



**MAGICAL KISSES,
A Jewels of the Quill Valentine's Day
Anthology
EXCERPTS**

["Telephone Tag Winner" {Aquamarine Series} by Dee Lloyd \(Dame Aquamarine\)](#)

["Magic Kisses" by Carrie S. Masek \(Dame Topaz\)](#)

["Winning Sylvia's Heart" by Nancy Pirri \(Dame Sapphire\)](#)

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"Telephone Tag Winner"
{Aquamarine Series, Book 1}
by Dee Lloyd (Dame Aquamarine)
Excerpt

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Chapter 1

Rina eased the daffodil yellow minivan onto the crowded highway. It had been a long day but the new-car smell and just knowing *Henderson Photography* was painted in flowing script on its side panels lifted her spirits. The Friday afternoon northbound traffic was even heavier than usual. On the plus side, the forecast snow squalls had held off and the pavement was dry and bare. She wondered what was drawing so many up to the ski hills. It couldn't be Valentine's Day. There must be something else going on in cottage country.

One thing for sure, it wasn't the town of Aqua's Annual Valentine's Day Car Rally! What had possessed her to let Lynne talk her into accepting a blind date with her brother? And for a car rally! She'd much rather spend the weekend with Maggie, her recently rescued spaniel puppy. She felt a wave of guilt for leaving the nervous seven-month-old pup behind even though Mrs. Ferguson, the friendly widow who lived just down the road, adored her. From the moment Mrs. F. picked her up around eight o'clock tonight, Maggie would be cuddled and thoroughly spoiled.

What would it be like to be adored and indulged like that? Of course, maybe the secret was in giving the kind of total love a puppy gave instinctively. Even the thought of herself curling up against a manly chest quivering with unqualified love made her laugh. A woman who trusted completely was a fool. Twice in her life, she had believed that a man loved her and been dead wrong both times.

Although Maggie came close to filling the gap in her life, Rina grudgingly agreed with Lynne that she should socialize more. Who knew? She might even enjoy spending the night at her new friend's family cottage before heading off early tomorrow morning with Len or was it Les? *I'm such a loser! I can't even bother to remember his name.*

She shrugged. The last thing she needed was a man anyway.

And Valentine's Day? She blew out an exasperated breath. Last Valentine's Day, she was staring vacantly at final divorce papers. Forget about that! Thinking about the wasteland her marriage had been was too depressing.

She simply wished she hadn't agreed to this nonsense. After the day she'd spent shooting Carrie Leroux's dream wedding on the slopes of Snowden Valley, she didn't have the energy to be pleasant to another stranger...even if Lynne did insist he was "a super nice guy."

It had been a good day, all in all. Snowden Resort was off the beaten track and usually quiet on a Friday morning before the weekend skiers descended. Today the weather had cooperated. The snow-covered hills had sparkled in the icy sunshine. The wind had died down. There had been only enough breeze to flutter the bride's veil. The bride in white lycra/spandex ski gear, her attendants in royal blue, and the groom and best man in black had made for dramatic pictures. Adjusting the lenses to make sure the bride's white suit stood out against the glaring white snow had been a challenge. Rina had rushed back to the shop and developed a few of the proofs right away. To her relief, those shots were some of her best work. Carrie would be pleased.

Although the slopes had been empty enough, the lodge itself had been alive with police and reporters. Apparently, a guest had been murdered some time the night before. The rooms Carrie had reserved for dressing for the outdoor ceremony were on the corridor that had been cordoned off. The new rooms were probably identical to the original ones, but Carrie had been upset. Getting happy pre-wedding shots of the bride hadn't been easy. However, the whole shoot had been a success. Best of all, it was over!

She hadn't had time to develop the pictures of the resort she'd taken yesterday afternoon but if they didn't turn out she could always go back and take more. What she had to concentrate on now was screwing up her courage. She'd avoided dating since the divorce last year. Lord! It had been almost six years since she'd dated anyone but Jim.

Lynne had tried to make a Valentine's Day Car Rally sound romantic and exciting. Rina had to laugh. What did anyone do at a car rally anyway? She had a vague idea it involved spending hours in a car with a teammate and driving around snowy back roads in some kind of scavenger hunt. She'd be trapped in a car with this stranger. Was she that desperate to make new friends?

She blew out a long breath. She knew the answer. The move from Vancouver to the small town on the south edge of Muskoka had been hard. The divorce had been final for a year but too many of their friends had been Jim's. Now she was making her own life. Her own tiny house and photography studio adjacent to a busy strip mall where her new friend Lynne had her beauty salon was a big part of that.

And she was going to make more new friends. Ones who were interested in her—not in Jim’s family’s influence and money.

She saw a small gap in the passing lane and took advantage of it. The minute she did, the traffic in both lanes slowed to a crawl. Then stopped. *Damn! There must be an accident up ahead.* The little boys in the school bus ahead of her grinned and pulled faces and waved at her out the back windows. She couldn’t help smiling back. After a while, they gave up and started shouting that endless song about bottles of beer. She could hear it with all the closed windows between them. She wouldn’t want to be the bus driver.

The traffic began to inch ahead again.

Enviously, she watched the cars speeding merrily down the southbound side of the divided highway. She could see one car in particular, a sporty little red one, flying out of the distance, passing everything in sight. It had to be doing well over a hundred.

Suddenly, when it was almost across from her, the sports car veered into the transport it was passing. Then, with a squeal of brakes, it ricocheted off it and hurtled across the boulevard directly at her.

With the lanes clogged with slow-moving traffic, the only place free of vehicles was the wide, snow-covered boulevard between the lanes. Rina twisted the steering wheel hard and floored the gas pedal. She couldn’t elude the sports car completely but avoided being hit broadside. She heard the screech of metal on metal as it scraped along the side of her van and ploughed into the rear of the school bus ahead of her.

Before she could breathe a sigh of relief, the car following close behind her crashed into her left rear fender and sent her flying towards the lane of oncoming traffic! She jammed her foot onto the brake pedal and yanked the emergency brake lever. The van stopped just short of the southbound lanes.

* * * *

Pain. Her head throbbed with it. And her whole midsection. She felt as if the seat belt and shoulder harness had cut right through her. The left side of her neck and her breastbone ached. Excruciating pain radiated from her left shoulder.

Then she smelled the blood. When she forced herself to open her eyes, she saw her white jacket was covered with it. Cautiously, she ran her fingers up the side of her face. Blood streamed from a cut on her forehead. A lump was already beginning to form around it.

The camera she always kept handy on the seat next to her was lying in her lap. From the blood on its leather case, she figured the impact of the crash had sent it flying. It was just her luck that it had connected just above her right temple.

The world was getting fuzzy and she couldn't think for the nauseating pain. She closed her eyes and gave in to the darkness.

* * * *

"Miss! Are you all right?"

The anxious face of the sandy-haired, uniformed Ontario Provincial Police officer swam into view. All right? Her head pounded, and her shoulder hurt so much she could hardly breathe. More than anything, she wanted to unfasten her seat belt.

"I'm fine," she lied, fumbling for the catch.

He caught her hand and held it still. "You'd better wait for the paramedics," he said. "They'll want to check you over before they take that belt off."

Several pulsing sirens split the air. "Here they come," he assured her.

"It hurts," she said, hating the whimper that accompanied her words.

The paramedics checked her over quickly. They dealt with the seat belt, put a temporary dressing on her forehead, informed her she had a dislocated shoulder and possibly a bit of a concussion. She would have to keep still until they returned with a stretcher. She'd be taken to the hospital in Aqua for a more thorough examination shortly. The first ambulance was transporting an elderly couple who had life-threatening injuries. From the moans and sobs she could hear from the other vehicles, she wasn't the only person hurting.

She couldn't pass out again. She had to think.

At least, no one was waiting at home for her.

Oh, Lord! Lynne was expecting her at the cottage. What was her phone number? She'd thought it was an easy one to remember. *Oh, yes...* 705-555-1525.

The pain in her shoulder was so bad she almost gave up on pulling her cell phone out of its sleeve on the dashboard. She got it. *Thank heaven, it has a signal.* Her fingers were unsteady as she dialed.

A brisk, pleasant-enough, male voice said, “You have reached 705-555-1525. Please leave a message after the beep.”

Whoever provided the voice on Lynne’s answering machine certainly hadn’t wasted time trying to be friendly. She wondered if it was the brother. Something vibrant about the voice appealed to her. Well, that didn’t matter. She didn’t ever have to meet the guy now.

“Lynne,” she began. A wave of dizziness made her pause a moment. “This is Rina. I’m afraid I can’t make it to your cottage this weekend. I’m in a multi-car pile-up on Highway 11.

“Don’t worry. I’m okay. The van is pretty banged up. I guess I am, too. I did something to my shoulder and I must have hit my head. The ambulance should take me to the Aqua hospital soon. The paramedics are looking after the people who were more badly injured first.”

There was something else she should say. *What is it?* Rina couldn’t remember for a moment.

“Oh, yes. Mrs. Ferguson is picking Maggie up on her way home after work. Could you call her? She usually leaves the store around seven-thirty. Tell her not to worry if she sees lights on at my house later tonight. I’ll probably be allowed to go home after they fix me up. I’ll call her when I get there and pick Maggie up in the morning. If you don’t have it, her number is 705-555-1492.”

It was getting hard to hold the phone up to her ear. She was almost done.

“I’m really sorry, Lynne. I hope you can find another blind date for your brother. I’ll be all right. It’s my new van that’s toast.”

She sank back against the cold leather of her seat. If she weren’t so determined never to be a wimp again, she’d burst into tears. She bit her lip. At least, she didn’t have to try to be appealing to a strange man. Or endure a Valentine’s Day car rally.



"Magic Kisses"
by Carrie S. Masek (Dame Topaz)
Excerpt

©Carrie S. Masek

Chapter 1

"Forget about a boyfriend." Eliza Fanelli glared at the pet carrier, sitting open and empty next to the couch in her new apartment. "I can't even keep a cat!"

Dangling four plastic bags from as many fingers, she stepped inside and kicked the front door shut.

She hadn't been gone for more than an hour. Where could the silly kitten have gone? "Here, Gandalf, here kitty, kitty, kitty." Shrugging off her coat, she tossed it on the couch and hauled her groceries into the closet-sized kitchen. She set the bags on the empty counter, took out a yellow box and rattled it. "Kitten Chow."

No answer, not that she expected one. From what she could tell, the kitten she rescued from the pound yesterday didn't have any voice at all. The little gray tom had stood when she paused in front of his cage. He'd silently batted at her finger through the bars until she asked an attendant to let her hold him. His purr started the moment the door opened. She should have realized then he had a thing against captivity.

Huffing a sigh, Eliza clicked on the light and opened the refrigerator. The sound always brought her old cat running. Unfortunately, at seventeen and a half, the pampered Siamese was too frail to move to the prairie wastes of Plainsville, Illinois. At least according to Eliza's mother.

"And of course I'm too young," Eliza muttered, slamming a quart of milk onto the top wire shelf. She was a little gentler with the eggs, but even after the yogurt, cheese and lettuce were all stowed away, the fridge still looked half empty.

The pantry was worse. Even though it was just a pair of shelves in the cabinet over the counter, one box of Cream of Wheat, one box macaroni and two cans of chopped tomatoes looked lonely inside it. *Tomorrow buy sugar and salt and maybe some spices.* Eliza glanced at the three pound sack of onions still sitting on the counter. *And oil. Hard to saute onions without oil.* Vowing to write a list before heading to the market again, Eliza set the onions beside the tomatoes.

Chewing on a dark strand that had curled free of her ponytail, she checked under the sink, in the cabinet under the counter where she planned to put her pots, and even inside the oven. No kitten. "Gandalf, kitty, kitty." Crooning as seductively as she could, Eliza poured a little kitten chow into her palm and headed for the combination living/dining room. Scooting between the table and her scattered boxes, she first checked under the burnt gold couch. Lots of dust bunnies--next apartment, she was cleaning the place *before* moving in--but no kitten. No kitten under the coffee table, no kitten under the faded

brown chair. No kitten hiding behind any of her boxes or in the two she'd already opened.

He wasn't in the bedroom either. Not under the bed or the dresser or hiding in the closet. Eliza's palm grew sticky from the cat food, and she was about to stop looking when she heard a vicious growl, apparently coming from the bathroom across the hall. She opened the door. A cold draft fluffed her hair. The growling grew louder.

A tiny kitten couldn't possibly make that noise. "Gandalf?" Eliza turned on the light and stepped into the room.

It was freezing, and it only took her a second to see why. The window above the shower enclosure was open.

The whole apartment had been freezing when Eliza and her boxes arrived earlier in the day. She'd dumped the boxes, turned up the thermostat and headed to the animal shelter without checking to see if any of the windows were open. After all, what kind of idiot left a window open in January?

Apparently the kind of idiot who never vacuumed under the couch. The window was too high for Eliza to reach without help, so she brushed the cat food into the toilet and ran to get a chair.

The four around the Formica table were a mismatched lot, but Eliza grabbed the sturdiest, a plain wood chair with a flat seat and even legs. She hauled it into the shower stall. It only took her a moment to realize why the previous tenant had left the window open. The darn thing was stuck. Even heaving with all her strength, she couldn't budge it.

Meanwhile, the growling had grown fiercer. Curious, Eliza stood on tip-toe and peered out the window at a lighted parking lot.

A dumpster hunkered below her second floor apartment. The growling came from a dark, bristling creature that looked like a cross between a wolf and a pit bull. It pressed its snout between the dumpster and the wall and scrabbled at the space as if trying to dig its way behind it.

A chill clenched Eliza's stomach. The window was awfully high, but open enough for a kitten to squeeze through. Had Gandalf managed to climb to the window, only to fall a story to the dumpster below?

Imagining broken legs or worse, Eliza gave the window a last, frantic shove, but before she could jump off the chair and run to Gandalf's rescue, a bellowed, "Out!" froze her hands to the window sill.

A tall, dark figure strode across the parking lot. He wore a knee-length, black coat that billowed open with each stride. She couldn't make out his features, but his head was bare, and light snow left sparkles in his dark hair.

"Out!" he bellowed again, this time right next to the growling beast. It lunged toward him snarling, but he held his ground. "No," he said in an even louder voice. Eliza could almost feel the intensity of the glare he aimed at the dog. The animal obviously felt it, too, because it whined and cringed, belly to the ground.

The man crouched and extended his hand for the dog to sniff. The stray flinched, then gave his hand a tentative lick. "There's a girl," he murmured. The dog thumped its tail, but when he stood, it bolted. Shaking his head, the man grasped the dumpster and heaved one end away from the wall.

A lump, a slightly lighter gray than the shadowed asphalt, huddled against the wall. The man crouched again and when he reached for it, the lump exploded into a hissing, scratching fury. *Gandalf.*

Swearing, the man caught Gandalf by the scruff of his neck and lifted him to eye level. Trapped by instinct, the kitten stopped fighting and curled.

"That's better." His rescuer stood, and the black clad shoulders rose in what had to be a sigh. "Next stop, animal control."

"No!" The protest burst from Eliza. The man's head jerked up. "He's mine," she called, hoping he could see at least her silhouette. "I'll be right down."

With his head tilted, she could see his face more clearly. It looked like he was frowning. He raised his voice to almost a shout. "Which apartment are you, two-oh-five or two-oh-seven?"

She was so flustered, it took her a moment to remember her new address. "Two-oh-five. I'll buzz you up."

"No need." Still carrying the kitten by the scruff, he strode around the corner of the building and out of sight.

Eliza scrambled off the chair and hauled it back to the table. She didn't have time to move the boxes, but she hung up her coat in the coat closet--luckily the last tenant had

abandoned several hangers in it--hid the empty pet carrier in the bedroom and threw a brightly colored shawl over the table's scratched top. It wasn't much of a tablecloth, but at least it added some color. She was pawing through her kitchen box, looking for some glasses--the least she could do was offer the man a drink--when he rapped sharply on the door.

At least it should be him. She didn't know anyone else in town. She stood and checked the peephole just to be sure. Gandalf, face enlarged and distorted, glared at her through the fish-lens.

Eliza threw open the door. "Thank you so much, I--"

"There are feral dogs all over this neighborhood." Gandalf's rescuer thrust the kitten at her. "You shouldn't let him outside."

No doubt about it, the man was definitely frowning.

Eliza took the kitten and cradled him in the crook of her arm. Obviously exhausted, the poor thing fell asleep. "I didn't *let* him outside. Gandalf escaped."

"Gandalf escaped." He did a single eyebrow lift, like Spock on the oldest Star Trek. "Picked the lock, opened the front door and made a run for it, did he?"

"He went out an open window," Eliza said, bristling at the sarcasm. "The one in the bathroom is stuck."

The frown eased into a sympathetic grin. "Yeah, the windows in this place are crap. Good luck getting the janitor to fix it." He paused and added, almost shyly, "Want me to close it for you?"

Eliza's first impulse was to say yes and step aside, but a belated attack of sanity stopped her. He was a stranger. A big stranger, she realized. He had to be at least a foot taller than her own five-two, with shoulders wide enough to mask his height. And he was dressed all in black like some kind of burglar, black coat--leather she now saw--black sweatshirt, baggy black pants, black boots. Wet with melting snow, even his hair looked black. He had a long face, with a largish nose and a good chin. And blue eyes, she suddenly realized, so deep a blue she'd initially taken them for brown.

The smile faded, and when he spoke, he sounded resigned. "Keep the cat inside if you can. If the dogs don't get him, the coyotes will." With a nod at Gandalf, he turned toward the stairs.

Had his shoulders actually slumped, or was that just Eliza's imagination? "Wait," she called. "Excuse my manners. Please, come in." After all, she did have the security system her mother had insisted on buying. All Eliza had to do was hit the panic button on her land-line, and it would automatically call 911. Besides, she'd seen the man in action. He'd sweet-talked a snarling fiend into a finger-licking puppy and saved her kitten, not the actions of a thief on the way to a heist. Or the sex-mad serial killer her mother was worried about now that her baby girl was living on her own. Eliza's instincts screamed that he was a good guy. If she didn't believe her instincts, how could she expect anyone else to? She held out her right hand. "I'm Eliza Fanelli."

"Brett Mason," he said. "Pleased to meet you." He covered the distance back to her door in one stride and took her hand. He had a good shake, firm and to the point, with no finger crushing or wrist yanking. Though it had to be below thirty outside, his hand was surprising warm. Eliza felt a twinge of loss when he let go and stepped inside. "Which window?"

"What?" Mentally slapping herself, Eliza tried again. "The one in the bathroom. But you want to sit down first, have a drink or something?"

There was that rising eyebrow again. Eliza's cheeks got hot. "I have milk and water," she babbled on, wishing she could stop, but her mouth just kept running. "And tea bags somewhere, if I can find them. Oh, and the tea kettle."

She knew she was spouting nonsense, but Brett seemed to understand. He nodded. If he felt like laughing at her, it didn't show. "Water would be great," he said. "It's a long walk from the dojo."

"Dojo?" Eliza perked up. She'd *known* he had a good reason for that outfit. "I didn't know there was a dojo here. Which martial arts do you practice?"

He smiled, and Eliza's mouth went dry. The smile lit his whole face, brightening his eyes to blazing. "Kung Fu, second-degree Black belt."

"I'm working on my Brown belt in Aikido," Eliza managed. "Or I was in Chicago."

"There are some great teachers in Chicago," Brett said. "I used to train at the Flaming Dragon Dojo in Lincoln Park."

Eliza's heart shifted up a gear. She knew that dojo. It was only a few blocks from her mother's condo. "The one near De Paul University, right?"

His smile turned shy again. "Yeah, I got my masters from De Paul, Computer Science and Telecommunications."

"I went to Loyola," Eliza offered, gesturing to the logo on her sweatshirt. "Double major, Philosophy and Comparative Religions."

"Impressive." He sounded like he meant it. To hide her blush, she took his coat and hung it in the closet next to hers.

"Go on in and sit down," she said, nodding toward the living room. "The couch came with the apartment. It's ugly but not too uncomfortable."

"It's fine," he said and plopped down on the cushions. His legs sprawled under the coffee table--they were that long. "I have one just like it up at my place."

"You live here, too?" Eliza didn't know why she was surprised. "That makes us neighbors."

"I'm in three-oh-eight, with a spectacular view of the back of the Thrift Store loading dock." His smile turned conspiratorial. "If you want a better couch, I'll keep an eye on the donations and let you know when someone drops off a good one."

Eliza laughed and Brett did, too. He had a nice laugh, deeper than his speaking voice and rich enough to blow her diet. "I just might do that," she said. "Here, let me get you that water." She bent to lay Gandalf on the couch beside him, but Brett startled her by shooting to his feet.

"I'm allergic," he blurted.

His eyes *did* look a little red. Eliza squelched the remaining laughter in her voice. "No problem," she said. "I'll put him in the bedroom."

It only took a moment to settle the kitten on the bare mattress and get back to the living room. Brett was sitting again, obviously trying not to stare into her open box. Eliza grabbed two glasses from it and unwrapped the newspaper she'd used for padding. "I don't think there's any ice," she apologized over her shoulder as she hurried into the kitchen. At least she did have dish soap and a sponge. In less than a minute, she'd washed out the glasses, rinsed them and filled them up again.

"Thanks," Brett said, taking the glass and downing half of it in one swallow. He gagged, nearly bringing it up again. "Tap water?" he sputtered.

Instead of answering, Eliza took a cautious sip. The water looked fine, but tasted harsh and metallic, a little like Gary, Indiana, smelled. Another reminder that she wasn't in Chicago anymore. "Tap water," she confirmed. She took Brett's glass. "How about some milk?"

"Thanks."

One glass of milk later, she showed Brett the stuck window. He didn't need a chair to reach it. He just slammed the palm of his hand twice on the window's wood frame, once on each side of the glass, and the window thudded closed.

"The humidity swells the wood," he said, stepping out of the shower enclosure. Standing there so big and strong, smelling of leather and melting snow, he sucked the air from the tiny bathroom.

Brett didn't seem to notice the lack of oxygen. He pointed to the metal railing inside the frame. "Rub bar soap on it. The window will slide easier."

"Thanks."

"I should, ah, get going." *Okay, so maybe he did notice.* "I should shower and, um, it's getting late. I've got to work tomorrow."

"Tomorrow's Sunday," Eliza protested, her fluster lost in a rush of indignation on his behalf.

Brett looked up and shrugged. "My boss is from Italy. I don't think he understands the concept of weekends."

"I have to do something to thank you." Eliza led the way to the front of the apartment and handed Brett his coat. "I mean," she added when he gave her a quizzical look, "you did save my cat and fix my window."

He shook his head. "You don't need--"

"I know," she said, brightening at the perfect solution. "After work tomorrow, come back here and I'll read your future."

* * * *

Read my future. Shit. It was all Brett could do to keep from swearing aloud. After six months in the social wasteland of Plainsville, the first halfway interesting woman he met turned out to be a fruitcake like his ex, Amy. He managed to say goodbye and, once the door closed, pounded up the stairs to apartment three-oh-eight, the mirror image of the one he'd just left.

The walls were still bare and he hadn't added any furniture except for the table holding his trusty desktop. The place looked more like a prison cell than an apartment. On nights

like this, it felt like one too. Brett stripped off his clothes on the way through the living room and headed straight for the shower.

The hot water thawed his feet and sluiced away the dried-on sweat, but it didn't do anything for his disgust. Eliza looked like such a nice girl, wholesome and normal in her ponytail, oversized sweatshirt and jeans. A little young--she had to be at least four or five years younger than he was--and too short, but with nice brown eyes and curly black hair. She was cute, friendly...and a flake.

It was a curse, he decided, stepping out of the shower and toweling off. He attracted kooks and nuts the way magnets attracted iron shavings.

Wrapping the Superman towel around his waist, he strode to the bedroom and dove into bed. Eliza's promise to tell his future had killed his appetite. Still, he thought, picking up the latest volume of Kohta Hirano's *Hellsing* and settling down to read, it wouldn't hurt to show up at her place tomorrow after work. Even kooks had friends.



"Winning Sylvia's Heart"
by Nancy Pirri (Dame Sapphire)
Excerpt

©Nancy Pirri

February 13th...

Sylvia Maxwell pulled into her parking space in the underground garage beneath her condominium. She was determined to carry all four grocery bags into her condo in one trip. The sound of another vehicle caught her attention and she saw her neighbor, Jack McNamara, ease into the space beside her. She stepped out of her late model Sedan at the same time he climbed out of his utility vehicle.

“Hey, Sylvia. Need some help?”

“I sure do know how to time things, don’t I?” she said, grinning. Reaching up, she opened the back hatch, hauled a brown bag out and handed it to him. “I appreciate it, Jack.”

“Give me a couple more of those.”

“But—”

“No buts. I can manage it. I have before,” he insisted.

“You’re the greatest, you know that?”

“You’re just saying that ’cause you don’t want to have to make two trips,” he said dryly as she centered the third bag in front of the other two in his arms. She took the last bag and followed him toward the elevator, her gaze trained on his lean backside.

Everything about Jack was lean and long. He reminded her of a tall, spare cowboy from the old west. She grinned as she looked at his jeans-clad legs that were slightly bowed, noting the slight swaggering gait. *Yep*. A handsome, rugged cowboy she had no business eyeing up and down. The only man an engaged woman should be ogling was her fiancé.

They stood beside each other as the elevator climbed to their floor.

“Tom coming over for supper?” he asked.

“Yes, we’re celebrating Valentine’s Day tonight.”

“A day early, huh?”

She sighed. “Yes, unfortunately, he’s very busy with work...”

“Uh-huh,” he said.

She glanced up at him, but he didn’t face her. His was looking up, watching the floor numbers slide by.

“Does the guy ever take you out on a real date?”

“Of course he does,” she bristled. *Not! Well, at least not all that often, but Jack doesn’t need to know that.* “You’ve seen us at places together.”

“Sure, I’ve seen him wine and dine you in less than an hour—record-breaking date time if you ask me. The guy’s gotta learn to relax, darlin’, and learn to appreciate you,” he said, turning soulful brown eyes on her.

Heat seared her cheeks. It was embarrassing that he knew how often she sat at home waiting for Tom to call. She seemed to always be waiting for Tom. Shouldn’t a man want to be with his fiancée? Shouldn’t he be thinking about her day and night? Tom didn’t. On the day he’d proposed, he informed her his work was important to him, and sometimes he’d have to break dates or show up late. There was his widowed mother whom he cared

for as well. At first Sylvia thought she could live with that, but now she was having doubts and second thoughts about marrying him. Jack's comments didn't help

They reached their floor, and she felt Jack on her heels. She unlocked and swung open her door, allowing him entrance. He set the grocery bags on her glass-topped kitchen table a bit heavier than necessary. Still, she was glad for the help. He proceeded to unload her bags, and she put away the groceries.

"Steaks, baking potatoes, tater topping? You sure know how to treat a guy right."

"You know how I feel about Valentine's Day. It's the most important holiday of the year."

He grinned. "You know, most people say Christmas is the best, but not you. You're a romantic through and through, aren't you?"

"Yup, that's me, Miz Romance."

Laughing, he reached out and tweaked a long curling strand of her dark brown hair, tucking it behind her shoulder. "Tom's a lucky man." A frown creased his brow, and he added, "I don't think he appreciates what he has."

"Look, Jack," she began, pausing at the sound of a doorbell ringing next door.

Jack glanced at his watch. "Damn. I've got company coming. Gotta run, sweetheart." He strode out the door, closing it behind him.

Sylvia sighed. Why couldn't Tom be more like Jack? Sure, earlier today he'd sent a box of candy, a bouquet of flowers, and a card with the words *I Love You Forever* to her at work. As usual, Tom had forgotten to include his signature on the card. *Why can't Tom be more like Jack?*

But then she thought about Jack's Saturday parties that carried into the late hours of the night and decided she appreciated Tom's staid, steady temperament a little more. The parties had started in the last few weeks, after Jack's girlfriend broke up with him. He'd been devastated, though he seemed to be coming out of his depression.

The supper she'd chosen was easy to prepare. She cleaned and wrapped two large baking potatoes in foil, then went to the bathroom to soak in the tub a bit before dressing for her special night.

Half an hour later, Sylvia left the tub, looked at her calico cat and sighed. Missy was perched on the edge of the bathroom sink, lapping water from the leaky tap.

“Listen, we can’t both have the sink at the same time.” She picked up the cat and set her on the commode. “Wait your turn.”

Leaning over the sink in her pink silk robe splattered with fire-engine red hearts, Sylvia stared into the mirror and flicked black mascara onto her lashes. She was beginning to tackle the other eye when the phone rang. Startled, her hand slipped and she jabbed her eye with the wand.

“Ouch!” She dropped the wand into the sink. Missy thumped to the floor and left the bathroom.

Her eye started watering and she couldn’t open it for the stinging. Grabbing a washcloth from the towel rack, she ran cool water over it and smacked the cloth against the injured eye while she headed for the phone.

Rock music blared from the apartment next door, interspersed with shouts and laughter. Jack’s party was in full swing now. She understood how people gravitated to Jack. Hadn’t *she*? He was her newest neighbor, having only lived next door for three months, but he was the nicest, friendliest guy she’d ever met, and oh so easy on the eyes. Guiltily she thought of moments with Tom when Jack’s face came to mind. Strange that Jack was in her subconscious when no other man, other than Tom, had been before. She sighed, thinking about the fun his guests were having next door.

Picking up the phone on the sixth ring from where it lay on the bathtub’s edge, she said, “Hello?”

“Honey? It’s me.”

“Tell me you’re not right outside my apartment building, Tom!”

“No, I’m not.”

Sylvia heaved a relieved sigh. “That’s good because I’m not ready for you yet. Hold on a minute.”

She released the damp cloth and it fell into the sink. Looking into the mirror once more, she saw with dismay her teary and bloodshot eye. Bum eye or not, nothing would prevent her from hearing Tom set their wedding date. He’d finally said he’d come to a decision. That meant this had to be a special night. She’d been waiting for this over a year since he’d given her the ring. He’d been putting off making a decision because of his workload, but maybe at long last he’d set a date.

“Okay, I’m back,” she said.

“I’ve got bad news.”

She started sweating, though the temperature in her apartment was set at an energy-saving sixty-five degrees. “What now?”

“I have to cancel our date tonight.”

Not a hint of regret bled into his voice. Her hand tightened around the phone.

“What do you mean you have to cancel? It’s Valentine’s Day...eve. You promised to celebrate the holiday with me today since you have to work tomorrow. Remember that we also planned on settling on our wedding date, too.”

“I have to close the Proctor deal...now. I thought I had all next week but it turns out Proctor has to return to Canada tonight. I promise I’ll make it up to you—”

Blah, blah, blah... Sylvia scowled and slumped against the sink, twirling a strand of hair, tuning out Tom’s excuses. She’d heard them all before.

A loud round of applause next door made Jack pop into her mind again.

“What else can I say to make you understand how important this?” he grouched.

“Listen, Tom, must I remind you you’re marrying me, not your work?”

“Of course not. What do you think I am anyway?”

She caught his injured tone but didn’t buy it this time. “So, you’d rather spend the evening at work than with me. Is that it?”

“Now, honey, don’t make me out to be—”

“—a first class jerk? You know the old saying, if the shoe fits.”

He started to respond but she cut him off. “If you can’t, you can’t.” Jack’s face resurfaced again, giving her the courage to say, “Tom? I think we need to end this relationship.”

She could hear him breathing. Was that a relieved sigh she heard? He didn’t reply and she said, “Did you hear me?”

“I did. It’s really for the best. Still, I think we should talk tomorrow and end on a high note. After all, we’ve been a couple for over two years.”

She was utterly unprepared for his reply. She'd been angry and had only meant to make him feel guilty, not break up with her! He'd agreed to end their two and a half year relationship...just like that. And the hell of it was, he didn't sound upset. She realized then she wasn't either.

"No need, Tom. Goodbye."

She punched the end button then slammed the phone down on the sink's edge.

What a waste of money. She stared down at her red painted toenails. She'd spent fifty dollars for a pedicure and manicure, a hundred on her new shoulder-length haircut and style. Groaning aloud, she thought about the three-hundred dollars she'd dropped on the red satin strapless sheath hanging in her closet. Maybe she should take it back to the store.

Sylvia sniffed as tears filled her eyes. She knew now that Tom had been stalling all along. He'd made plenty of promises and broken most of them. She'd expected romance, but there had been little. Tom had never been the overtly romantic type, which should have been a big red flag to her. But then, she had recently turned thirty-two and the thought of living her life alone made her sick to the stomach. Not that she'd ever been one of those women who needed a man around all of the time. But she did want to find a kind, decent man to share the passages of life, including having children.

Yet breaking up tonight had been easier than she'd ever thought it could be, because she knew she couldn't live the rest of her life with a man who didn't have an ounce of romance in him. Lately she'd even wondered about his desire to become a father. It seemed every time she brought up having children he changed the subject.

For the last two Valentine's Days, Tom had presented her with the traditional box of candy and a bouquet of roses. Sweet gifts, but hardly original. She knew the holiday wasn't important to him, so his gifts were a token to appease her. In her mind, the perfect Valentine's Day date was more than flowers and candy. What about those sweet whispered nothings in her ear? And instead of hauling her to some fancy restaurant, or her cooking for him, why hadn't *he* cooked *her* a meal at his house?

She sighed, knowing now she could never envision Tom donning an apron and cooking. Plus his mother would have had to share the evening with them.

Slow-dancing was another thing she'd asked from Tom and something he never delivered. He didn't dance—never had, never would. She'd heard the finality in his voice the first time she brought it up and never said another word about it.

She was a romantic, through and through, so why had she become engaged to the most unromantic guy ever born? Her problem was she'd made the big mistake her mother had

always warned her not to make—she'd settled for a man who obviously was not right for her; settled for fear of being alone the rest of her life.

One tear slid down her cheek as she thought about her mother's death last year, thought how much she missed her. She wished she'd listened to her and believed her when she said Tom would not make her happy. Her mother had been right, but no one could convince Sylvia otherwise back then.

Her stomach growled, yet she didn't want to cook steak and potatoes just for her. Besides, truthfully, she hated cooking. Her only intention was to please Tom. As she picked up the phone to dial Sui Yep's Chinese down the street, someone knocked on her door. She set the phone down on the kitchen counter. Waiting a moment, she listened but heard only silence. *Probably some late arrival for the party next door.*

Boisterous laughter and an increased volume in the music made her frown. She scowled when a door banged shut. How in the world would she sleep tonight with all the noise? Jack partied nearly every Saturday night but never had the guests been this rowdy.

The banging on her door started in again, this time with more persistence. Pausing before her door, she tied the belt on her robe snugly around her waist.

"Hey, Sylvia, let me in!" a low, harried-sounding male voice said.

Sylvia rose on her toes and looked through the little peephole. It was Jack.

"What's up?" She unlocked the door, swung it open, and he rushed inside.

"Thanks," he muttered and tore down her hallway.

Sylvia's eyebrows rose when she followed him. Was it her imagination or... No, he actually did have red hearts on the only thing he wore—a pair of pink boxer shorts. He'd yanked open the sliding glass door to her deck. Pausing with a grin on his face, his gaze swept her body.

"Nice robe." He wagged his eyebrows.

She tossed her hair over her shoulder and laughed. "Ditto on the shorts. Seems we shop at the same place."

Her heart skipped a beat at the soft look in his beautiful eyes. "It seems we do."



"The Third Kiss"
by Jane Toombs (Dame Turquoise)
Excerpt

©Jane Toombs

“Joey’s brother heard that if two people wearing braces kiss, sometimes their braces lock together and a dentist has to help get them loose. So the guys dared Augie to kiss you to see if you two locked braces. You didn’t, did you?”

Reminded that everyone at school would know what happened, anger surged inside Gail again. “I hate that rotten Augie!” She knew nastier words, but Gram had pretty much trained her out of them. And her grandmother just might be able to hear the two of them because the window was open.

“So they didn’t lock, then?”

“No.” It might have been Joey’s brother’s idea, but Augie didn’t have to take the dare. What if their braces *had* locked? Too grim to think about. “I’m never, ever gonna forgive either of ’em. Especially stinky Augie.”

After Terri left, Gail went inside, intending to go to up to her room and see if she could think up a revenge nasty enough for Augie. But, as she passed through the living room on her way to the stairs, her grandmother said from the couch, “Come sit beside me, dear. I have a story I want to tell you.”

Ordinarily Gail loved to listen to Gram’s tales of the past, but not tonight. She paused, trying to think of a tactful way to refuse.

Grandma’s tone took on a touch of command. “Come here, child.”

Gail shrugged and plopped onto the couch.

“You have your mother’s beautiful brown eyes,” Grandma said. “So striking with the blond hair you got from your father.”

This was far from the first time Gail had heard this. “You never tell me who I inherited my buck teeth from,” she muttered.

“Why, from your great-great grandmother Williams. Luckily they have braces today so you won’t always have teeth like hers.”

No one ever got one up on Grandma Maud. She always had an answer that shot any other down.

“Long ago, when your father was a boy,” her grandmother went on, “I told him this same story. He later let me know it took only one kiss for him to know your mother was the one for him. Her death came far too soon for any of us.”

Gail’s heart tightened up, the way it always did when she thought about her mother.

“Ah well, the Lord’s ways are mysterious, and often not as we would wish.” Gram sighed. After a moment, she went on. “I take comfort in being able to tell you this story, too. And as my grandmother told it to my mother, and she to me. Did you know the old Scots believed that the third kiss a girl received was the lucky one, the magic one? Provided it came from the boy who’d given her the first kiss, that is.”

“I’m never gonna get a lucky one then,” Gail muttered.

“Exactly what I thought when I heard the story at fourteen. Things were different in those days. That was the year I went to my very first girl-boy party. We were supervised by the parents of the girl who hosted it, of course, but they didn’t hover over us. So a few of the bolder girls started necking with boys. Not me. Was I surprised when a boy named Mitchell asked if he could kiss me. I told him, ‘No!’”

Grandma Maud smiled as if recalling that time. “Well, you might know he paid no attention. Bold as brass, he put his arms around me and kissed me anyway. I was furious. I tried to slap his face, but he moved away too fast. All the way home I told myself over and over that I’d make sure he never got a second chance.

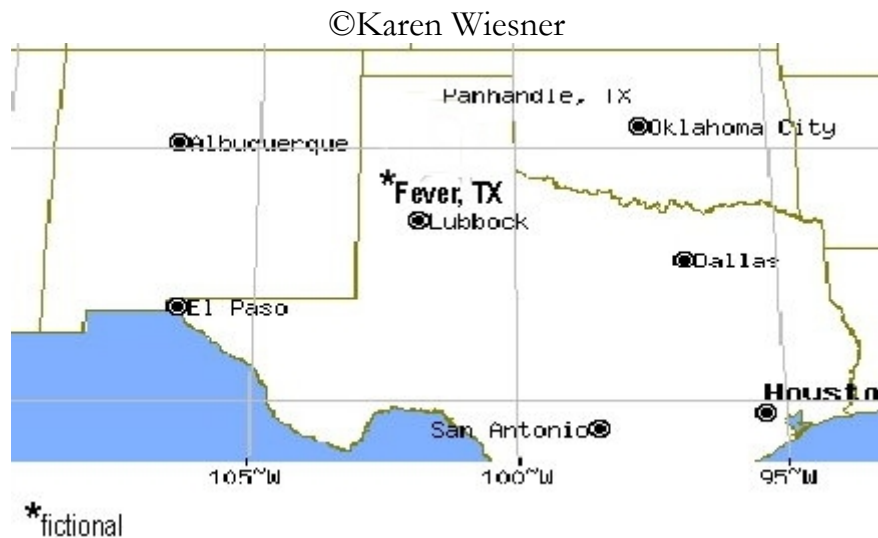
“I didn’t see Mitchell again until after I’d met George Halbert and agreed to marry him. I was twenty-two at the time. The night before our wedding, the doorbell rang. I happened to be alone in the house. When I opened the door, I was amazed to see Mitchell on the doorstep. He didn’t live in town anymore and so hadn’t been invited to the wedding. ‘Just happened to be in town visiting friends,’ he said. ‘Heard about you getting married so came by to wish you happy.’”

Interested now, Gail asked, “What did you do?”

“The courteous thing was to invite him in, so I did. He declined. But instead of stepping back and turning around, he leaned down and kissed me. I stood there like an idiot and let him. Then he left, and I watched him walk away. Just a goodbye kiss, no harm in that, I told myself, but I never quite forgot that kiss.”



"In Cahoots With Cupid"
{Kaleidoscope Series, Book 2}
by Karen Wiesner (Dame Amethyst)
Excerpt



Chapter 1

February 12th...

Her stomach felt like she'd swallowed a big box of the very worst flavors in Bertie Bott's Every Flavor Beans. Angela Lewis closed her eyes and halted on the disembarkment ramp, causing several passengers to mutter rudely as they shoved past her. The roiling in her middle worsened. Little if any sleep last night, nothing to eat today, reading on the plane to keep herself from thinking too much about what in the world she was doing coming home...

Airsickness. Ugh. At least Keri and Joshua would be waiting for her at Baggage Claim instead of her family or anyone from the Lewis Ranch.

Keri...what am I going to do about her resignation?

Angela shook off her thought. She'd have to face it, but not today. Not until after she returned to La Crosse, Wisconsin. Besides, she was thrilled Keri and Joshua were engaged. She, along with Dandy, the crotchety, loveable old foreman on her family's

ranch, had gone to the trouble of matchmaking for just this reason—to see Keri and Joshua happy at long last.

Angela took a few slow, deep breaths, trying to fight her nausea. Then she forced herself forward. The Lubbock International Airport was crowded. The weather through the plane windows had looked gorgeous with the sun shining brightly, the day unseasonably warm, according to the pilot, at seventy-three degrees. Because of her sickness, the warmth only made her feel feverish now. Back in La Crosse that morning, light snow had been falling. It was hard to believe she'd been in the same country just hours ago.

Jostled about by those who apparently didn't have time to be polite, Angela was thrust into Baggage Claim, already filled to capacity with passengers and loved ones. She huddled into the nearest space against the wall and spent another long minute trying to talk her stomach into calming down. When she couldn't, she accepted her best bet was to find Keri and Joshua and get out of the dizzy airport.

The last person she expected to be coming toward her was Kiowa Mackenzie. Dressed in comfortably worn jeans, a denim work shirt under a light jacket, and his old Resistol suede felt cowboy hat and boots, he took her breath away.

The many faces of Ki. Today the tall, muscular cowboy I remember he was growing into by the time I left home; last time I saw him, the sharp, sexy businessman.

His skin was as tan as it would be if he'd spent the last few months in Miami instead of overcast Renton, Washington, a small city south of Seattle, where she knew he'd been at Christmas. He'd been working on a major upgrade of a wastewater treatment plant. He and his brother Wings, or "Mac" as everyone called him, co-owned Mackenzie Environment & Infrastructure, an engineering firm. Los Angeles marked the headquarters of their successful business. Both he and Mac had extensive experience and schooling in engineering and wastewater treatment. They traveled all over the United States, spending a few months on each project, more if there were problems. Angela knew that part of what Ki loved about his career came down to the fact that he wasn't always doing the same thing. While his permanent location was situated in the dinky little ranch town of Fever, Texas she and the two brothers had grown up in, he returned only a few times a year.

And I haven't been home since—

Deep grooves surrounded his smiling mouth, scattering her thoughts and drawing her own lips up against her will. She recalled their greeting last time he flew into La Crosse to see her.

"What are you doing here?"

“It’s Christmas. I was hoping to take you to dinner.”

“To... You came here from Washington for dinner?”

He chuckled. “You act like that’s out-of-the-ordinary.”

No, that wasn’t strange for Ki. No matter where his projects ended up, he came to see her in Wisconsin often. When he couldn’t visit, he called her four or five times a week.

I don’t know what I’d do if he didn’t. I live for those phone calls. Those visits. He goes straight to my head every single time with all his flirting. And those hello and goodbye kisses...

Even as she opened her arms for his expected hug, she asked, “What are you doing here, Ki? Keri and Joshua were supposed to meet me.”

“I convinced them to let me do it. Do you mind?”

She drew back slightly. “Of course not. Never.”

He enveloped her again, and she closed her eyes, breathing in the familiar, intoxicating scent of his cologne. Why did his arms always feel so right? During those three-hour-long phone conversations with him, she imagined herself in his arms, growing warm and drowsy against his chest.

Just like all those times, the memory of his kiss shattered the comforting aspects of being swallowed up in his strong embrace. He never kissed her the way he should, the way she told him he ought to. She often teased him about how he lost that ingrained gentleman quality of his when he said hello or goodbye. When he eased away now, she stopped breathing altogether—forgot how—with his gaze hungry on her lips. Heat raced through her veins, straight to her nerve endings, in anticipation.

Unfortunately, her churning stomach couldn’t be denied even with the intense desire she knew she shouldn’t feel for this childhood friend who meant more to her than any other.

“You don’t look so good, angel,” he murmured, cradling his cool hand against her burning cheek. “I’d say you look white as a ghost if you weren’t green.”

She grinned uneasily. “Airsickness. I’ve never had it, but I’ve been around others who have. I need to get out of here.”

“I’ve got Dramamine back at my apartment.”

“Let’s go.”

He leaned forward and dropped a kiss on her mouth, reminding her of the deep, forget-my-own-name kiss he would have given her if she wasn't sick. "Stay here out of traffic. I'll get your luggage."

Angela leaned back against the wall, her eyes glued to the man who'd infused her childhood with confidence. His crush on her had been outrageous, sweet...a complete whirlwind of happiness. Tempering his incurable flirtations, his charm seduced her even now. She could come up with a million reasons why she wasn't the right woman for him, why he deserved so much better than a shell of the person she was as a teenager, the whole woman she was meant to be now...and wasn't. The fact that he'd just turned thirty-five and she'd been thirty-nine for a long time was one good excuse—one as good as any.

She admired his patience as he watched for her suitcase to come around the carousel, the way he tipped his old cowboy hat back. She loved those blondish-brown curls at his neck, the baby blue eyes that checked on her frequently as he waited. Why did her chest feel so heavy if it was her stomach that was in chaos? She worried she'd cry when he came back to her with her heavy suitcase. With his free hand, he drew her tenderly against his side, obviously to shelter her against the bustling traffic all around them as they made their way out of the airport.

They boarded the shuttle bus to the parking lot.

"How you feeling?" he asked when they found a seat together.

"Is it possible to want to sleep and throw up at the same time?" she murmured.

His arm already around her, he pressed her head to his shoulder, stroking her hair. "I'll get you somewhere you can do both."

Instinctive laughter burst out of her, and she groaned at the commotion the act caused her insides. "I'm really glad you're here, Ki. You make me feel comforted, cherished and taken care of all at the same time."

"Wow, three out of four *what's* all at the same time. And at least one *how*."

Confused, she looked up at him. "What?"

His grin was just a little crooked—something she loved every time it set her heart to racing. "Nothing. You've never been airsick before?"

"You're talking about someone who's climbed Argentine Patagonia's mile-high sheer faces and granite spires that stretch thirteen thousand feet into the sky; navigated treacherous Guatemalan jungles; explored Egyptian archeological digs with a field school

and nearly got buried in a cave-in; and jumped out of a plane flying 13,500 feet above the earth, falling at a rate of a hundred and twenty-five miles per hour... Ugh, why did I have to remember that, of all things?” Angela prided herself on a healthy lifestyle filled with adventure that covered her deepest, unshakable fears. “Save yourself, Ki. Drop me off at a hotel and you can miss the ‘action’.” The motion of the bus was making her feel like she would hurl at any moment.

“You remember last time you came home?”

His parents’ funeral.

Angela and Ki had grown up in a circle of cooperative ranches. The one they lived on was the Lewis Ranch. Ki’s father had been a ranch hand there throughout their childhoods. The ranch was jointly owned by Angela’s father, his younger brother—Joshua’s father—and their sister Crystal, who’d married the cowboy who got her pregnant. The entanglement lasted all of a month. When Crystal’s son Shawn was a teenager, she left him with her brothers and moved to La Crosse, Wisconsin. Crystal had long since taken up travel as a career, and she rarely came home now—not even for weddings and funerals.

And I inadvertently followed in Aunt Crystal’s footsteps. But how could I have not come home for Ki when his parents were killed in that plane crash, even if I could never come home for myself?

Angela squeezed her arms around Ki’s waist, and he nodded, looking down at her. “Just returning the favor for the way you took care of me, angel.”

“That was different,” she murmured, her gaze locked with his soft one in the shadow of the brim of his hat.

“I needed you. I couldn’t have survived without you there for me. There’s nothing I wouldn’t do for you, Angela Butterfly Lewis. Just ask me, and I’m yours.”

The fierceness in his voice reminded her of the only other man who called her by her embarrassing middle name.

Daddy who always called me his beautiful butterfly. Daddy who sided with my husband when Mason destroyed my faith, confidence and ability to trust anyone else to love me. But how can I blame Daddy when I never told him what Mason did?

Still, she hadn’t been able to return home for her father, nor for her own good. Home—where the jagged pieces of herself were scattered beyond retrieval. She’d been grateful when Dandy asked her not to come home for his funeral. He’d wanted her to remember him as he was. Dandy had realized she wasn’t ready to face her past then.

But for Ki she had returned.

And, whether or not I'm ready now, I'm home. Against her better judgment, she'd be Keri's Maid of Honor on the Valentine's Day wedding, which would take place on the Lewis family ranch. I'll never get through it. Not without...

"You'll be busy as the Best Man. How can I ask you to be there for me, Ki?"

The back of his free hand brushed her cheek, his thumb lingering on her bottom lip.
"You don't have to ask me, angel. I'm still yours. Always yours."

His words evoked the memory of his words when he was only thirteen. *"I'm gonna marry you, Angela Butterfly Lewis. You mark my words good, honey. Someday I'm gonna marry you, right here on your daddy's ranch. Don't matter if you're ninety-four and I'm just comin' into my golden years. Someday you're gonna love me the way I love you. For always."*

Shaky as she felt, Angela couldn't prevent herself from smiling. Kiowa Mackenzie hadn't changed one iota in almost thirty years. He was still chasing her like a jackrabbit with a one-track mind, and she still couldn't decide whether to set him loose for some other nice girl...or to let him catch her.



"Atop A Wedding Cake"
by Karen Woods (Dame Coral)
Excerpt

©Karen Woods

Chapter 1

February 11th...

The front doorbell rang just as Cathy Baker walked in the back door of her Victorian era home. She heard the grandfather's clock chime six thirty. She put down the stack of boxes she'd brought home from her pastry shop. Walking through the house towards the front entryway, she took off her gloves and hat as she went. The front door bell rang again and again, impatiently. When she'd almost reached the door, the bell ceased, only to be replaced by unrelenting pounding.

Cathy glared at the door. She knew who stood on the front porch. It had to be her youngest daughter's future father-in-law, Clinton Charles Edwards, III, M.D., known—

her daughter had recently informed her—to his friends as Trey. Somehow, she couldn't easily reconcile the charming fellow who was her twin brother's best friend with the man her daughter spoke of as controlling and manipulative.

Trey had made his opposition to this marriage of their children abundantly clear, nearly destroying his relationship with his only son in the process. Cathy wasn't thrilled with the idea of the marriage herself. But she was even less so with anyone who had made her daughter miserable. Even so, she wouldn't have left a dog outside in this snowstorm. And she had, after all, invited him to stay with her until the situation had been worked out.

Cathy took a deep breath and opened the door. Looking at the senior Doctor Edwards standing within the porch light against the background of heavily falling and blowing snow, it was easy to see where Charlie got his good looks. Trey had a square jaw with a cleft in it and blue eyes so deep a woman could drown in them. In thirty years, Charlie Edwards would strongly resemble his father—minus the angry scowl, she hoped for her daughter's sake.

“Do you normally take this long to answer your doorbell?” he demanded, his voice a sharp rebuke.

“I've just come in myself! Do you normally behave as though you believe everyone has to drop everything and rush to answer your every summons?” Cathy returned. Meeting strength with strength was the only way to handle him.

His expression softened and his posture became less threatening. Something like self-deprecating humor glimmered in his eyes, and he smiled. “Probably,” he admitted.

That smile was almost charming. She smiled back. “Well, at least you can admit it. Come on in, Trey, before you let all the heat out.”

“Thank you. Have we met?” he asked. He entered the foyer. Closing the door behind him, he put down his suitcase before he removed his sheepskin lined, black leather jacket and hat. He hung both next to where she'd just placed her coat and hat.

“Yes, more than once. But it's been several years since we last saw one another. The last time was my sister-in-law's funeral. Why don't you come back to my kitchen? I'll put on some coffee. You could probably use something warm.”

“I could. Thank you.”

Cathy understood the delight on his face as he looked around. The elegant Baker family home had passed down in her late husband's family for the last four generations. The

house had taken her breath away when Anthony James, her late husband, first brought her here. Tony, her oldest son, had been a toddler, carried in his father's arms that day. Cathy had been seven months pregnant with the twins Julie and Jeff. It seemed like yesterday, but Tony would turn thirty next month.

"Dinner will be just us and Emily and Charlie. I thought we could use a little time to clear the air before all the parties begin in earnest," she said. She led him through the sprawling house to the kitchen.

"I would've preferred to be given more notice on this wedding of our children," he said behind her.

"Trust me, so would I. Still, you've had more time than I have. Emily and Charlie announced their engagement to her family just before Christmas. By that time, she'd already refused to sign that abomination of a prenuptial agreement your attorney emailed Charlie."

"Putting this wedding together so quickly couldn't have been easy," he said, his voice tight. The subject of the prenuptial agreement was obviously a sore one with him. And rightly so, in her opinion. He deserved to feel more than a little discomfort.

"It's not been an easy thing to get all of the logistics put in place," Cathy conceded, "especially since we're expecting over four hundred people. Still, Emily has her heart set on a Valentine's Day wedding."

"Is she pregnant?" Trey demanded.

"You would leap to that nasty conclusion," she said, facing him. She planted her hands on her hips to reduce the temptation to throttle him.

"When a wedding has been thrown together with this kind of haste, that's a question you should be expecting...if you'll pardon the unintended pun. You didn't answer me. Is she pregnant?"

"I doubt it. I've never felt the need to ask her that question either." She continued toward the kitchen. Not hearing footsteps following her, she turned around to see him looking at her own wedding picture hanging on the wall. The photo featured herself and her late husband along with their parents and siblings.

"You're Jase Wyatt's twin sister, Mary Kate," Trey said, his voice as insubstantial as a dust bunny. "I don't think I would have recognized you, except for Jase being in the photograph."

“No one’s called me Mary Kate, apart from my brothers, in a very long time.”

“Jase always called you Mary Kate. Besides, Shakespeare had you pegged when he wrote: ‘For you are called plain Kate, And bonny Kate, and sometimes Kate the curst, But Kate, the prettiest Kate in Christendom, Kate of Kate Hall, my super-dainty Kate— For dainties are all Kates.’”

Cathy recognized the second act of *Taming of the Shrew*. “You certainly are not Petruchio, come to woo me on a bet. Nor are you the first man to quote that particular passage to me.” She chuckled.

“I doubted I was. We’re neither one kids. Cathy is the name of an unfledged girl. Mary Kate...now that’s a name with enough character to fit you.” He smiled. That smile made him look very appealing. “You should smile more often. It’s a vast improvement over the scowl you were wearing a few minutes ago,” she told him.

“I guess I owe you an apology.”

“You guess?”

“I’m sorry. I should have recognized you before now. But, when we talked at Rose’s funeral, your hair was different. It was in a long braid that draped over your left shoulder. Your hair was still mostly dark then, with just a little silver. And you’ve dropped at least twenty pounds.”

“I’m taking better care of myself these days. Still, we’ve both aged in the last dozen years. You’ve turned gray yourself, and we both have wrinkles we didn’t have then.”

“True enough,” he allowed upon reaching the kitchen. “Tell me honestly, Mary Kate, aren’t you worried about this marriage of our kids? Emily is very young.”

“She’ll outgrow that soon enough. We both did,” Cathy said. “She’s eight years younger than Charlie. That’s not an insurmountable difference in their ages.”

“There are times I don’t feel any older than Charlie, or even Emily,” he admitted.

“I doubt either of us would go back to those years, even if we could.”

“No, I wouldn’t,” he admitted.

“There’s one bit of common ground between us. I wonder how many more we can find.” Cathy scooped some coffee beans into an electric grinder and pulsed it until coarsely ground. Then she dumped the ground coffee into a French press and filled the

cylinder half way from the instant hot water tap before setting the coffee press on the counter to steep.

She turned around to face Charlie's dad. He'd taken a seat in a bar stool and propped his elbows on the counter of her stainless work island. While she plated some of the appetizers she'd brought home, Cathy asked, "How do you take your coffee, Trey?"

"Irish...if you'll join me?"

"I'd have to look to see if there's any whiskey in the pantry," she agreed. "Help yourself to the pastries."

He took a bite of a phyllo triangle stuffed with spinach and feta cheese. "This is outstanding."

"Nothing tastes quite as good as pastry made fresh by experts. Excuse me for a moment," she said.

"This house is not at all what I expected," he called, while she rummaged in her pantry. "The public rooms are strictly Victorian charm, but this is definitely a modern production kitchen, right down to the food service license hanging on the wall there."

Coming out of the pantry carrying a still sealed bottle of a very good single malt Irish whiskey, Cathy said, "I worked here until I had to have a bigger production kitchen. My daughter Julie uses it now for her catering business."

Trey raised an eyebrow. "I'm forced to re-adjust my expectations where this family is concerned."

"That's not surprising. You seem to have assumed that Emily's main concern is Charlie's money—specifically his future income." Cathy kept her voice level.

Trey remained quiet for a long time. "That's plain speaking," he managed at last.

"I have no patience with polite small talk when the matter is important." She pushed the plunger of the coffee press down, trapping the grounds at the bottom of the cylinder. "Nothing is more important to me than the happiness of my children."

"You aren't going to make this easy for me, are you?"

"No, I don't think I am," she said, looking up while spooning superfine sugar into the hot coffee. "Too many people make things easy for you. It's obviously spoiled you. Then

again, I've never known a doctor who wasn't at least a bit spoiled. My own family members are included in that assessment, just in case you were wondering."

He laughed, his mirth sounding rusty. "Lady, you're definitely something else."

She opened the whiskey bottle. "Which means you haven't quite made up your mind what I am." She didn't look up from pouring a tablespoon of whiskey into the bottom of two stemmed mugs. "That's fair enough. I'm not sure I know what to make of you either. I don't vey much like the side of you I've seen through your interaction with the kids. Somehow, we have to find a way of co-existing peaceably so we don't become a problem for our kids."

"I wasn't aware we were at war," Trey said in some surprise.

"You declared war on my family when you had the prenuptial agreement sent. Now we have to make peace."