

~ Still Life ~

by Devize

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Disclaimer:

Okay... this is kind of experimental. Unfinished stories within a possibly unfinished story. But DON'T RUN SCREAMING because it is finished in it's current format. Are you following this? Good... can you explain it to me then?!

No sex, just a little kissing and cuddling.

As always, the spelling isn't wrong, it's British.

Dedicated to the ladies of the Sandbox.
And, of course, my cariad.

There are nights that change your life.

But, God help me, has it really come to this?

I shifted in the dark, barely a centimetre; just enough to take some of the weight off my right arm. I could hear a tap dripping somewhere... in the bathroom, in the kitchen, couldn't tell from here. A steady... annoying... slow-torture drip... drip... drip. But my body was too heavy to move.

I closed my eyes onto tears and hurting and thought of her. Her smile, the light in her eyes when she laughed, her voice; the conversations we have which seem to last for hours - but never seem to last long enough to say what I truly want to say.

I wondered about her, as I always do. I knew she lived with her parents, a situation she wasn't happy with. I knew she was dedicated to her work and those privileged enough to have the benefit of her services. I know she... how did she put it? Remembering: there was that little pause, her eyes cast down - looking for all intents and purposes like a Jane Austen heroine in jeans and sneakers - she cleared her throat and quietly she said, " I prefer the company of women." And again that smile, heightened by the crimson on her cheeks, which made me laugh, and made her blush even more. "Oh stop it, you!" she had said, punched me, lightly, on the arm, and found something very important to do in the kitchen.

I wondered about her, as I always do. I wished about her, fantasized about her - well, it isn't a crime, even for someone like me, although there are those who still think otherwise.

I flexed my fingers, feeling the blood pump through my veins like a drumbeat. I could feel it against my skin. I wished I could feel her against my skin.

"You have such an amazing imagination, Gracie," she said to me once. "You ought to use it." And I had tried. Single-finger tapping on a computer keyboard, my thoughts outracing the words on the page, until I'd get frustrated and want to chuck the stupid computer out the window. But I couldn't. Which was even more frustrating.

But now my thoughts could race all they wanted. I felt dark... somewhere dark and hopeless. I closed my eyes.

There *are* nights worse than this.

With my eyes closed, the dripping became more lucid, as if I could hear liquid sliding on a solid surface before it fell. Condensation on a cell wall; the gentle stench of moulding stone that had become so much the air that I breathed, that now I barely sensed it. My body tied, arms and legs knotted to the floor, my face pressed to the damp ground, combining with sweat to render my skin muddy.

I was their prisoner. Unseen, their faces hidden as they tortured me for information. I was different from them. Looked different. Belonged to a different set of people. Abided by a different set of rules. Therefore, I was enemy. Timeless reasoning. I couldn't remember what year it was, what century, what country I was in. Maybe another continent, maybe a long time ago. Kept in the dark, days and nights blurred into one until my incarceration became eternal.

Except for her.

She came in the night. I assume it was the night; the darkness was constant. Only the slow diminuendo of humanity into the silent chirrup of cicadas, suggested the sun had set. And she came out of that quiet. The slightest tread of a foot, which seemed like nothing more than the turning of dust. But I heard it, always. The pause... unsure.... In the dark I pictured her as a fragile faun, wary of the hunter, her fear seemed to ripple the air.

But she always came.

A hand on my hair, what was left of it after they'd sheared my head. I could feel the pads of her fingers, sensitive on my scalp. And then that touch to my lips, cold and rough, but like the cloth of heaven. She'd soaked it in water, and I sucked each precious, clean drop from the material, moistening my parched throat, loosening my sticky tongue.

"Thank you," I always said it, the words sounding swollen in the stillness.

And always there would be a hand to my lips, and she would bend over my body, her mouth almost touching my ear. Her voice was low, strange, but so sweet I could taste it. "Sssh," she would whisper, "please. If my brother...." And her hand would stroke my head, instinctively, the backs of her fingers following the curve of jawline, until it would rest gently against my mouth. I

would kiss it, giving my thanks with chapped lips, listening to the sudden hitch, the quickening of her breathing.

Again her voice, a susurration I inhaled. "I'm sorry... I'm sorry." Her hands on my face, another kiss, my mouth dragging on her skin. "This is wrong. My people... we aren't like this. We aren't all like this." Her body rocked above. "Please believe me."

"Tell me your name." I whispered it against her skin.

"I can't."

"Please."

"Don't ask me."

A hundred times she said, "Don't ask me," or so it seemed. And then one night, there was a pause instead of her words. I felt the gentle tickle of her breath on my skin as she again bent over me.

The terror of hesitation, and then, so small and swift a sound I could barely hear it....

"Margareta."

And with the flick of her skirts she was gone.

But the name roared in my blood.

Margareta. It echoed in my mind while their voices raged over me, and their hands beat me.

Margareta. I cried with it... but I didn't betray her. I stayed silent.

So she came again, and I smiled as I said, "Thank you, Margareta," and I could hear her smile in return.

I started to bear the days of solitude and pain, because of the company of night. She nurtured her courage, and my own. I dared to whisper questions. She dared to stay longer - sometimes arriving as we could still hear the faint laughter of the men, before the night stole even their bawdiness - communicating with her hands when she couldn't communicate with words. And she fed me now, stealing provisions from under my captors' noses to feed their prisoner. She'd cut from chunks of bread and fruit, placing morsels against my lips so I could eat and lick the remains from her fingers. I strengthened under her hands until one night I was able to ask her: "Free me?"

There was still hesitation... but the terror was no longer there.

"I shouldn't."

"My hands?"

The ropes around my wrists felt part of me now as her fingers explored the strands, pulling. "They're damp. I'll have to cut them."

"You can't, they'll know."

"There's more rope. I can tie you up again." There was a smile in the dark.

I could feel the knife slipping against the cords as if the blade was cutting into my skin. I sensed warm, wet liquid seeping into my palm. I didn't feel the pain, it was little more than a gentle awareness compared to the beatings I had suffered.

Strange that, with my upper body free, I remained on the floor, my muscles unaccustomed to any other position. It was Margareta who lifted me up, her torso pressing against mine, and although it seemed I couldn't feel, couldn't move, I felt every inch of her against me, her own sinews flexing as she drew me upright.

I felt faint, unsteady, and she held me, taking my weight against her own slight form, reassuring me, stroking my back, as I struggled to find some kind of equilibrium. Until I felt able to draw my head up, and now in the muted moon light creeping through the boarded window, and from my own familiarity with the endless dark, I could see the shape of her, the soft curve of her cheek, the sparkle of life in her eyes. Fighting against weeks of disuse, I lifted my arm, my hand shaking against her skin. My touch left streaks of dirt and blood.

"I'm sorry."

She grabbed my hand. "That blood is fresh. Did I hurt you?" Her distress ached inside.

I tried to examine the knife-wound in the dark, just a nick from her blade as it cut through the rope.

"You could never hurt me."

And at my words she brought my wrist to her lips, as if her kiss could heal the wound, and my body surged with need. "Margareta...." I didn't know what I was going to say, only her name had formed in my mind, but her mouth stopped mine with its touch. Firm and lingering, and sweeter than water. I could taste the strange tang of my blood on her lips. Her kiss was eloquent, and as strange and beautiful as her voice to me. It left me breathless with wonder as we parted, and I blossomed with the rapid touch of her breasts against me as she fought for air.

For a moment, it didn't matter where we were, all that mattered was Margareta: her presence, her kiss, these feelings that were racing through my veins.

But we were in my cell, dark and dank, and my strength was failing. I fell forward, and I could feel her arms catch me, support me against her body, drift me down into the safe haven of her lap.

She held me for a long time, and for a while we returned to our familiar positions: her body bent over mine, the touch of her fingers tracing my face.

Once I started, "My name is...."

"I know who you are," she said, her mouth once again almost touching my ear. "They say you're the daughter of our enemy. They will keep you here until your people surrender to us."

I reared up, pushing at her, my mouth almost meeting hers again. I could feel the brush of her breath on my skin as I spoke: "My father will never surrender."

"Then..."

"Then I'll die here." My lips, rough and dry, grazed hers as I spoke.

"I won't let that happen." And she kissed me again, her fingers at my shoulders, my neck, my back. In the black of night, I shaped her body with my hands, feeling the form of her. She was smaller than me, slim, but with an intense power that seemed to tingle at my touch. A lock of hair shifted under my touch, it was long, loose and soft. I tried to picture her in my mind's eye: tresses as bright as moonlight, her slender, pale form in this dismal cell. And now my own form, broken, filthy and stinking - a foul thing pawing at her beauty.

"Why?" I broke away, falling backwards at my own force, pulling at the ropes round my still-bound feet. "Why are you helping me?"

She paused, taken aback by the sudden, vile bitterness in my voice. She sat back... I could all but see her smoothing the lines of her skirt along her lap. I could hear her choosing her words. "Because I hate what they've done to you."

"Pity?" The word seemed to spit itself, too loud in the stillness.

Her voice, in contrast, was gentle. She spoke as if she still whispered at my ear. "I saw them bring you in. You were beautiful, strong, a warrior, and they were scared of you. My brother... he beats you because he's ashamed of his own fear."

"You help me to get at your brother?"

"No." I could feel the little shake of her head. Her hands moved to my face, as if now she too could see with touch. Her thumbs traced my cheekbones. "No, I help you because despite them, you are still beautiful and strong."

This was getting too much.

"Because of you," I whispered.

Because of her. If at all. That's what I wanted. To be beautiful to her, but how could I be beautiful like this?

"Help me," I said into the dark.

"Help me, Margareta." The words moved against her hands.

"I'll find a way to get you out of here."

There was the sudden mutter of sound from outside the window. We froze, rigid against each other. Listening... listening. A footstep. A name being called. An answer in the distance. The fading slide of sound as the footsteps receded.

I could hear the fast, frightened beating of a heart, and I wasn't sure whether it was mine or hers.

"I've stayed too long," she ventured, finally.

"I'm glad you did."

"I must go."

She stood up, her presence suddenly soaring over me in the dark. It felt right to be on my knees in front of her, her devout proselyte. And then she was gone. For a few moments, the room echoed with the sound of my own lonely breathing... wondering if I had imagined it, wondering if I was still pressed to the floor, dreaming of a goddess called Margareta.

Until I felt her again. She took my hands, kissed each palm, then bound my hands, gently, loosely, the coagulating blood wiping across fibres. I lay down, sinking into the familiar morass of dirt and anguish, feeling already the morning's coming abuses. There was the rustle of rope as she attached me to the floor's hidden bands, and I was a prisoner again. But she was still there. She kissed my cheek, as if she knew the tears were there, and whispered, "I'll find a way, my love."

And she left me.

The following day, I closed my eyes and thought of her - the feel of her, the taste of her, the sound of her. And I felt the first breath of freedom. For the first time in as long as I can remember, I could imagine a spark of future. Only once did the men come in. I watched their sandaled feet in line with my face, kicking up dirt. I was spared a beating that day. But I held myself taut, pretending that my bonds were tight against my skin.

Night never seemed to rise. The endless twilight of voices and humanity drummed at the walls. Until slowly they died into darkness. And now the waiting was agony. Even the cicadas seemed

quiet, as if they too paused, breathless. But then I felt her footsteps through the dirt; fingers on the ropes at my wrists.

There was an urgency about her tonight, hands stumbling over my bindings, her breathing hot and urgent against my body. Finally, there were words: "I can get you out."

Those words were fire. My stiff limbs protested, but I struggled up, and as she cut away the ropes from my ankles, I stood. My legs screamed, my knees buckling, and I crashed to the floor. For the first time I realised how much my captors had supported me when I was upright, my weight on them, my life in their hands. Now it was if I couldn't give up the dirt floor on my own.

"Let me help you." I could feel her hands on me, pulling me up. I could feel desperation in her skin, as if she was willing me on. Again, I laboured, feeling sleeping muscles waken abruptly, and I was on my feet, shaking and in pain. But she held me, her arms around me, and I marvelled at her small body next to mine, and that, of the two of us, she was the stronger. Briefly, she reached up, the ghost of her face below mine, and kissed me - a determined, promising kiss that told stories of so much more. And then she broke away, and all but carried me towards liberty.

But we hadn't noticed the presence at the door, watching us.

And for the life of me, I couldn't think of a way to get them out of there.

Hell, I couldn't think of a way to get me out of here. I twisted my shoulders around as far as they would go, hoping that the action would be more comfortable.

Nope.

I stretched my free arm and caught my wrist on a familiar metal switch. I listened for a moment as I heard wheels turning in air. Stupid fucking things. It was as if that sound was symbolic of everything that was wrong. That... that annoying sound of water. It smelt musty in here, thick... too thick to breathe.

I just wanted to get the hell out of here, and preferably, the hell out of my life. But I wanted to take her with me.

Somewhere completely different. The sound of water.... I closed my eyes and wished.

My bed was rocking gently. It would feel odd if it wasn't. It would be odd for me if I didn't wake to the sound of waves, the creak of wood, the flutter of sails, or ribald laughter coming from the deck. But this morning something had pulled me awake - wrenched me headlong from a dream which had involved me diving tonguefirst into somewhere warm and....

And there was that damned knocking again.

"What the hell is it?" I shouted.

"Ship ahoy, cap," came Con's mumbling voice.

I launched myself from my bunk, glad of my habit of keeping my leg strapped on as I skittered across the floorboards to the door. "What kind?"

"Square rigger."

"Fire power?"

"No more than sixteen, we reckon."

"And they won't have the crew to man them." My grin spread to my first mate's face. "And what are we waiting for, Con?"

He didn't wait.

I always gave myself the luxury of a few minutes alone before an attack - to prepare myself, to drink in the sweetness of anticipation, to make sure my leg was strapped on securely. What would be on board The Miracle by the end of the day? Chests of treasure, gold coins, tobacco, new crewmembers, a few luscious maidens, ready to have their heads turned, and their skirts lifted, by a dashing pirate?

A square rigger? There might be a few passengers aboard....

I buckled on my cutlass - an accessory really, as I never used it, but brandished in the right way, it could put the fear of Whitefaced Jack into the most daring of souls. My carefully purloined, and hidden, pistols had long proved far more subtle and devastating toys. When necessary.

I tied a bandanna round my head, then topped it with my tricorn, flung my coat around me, and went into battle.

They didn't put up much of a fight. A merchant ship - the Lady Josephine - destined for Barbados, crewed by puny milksops who were apparently surprised they had guns on board, let alone having the capability to use them. They all but handed us their cargo: furniture, cloth - worth a lot if you had the connections, which I did - gold and, to my men's particular delight, spirits. And passengers. A few cowering individuals, easily parted from their jewellery, and as the gunsmoke cleared, a woman, with more mettle in her than the rest of them put together. I watched her from my vantage point on the Lady Josephine's quarterdeck, berating the other passengers and the crew, shouting orders, even taking a couple of well-aimed swipes at my men. I couldn't help but laugh as Short-stack landed a bloody nose. And she was pretty. Elegant, soft-cheeked, with a fashionable but simple hairstyle. It was gold and flowers in the sun, glittering more than any treasure on board that ship.

Goods, gold, spirits... it might as well have ended up at the bottom of the sea, suddenly all that mattered was that woman... and the fact that, in the melee, she couldn't hear the footsteps behind her, never realised her own danger as she tried to help her fellow passengers. I could see Bill

O'Hara slide an arm around her waist, another round her mouth, and whisper something in her ear.

Not on my watch.

I hopped down across the gundeck, found a loose line cut from the mainmast and swung my way onto the deck, slamming into Bill O as I landed. I grabbed the woman's hand as Bill fell and pulled her after me. I had her aboard The Miracle before she realised what was happening.

She struggled, she shouted, she used language of which a lady of her breeding shouldn't have been aware, and it didn't help a bit. With our cargo loaded, we cut the Lady Josephine loose and made our escape, my own lady still aboard.

Only then did she quieten. I watched her as she fully realised her predicament: separated from her companions, surrounded by men, some of them eyeing her in a particularly unfriendly manner - Short-stack still holding his nose - and some of them eyeing her in a manner rather too friendly. If I was her, I would have been very scared. I wasn't her. And she certainly wasn't me. A deep blue gaze settled on me, and it was me who felt nervous.

I touched my tricorn. "Apologies for the inconvenience, ma'am, and welcome to my ship. As I haven't had the pleasure..." (there was a murmur of mirth among the crew, which I ignored), "...might I enquire...?"

She stood up to her full height, which wasn't particularly tall, held her chin up, looked down every inch of her perfectly proportioned, perky nose, and spoke in a voice that could be heard as far as Bridgetown, let alone by every person on my ship. "My name is Margaret Fitzhugh, daughter of William Fitzhugh of Liverpool, and I'll thank you to stop staring at me in that unseemly manner, Mr High-and-mighty Pirate."

And the crew burst out laughing.

Which only made Miss Fitzhugh even more angry. I wondered if she was going to stamp her foot in those heels of hers, and if so, whether it was going to damage my deck. If she did, she was damned well paying for it... or at least Mr Fitzhugh of Liverpool would.

"I have connections, you scoundrel. They'll hunt you and your band of brigands down."

I smiled, I was intrigued by her spirit. "Of course they will, Miss Fitzhugh, but they'll have to find us first. In the meantime, perhaps you'd care to take supper with me in my quarters?" I offered her an arm.

"I wouldn't be seen dead..."

"You have a choice, Miss Fitzhugh. You take lodging in my quarters or you bunk down with the crew. You are more than welcome to join them if you wish for their company. I'm sure they would be thrilled to have yours."

The devil and the deep blue sea... she took one more look at my companions on board The Miracle - the winking, the gesturing - and followed me. Although she drew up her skirts as she walked, and refused to take my arm.

Cookie had provided us with food from the Lady Josephine, a fine pork and the wonder of fresh vegetables. My guest didn't touch a thing. Nor did she accept a mug of wine. Only taking water. Me? I tucked in, although attempting to mind my manners and not speak with my mouth full.

"Finding your fortune in Barbados, Miss Fitzhugh?"

She didn't reply, simply sipping her water with a determination that made me wonder if she was going to break the cup simply with her lips.

"Seeking adventure on the high seas?"

Her jawline moved a fraction, becoming even tighter.

"You seem to have found it." I thrust a piece of pork through my grin and chewed happily.

She glanced at me - presumably she thought I was concentrating on my food - and caught my eye, much to her further annoyance.

"Adventure indeed. A beautiful young lady, unchaperoned, in the bedchamber of a notorious...."

"I had a chaperone, until your men killed her."

I paused, aware that I should be feeling angry at her presumption. I wasn't. I could only feel attraction to her fire, and sadness at her grief. "My men don't kill unless they haven't a choice," I said, quietly. "I imagine that at this moment, your companion is safe on board the Lady Josephine, probably already forgetting her inelegant dive for cover under the cockboat and, no doubt, putting the finishing touches to a story of attempted rescue and last minute despair as bloodthirsty pirates stole away her charge from under her nose. I wonder how she'll describe me."

Now Margaret looked directly at me. "She'll describe you as an evil, murderous man, who cares for nothing but lining his own pockets. The infamous Whitefaced Jack of The Miracle. That's the truth, is it not?"

I raised an eyebrow. "You seem to have heard a lot about me."

"You are proud of your notoriety?"

"It amuses me."

"It amuses you that people fear your name?"

"It amuses me that barely a word of it is true."

Margaret looked at me, disbelief wide open blue in her eyes. "This is The Miracle, isn't it?"

I smiled. "That's the true bit."

"And you are Whitefaced Jack?" she said, as if arguing in court.

I abandoned my meal and moved over to where she was sitting. I could see her draw back a little as I approached, but she didn't move from the chair. And her face never betrayed her fear; she held my gaze.

I took the seat beside her, caught her hand in mine. It was stiff, cold. She couldn't disguise the tremble at my touch.

"Miss Fitzhugh, do you know why I'm known as Whitefaced Jack?"

Her voice was quiet as she answered, but never lost its intensity. "Because unlike yourself, most of your crew are... were rescued from slave boats."

I knew my eyes were laughing at her certainty. Her own widened with concern as I lifted her hand, but with little resistance, I drew her fingers down my cheek. "How many men do you know, Miss Fitzhugh, who aren't troubled by the colouring of a beard?" Briefly, I kept hold of her hand, wondering what she would do if I brought those fingers to my lips, but thought better of it and delivered them to the safety of her lap.

She stared at me, puzzlement creasing her sweet face, searching my own features to find answers to questions she didn't yet know how to ask.

"And Jack?" I smiled, asking the question myself as I leant back in the chair, running my hand over my head, and pushing off the scarf with which I held back my hair. I shook my head, and Margaret watched as long, dark locks spilt over my shoulders. "It might as well be Tom, Dick or Harry. It makes no difference to me... or my sex."

Her mouth fell open. "But...", she said. "But...."

"In fact," I finished, "it's a rather helpful masquerade, don't you think, Miss Fitzhugh?"

"Holy Mary, mother of God," Margaret said, and fell off her chair.

"Well, I've been called a few things, but never a blessed virgin." I stood up, and balanced myself to reach a hand down to her.

She stared up at me as if I was indeed the mother of God. "But you have a wooden leg," she said.

"Sadly, women are equally as susceptible to musketballs as men," I sighed. "Now do you want to stay on the floor, or can I be of assistance?"

It's strange how even the most noble of ladies seem able to relax once they realise that the evil pirate is nothing more than a woman; as if the trousers, the sword, the pegleg are magically replaced by a gown, a fan and a sudden flutter of manners. As if now they were safe; God bless their sweet naivety.

Margaret was something of an exception. Indeed, Margaret was exceptional. Not only did she remain on her guard, but I suddenly came down with an attack of gentility. She was different, fiery and proud, but without the supercilious pretension of many of her class.

She ignored my proffered hand, and got herself off the floor, as I struggled with the unfamiliar and frightening inclination to avert my eyes at the eyeful of shapely calf she involuntarily displayed. She sat herself back down, casting sidelong glances at me, and I found myself doing the same, taking sipping looks at her long, soft fingers as they straightened her skirts; the turn of her nose, the golden shimmer of her hair.

There was a silence that seemed to make me even more uncomfortable than my guest. I got up, and found myself pacing, hugely aware of the unnatural tap of my leg against the floor, until she spoke. "So, how does a lady take on the wrappings of a scoundrel?"

I found myself staring out of the porthole, at the darkening sky and the moon glistening on the waves. "A long story, Miss Fitzhugh."

"Seeking adventure on the high seas?" There was a smile in her voice.

And I returned it with one of my own, "That was never the intention." And I caught her blue gaze, and held it.

"I am to be married once I reach Barbados," she said, and looked away. It was a statement with no joy or expectation. I think she was anticipating some flippant reply, as she paused, glanced at me. But I kept my mouth shut. I appreciated her honesty, felt humbled by her trust.

"Then all must be done to reunite you with your fiancé," I replied.

"What will you ask for me?"

I thought for a moment. She was worth a potential fortune, with both a merchant father and a merchant beau to approach for ransom. But I was already beginning to realise - no one could pay Margaret Fitzhugh's ransom, because Margaret Fitzhugh was priceless.

I finally spoke: "Every penny you are worth, Miss Fitzhugh."

"And if they will not pay?"

I watched the fear glisten in her eyes, and for a moment saw myself through her gaze. Rough, violent, sword and pistol to hand, a travesty of everything she knew, a travesty of womanhood. Why shouldn't she be scared?

"They will pay," I replied, because there was no alternative for them... or me.

There was the sudden bang of gunfire....

A car backfiring in the street outside, rousing me from a stupor. My body felt lethargic now, I couldn't have moved even if I'd wanted to. I wondered how many other people up and down the street had had the same start. I could picture the little bursts of subdued light at the windows, the agitation of curtains, a hundred tuttings like echoing backfires. I closed my eyes and pictured the sky. Clear, I thought, dotted with stars, which would be almost hidden in the dark shadow of city haze. For a moment, I longed to be out there....

The biting wind against my skin; loose hair pulled back by the blast of air. The vibration of movement between my thighs. The road a snaking ribbon ahead of me. We could go anywhere, do anything. I could feel her body warm up against my back, her arms around me, gripping hard, but her laugh, almost drowned by the roar of the wind and the engine, rang with joy in my ears.

Freedom. To move, to escape, to fly....

Too close for comfort. I wiped away a tear where it was tickling down my cheek and tried to focus on something else.

Something different, something different....

But I couldn't help thinking of the same old: trying to find the exact word to describe the colour of her eyes. How could you describe them as 'blue' when they're the blue of a summer sky; the blue of a Caribbean sea; the twinkling blue of a multi-faceted sapphire? I'd seen those eyes the colour of thunder during a night storm. I wanted to know what colour they turned when she was aroused.

And I really wished I hadn't thought of that, because now I was miserable, uncomfortable and horny.

Sex. That feeling never goes away. It's a demon that lingers impossibly in your mind, playing with you, taunting you.... But I was always glad of it, because it made me realise that there's still life in me yet.

I wished... I wished I had the courage just to tell her. I was always scared, you see... that she'd laugh, or be angry, or that I'd lose her - rejected by her professionalism. It's just sometimes, I'd imagine I'd see in her eyes a mirror of my own feelings, embraced in hopeless blue. And I wondered if she was scared too.

She spent a lot of time with me, far more than she had to. She'd stay late, we'd cook together, we talked for hours. I'd tell her stories, and love the pleasure in her face. She kissed me once - just on the forehead - but it made me blossom inside. She'd hold my hand sometimes, a fleeting squeeze, but it made me thrill with joy each time. It was times like that that the demon awoke and on those nights, left with nothing but my own thoughts, I'd be overwhelmed with the memories of desire. But each once-treasured memory, each woman's face (all long gone now), was replaced by her - and it killed me each time that with her, it could never be like that. I would only ever get close to her in my imagination.

So, I closed my eyes, ignored the growing ache in my right arm, and imagined.

She had legs that made it half the way up, but couldn't quite make it to bingo. Sure, she was small, but she was perfectly formed. A china doll of a broad. I wanted to protect her. I wanted to protect her bad.

She'd been waiting at the office door as I got back, looking like a kid in the big, bad world of night. Barely a word was spoken as I unlocked and opened, guided her through. She stood by the desk, as if she was too polite to sit until I'd given her the nod. Despite that, I heard saxophones play as she moved. She was one big band of a little lady and I'd be hearing her music my whole adult life.

But we had to get the formalities over with. I slung my hat and coat onto the stand and slid into my chair, hoisting my leg up onto the desk. She sat opposite, looking demure in that neat little black dress of hers, waiting for me to start the ritual: name, rank, problem

I let her wait - besides I was having too good a time looking at her. So, in the end, she spoke. "It's very dark in here."

"It's night-time, it gets that way."

"Haven't you any lights, Miss...?"

I silenced her as I flicked the desk lamp on. She was beautiful by the glow of the streetlamps, but now.... Hourglass figure, emphasised flawlessly by the cut of her dress. A little hat to hide a host of expressions behind, giving a glimpse of glinting hair à la mode. Hips that were just begging to be smoothed with the right pair of hands. Pale skin and dark shadow hinting of cleavage and beyond. I swallowed the whistle that came to lips, tamped down the double hubba and, surreptitiously, wiped my mouth.

She sighed, as if now she was here, she'd rather be anywhere else, but then started to speak. "My name is Greta Van Linden. I'm...."

"Van Linden? As in the Van Lindens?" The millionaire van Lindens? The Hamilton Avenue Van Lindens? The Van Lindens who owned most of the city and were quickly buying up the rest of it? Money just walked right in and pulled up a chair.

She seemed annoyed at the interruption. "Yes, the Van Lindens."

Yet she'd come to a one-woman detective agency, rather than the police. Hell, the cops would love this case. The Chief Commissioner himself would be on his knees searching for clues, even if it meant hunting for a lost cat. Although, I suspect that the beautiful Greta hadn't come to me to find Tiddles. And what was she keeping from old man Van Linden?

"I believe you're discreet."

"As discreet as you like."

Again, the pause, the sigh. "Miss Langley... I need you to find me a husband."

Okay, so I wasn't expecting that one.

Hell, I wasn't expecting that one.

"Excuse me?"

"I need a husband, Miss Langley."

"Any husband in particular, or shall I take a pin to the phonebook?"

"Well, if you're not going to take my request seriously...."

"I don't run that kind of agency, doll. Try Miss Mamie's on Seventh."

She stood up holding her clutch-purse to her like a shield. She turned, casting a look at me from under the brim of her neat little hat, and I felt like I'd been slapped.

"Good night, Miss Langley," she said, and gave me the perfect sight of her back view. Makes me wonder if she was waiting for me to stop her, because her walk to the door was slow and measured, as if she was counting steps, but at that moment I was focusing too much on the movement of rounds beneath her dress. My gaze dragged downwards and was suddenly entranced by the sight of her calves. They were perfectly curved as priceless Ming vases, and I toyed with the need to throw myself to my knees and treasure them with my lips.

Until I realised that those Ming vases were about to walk out of my life.

I launched myself across the room, not bad with my bad leg, and met her at the door. She'd got it open. I closed it for her.

Standing so close, she had to look up at me, giving me coy blue from under that brim. But she was trembling. Her lips were trembling. I licked my own. "Why...", why the hell was my voice that husky? I cleared my throat and started again. "Why do you need a husband, Miss Van Linden?"

She opened her mouth and I thought she was going to speak, but suddenly it was as if she couldn't. She stammered, "Miss Langley...." And then reached up and kissed me.

Okay, so that's one way to get me to take the case. Hell, I wished every client was this willing. Then again... I'd be thinking I'd died and gone to heaven every night, and waking up in hell every morning.

It was a questioning kiss, as if she was testing me out. So, I answered, running my hands where my imagination had gone just a few moments before - feeling the hourglass. I wanted more... I wanted to push her back onto the couch in the corner, where I'd spent so many nights alone, and find out a lot more about my new client. But I didn't. I merely opened her lips with my tongue. There was a surprised little gasp that tasted of peppermint and expectation, before she tasted me back. Bourbon and experience. I wondered, briefly, if she liked the mixture.

I felt her hands rest, tentatively, on my waist, and thrilled at the little pleasure as she started a journey up my back, gently teasing the cotton beneath her fingers, and I realised I was becoming obsessed just by this feeling. It didn't matter that this was Greta Van Linden. It didn't matter that I was holding a little package of a million dollars. This woman was dynamite... but it was me coming close to exploding.

And then she stopped, with a little exhalation that made my knees buckle, and allowed her hands to slip. "I'm sorry, Miss Langley," she said, breathlessly. "That was very unprofessional."

I smiled. "Hey, doll, I'm the professional here, and I'm telling you that there's nothing like a little unprofessionalism."

She smiled, blushed, and I felt a ridiculous grin split my face, but she walked from my grasp and sat back at the desk... as if nothing had happened.

Jesus, this woman was going to be hard work...and if it meant breaking rocks I was going to take this case. But... she wanted a husband?

"So... tell me the story," I said, wandering back to my seat... propriety now only a battered piece of furniture between us.

And again, there was that pause. A sigh, and when she spoke her voice was darker than the shadows in the room. "Miss Langley, my father is dying."

The words lingered in the evening.

"I'm sorry."

"A lot of people could be unless I marry."

"I don't get the connection."

She pursed those perfect red lips of hers. "My father has no sons, Miss Langley. There is me and my younger sister. As the older, I am his main beneficiary and my sister will be left with a specified bequest. However, my father has always been an old-fashioned man, and there is a stipulation in his will that means I must be married to inherit. If I don't marry, our positions are reversed. My sister, you see, is married."

There was a growing sense of disappointment as she spoke... a coldness, that didn't seem to fit on those fashionable shoulders. I didn't look at her as I spoke. I tried to keep the disgust out of my voice. "You're doing this for the money?"

"No." I glanced at her, she was looking at me, her eyes perceptive blue. There was admiration in them. "My needs are simple, Miss Langley. I don't care about the money. I care about my family's name and reputation."

I raised an eyebrow.

"If my sister inherits my father's estate, my brother-in-law will get his hands on it."

"And this is bad because...?"

"You're obviously not one for the society pages, Miss Langley. My sister is married to James Devenpeck."

Now that name I'd heard, and not through the society columns. I'd heard it whispered in the backrooms of bars, on street corners, and back alleys. But not in that form. "Your sister is married to Jimmy the Hood?"

"Is that how he's known?"

Jimmy was a grifter. Started off as a poor little rich kid who found himself playing with too much money and not enough talent. A lot of the sharks round here could smell rich blood from a mile off, and Jimmy soon found himself way out of his depth. But... rather than breaking his legs for the money, they used him. He became the reputable face of disreputable business - a front for the long con. Suddenly a lot of rich people were getting inexplicably poorer, a lot of innocents were finding themselves out of jobs, out of homes, and a lot of low-lives were getting fur coats for their girlfriends.

And Jimmy the Hood dropped the hood and became nice guy James Devenpeck again, with a few extra bucks in his pocket, his kneecaps intact; and with the watertight alibi of family name, reeking of virtue.

I knew more about Greta's brother-in-law than she did, and I knew now that's why she'd come to me. Partly. "I never trusted James, but I haven't been able to prove anything. My father won't believe me, my sister is barely talking to me...."

"So you need a husband."

"Believe me, Miss Langley, if it was my choice I wouldn't get married at all."

"You like your freedom, Miss Van Linden?"

"I like lots of things, Miss Langley. Or haven't I made myself clear?"

The air between us crackled like a neon light.

She licked her lips. "I need someone who would be willing to enter into a business arrangement with me. I need someone who understands the risks, who I can trust. I did my research, Miss Langley. I believe I can trust you...." I watched her throat move as she swallowed. "I believe I can trust you to find someone for me."

"A husband."

She nodded.

"I'll try." She smiled and I knew I'd do it for nothing. Not that I'd tell her that. Maybe I'd take payment in kind.

"Miss Van Linden, do you always approach your business deals with such... passion?"

She smiled again, and there was a warmth in her eyes that melted me. "No," she said, red lips forming a perfect kissing circle.

I smiled back, stood up, rounded the desk and went down on my knees in front of her. She reached out, ran a finger round the collar of my shirt, loosened my tie, reached down and kissed me again. Hot, deep, feeling it down to my boots. Fingers played with my buttons and I felt the shirt pushed from my shoulders, a caressing touch, tracing the outline of my bra. My hands on her silk-soft legs, pushing up her skirt. Payment in kind.

"If that's the way it is, doll," I said against her lips, "you'd better call me Grace."

The letterbox crashed and I jumped awake. I was stunned I'd even managed to fall asleep. I was stunned it was morning. Hard to guess what time it was as the mail came at differing times. Light oozed through the curtains, across the familiar furniture, unfamiliar from this angle. From where I lay, I could see a little pile of letters by the front door and I ached to get them, but I couldn't. Even the prospect of demands for money was better than where I was. Still the prisoner: incapable of escape. Still pinned to the floor by my own wheelchair. I couldn't escape this life. I never would. And after the night, they could take away the little freedom I did have. And they'd take her away. I could dream all I wanted, but how on earth could I ever believe that she could... love me?

I turned my head, attempting to bury reality into the sitting room carpet, which only succeeded in giving me rug burn... and not where I wanted it.

I didn't want to dream anymore. I didn't want to think any more. I closed my eyes, held my breath....

The front door. Two keys twisting in each lock. The slight squeak of the hinges as the door swung open. I felt her presence immediately. I tried to call her, but the night seemed to have stolen my voice.

Her gentle timbre of her tone drifted through: "Hi Grace, it's me. You know your mail's here?" I tried to move again, but again felt the immobile mass of the chair preventing the momentum. Under the couch, I had a view of the hallway. I could see her sneakered feet; and then a hand appeared momentarily, picking up envelopes, lithe fingers sliding over paper. Her voice lowered, and I just caught, "Not surprised you didn't look at this lot. Three bills and a free sample of toilet detergent."

Small feet padded on the hallway carpet, making slight indentations in the pile, vanishing as she lifted her foot, as if she'd never been there.

"Where are you?" The sneakers took a left, disappearing into the bedroom. "Gracie?"

I opened my mouth, forced my lungs to work, "Maggie!" The sound meant nothing, but at least it was a sound - a grunt to give away my presence.

And she heard - thank God, she heard - and came to me, running, a blonde head suddenly appearing around the couch, knees crashing down an inch from my head. "Oh my God, Grace, are you all right?"

"No," I said, and got a mouthful of carpet, fibres pulling at my dry lips.

She put a hand to my face, her thumb erasing the traces of tears and saliva, as if she was my mother, my friend, my lover.

"When did this happen?" Now I could see her face, a model of sweet concern, her eyes shining in the gloom.

"Last night," I mumbled.

"Oh my God, Gracie, you haven't been here all night?" Her soft tone seemed to soothe the pain inside. Balm from heaven, my sweet Maggie. Her question didn't need answering. "Are you hurt anywhere?" I couldn't really shake my head with my cheek pressed against the floor, but she seemed to understand what I was saying.

"Come on then, sweetie, let's get you up," she said. I felt her arms slide round my body, under my armpits, round my back, her chin resting on my shoulder.

I've never understood how she can do it. I'm not small, by any means, though thinner and lighter than I once was. Yet Maggie, who once would have stood a good few inches below me, lifted

me, sliding me out of my overturned wheelchair, and into an upright position. The super-strength of a carer.

I groaned at the loss of contact as, briefly, she rose to open the curtains. I groaned at the sudden blast of morning light. I groaned at the pain as my body readapted to verticality. I groaned at the sight of the wet seat of the chair, the wet floor beneath; my sweat pants were soaked, but only now could I see the darkened material sticking to my skin. My catheter had come out.

I burnt with shame. Tears seemed to steam on my flushed cheeks. I wanted to cover my face, but my good arm was immovable, barely able to feel the returning pinpricks of life, having been squashed beneath my torso for the last few hours. I had to make do with covering my eyes with the stump of my left wrist.

"I'm sorry," I did no more than mouth.

Her fingers danced on the skin, manoeuvring my arm away from my face. "You have nothing to apologise for." She smiled, and I felt myself falling into the deep pool of her eyes, slowly drifting down to the gentle curve of her lips.

"Maggie," I said. At least, I thought I said, but my voice was apparently still sleepy. I shook it awake with a cough.

Crouched in front of me, her fingers ran over my left arm, coming to rest on the stump, and for a moment I could almost believe my hand was still there, holding hers. For a moment... then her hand danced over to my other arm and gently started to rub feeling back into it. "What happened?" she asked.

I exhaled, angrily. "That stupid wheel. I just reached over to turn the light out, and it gave way." Maggie leaned over and jiggled the buckled wheel.

"Might be able to mend it, once my arm wakes up," I continued, giving the sluggish limb a shake, "if you could get my prosthetic." Hell, I used to mend my bike all the time. "At least it'll get me mobile until..."

Maggie sighed. "We ought to call the doctor, just to get you checked out."

"Don't tell them...."

"Grace, I need to make sure you're okay."

"But, don't tell them what happened."

"Grace...."

"Please, Maggie, if they think I can't look after myself, they'll move me. I'll lose this place. I'm not helpless, I'm not. I've learnt to do so much on my own. I can get myself out of bed. I can

dress myself. I can feed myself; I've even cooked for myself... if you can count beans on toast as cooking."

"Beans on toast is cooking." She half-smiled, and looked at me for a long time, her eyes fixed on mine, conversations without words. She pursed her lips, "I still need to phone them, to get a replacement."

I let out a breath, warily allowing a little hope, and looked at her askance. "A replacement wheel or a replacement wheelchair?"

She looked at me wryly. "You know what I'll ask for, and you'll know what I'll get." And then her hands and her attention were back on me, resting again on my stump, lacing with my recovering fingers. Her expression was earnest, pale with sorrow. "I'm sorry this happened, Grace. I'm so sorry you were alone. I hate to think of you like that all night. I feel... I feel as if..." And her voice dwindled, leaving expectation like a vapourtrail.

There are nights that change your life.

On a rainy three years ago, I severed my spine, lost both my legs, my left hand, my independence, I almost lost myself as my bike slid under a truck. My reality became paraplegia. Months in hospital, operations, physiotherapy, a hell of a lot of pain. Inside and out. My friends drifted, old ones left, new ones... one... one infusing me as sunrise infuses darkness. But she wasn't supposed to be my friend. She was only my carer.

Only...?

I'm not helpless. I might not be the person I was a few years ago, I might only have one good hand, and a prosthetic claw that spooks the unprepared, I might not be able to move in the same way as other people, I might not be attractive any more; but I still have my mind, I still have my imagination. I might be the prisoner rather than the pirate, but I still have my dreams.

I'm just different.

"Maggie..."

"Are you all right there for the moment? Can you make it to the bathroom? And I'd better give you a quick exam myself. Do you want to get onto the couch...?"

I was still on the floor, propped up against the armchair, the useless ruins of my legs, sticking out in front of me like withered tree roots.

"I'll only get the couch wet. Maggie...."

She paused, not meeting my eye. Something hovered at her lips, a thought like a hummingbird, fluttering with hesitation. "Grace... I know how much you treasure your independence...."

"Maggie...."

"But what if something like this were to happen again? Fact is, it *could* be something as stupid as a broken wheel that could get you hurt...."

"Maggie...."

"Grace, I couldn't bear it if you got hurt. I couldn't bear it." There was an ardour in her voice that I heard for the first time, and it confused me, shocked me, and for a brief moment gave me... hope.

"Maybe you shouldn't be on your own, Grace. Maybe if you didn't have a carer, but you lived with someone who...."

"Maggie... I love you." And the words left my mouth, fluttering up to heaven like the most fervent of prayers.

Now she stopped. Sky-sparkling eyes on me, a little surprised.

My good arm was recovering its feeling. The first thing I felt was her touch on my hand. She squeezed. "I love you too, Gracie."

"No... I mean...."

The look in her eyes changed, deeper blue, a telling blue. And, for a moment, I knew what colour arousal was. "I know exactly what you mean." She leant forward, kissed me, lingering on my lips. And I felt alive.

She smiled. "Hey, if we get your chair sorted today, do you want to go the park? Maybe you could tell me some stories?"

THE END

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