

~ That Kiss ~

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© by E. O'Rielly June 2005

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Disclaimer

Love/Sex: This story features relationships between adult women. If this bothers you, is illegal in the State, Province or Country where you live or if you are under the age of 18, find something else to read. There are loads of general stories out there.

Language: There is the use of a few expletives.

Violence: There is no violence in this story.

Hurt/Comfort: There are scenes of heartache to be dealt with by the characters.

Acknowledgment: ...Thank you for all your help Carmen and Vi. A special thanks to my sister for editing.

Dedication: .For my friend Julie whose unwavering support has given me wings to once again fly.

Author's Personal Note: I have learned...that a rat can dress itself up in new clothes and even don a new hat with a little feather in the band then strut around as if it were something else...at the end of the day though, it is still a rat. Or, as a wise woman once said...same ho different dress.

That Kiss

Part One

* * *

Carlin Whittaker stood watching her partner of almost twelve years hunched over a computer as fingers furiously hit the keyboard. Susan Macmillan was everything she had ever hoped for in a partner. Although their relationship had been tempestuous at times, Carlin took her commitment seriously and had never looked at or even thought about another woman. She was reminded of the first time she had ever seen Sue.

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She had returned to her office and found a stranger sitting at her desk concentrating on her desktop computer.

"What do you think you are doing?" Carlin was incensed that this person was allowed into her office.

Startled, the dark haired woman looked up. "Oh, hi," she said smiling. "I'm upgrading your computer."

The woman's smile was infectious and Carlin couldn't help but respond in kind. "I didn't know. No one told me you'd be here." She closed the space between them and held out her hand. "Carlin Whittaker." The hand that met hers was strong yet soft.

"Sue Macmillan." She held Carlin's hand a bit longer before letting go. "I will need about two more hours to finish up. They told me you would be out of the office...guess they didn't check with you."

Carlin discreetly checked the woman's hand. 'Good sign, no ring.' "Actually I will be in and out." She raised her eyebrows and shrugged.

That night the two woman shared dinner. That was the beginning of their relationship.

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"Hey, good lookin', you ready to go?"

Glazed eyes looked up. "Shit is it that time already?" Sue sighed heavily when the phone rang and held up one finger. "Macmillan." Her hand went quickly to the mouse, her fingers made several keystrokes as her eyes scanned the screen.

"Damn it Freddie, please don't tell me that. Do you have a handle on where the glitch starts?" Listening to her head programmer, Frieda Martinez, Sue rolled her eyes.

Sue's eyes drifted to her lover who was now standing next to her. She rolled her eyes again and gave a brief smile before continuing the conversation.

"Now we will have to go back over the entire program with a fine tooth comb and see how that will affect all the parameters of the program." Exasperation filled her voice, "who the hell wrote this anyway?"

She listened and shook her head. "You know what this means don't you?"

"Yep, until we get it right. The people upstairs want this by Monday so it will be non-stop until then." She sighed again but this time it was in resignation of what that meant to her personally. "Listen, I have a few things to take care of first. Why don't you get the others together and meet me in a half an hour or so in the lab."

Hanging up the receiver, Sue wondered if she dare look up at Carlin.

"Guess this means you aren't going." Carlin's words were clipped and cold.

"Look, I didn't plan on this happening. It just did."

"All of a sudden? You had no idea that you couldn't go say an hour ago or maybe even yesterday?" Lately whenever they had plans for a few days alone Sue would, at the last moment, come up with a reason not to.

Sue looked sheepishly up at her partner. The regret she felt appeared to be evident in her eyes. "I was hoping I could get it finished in time. Hell, I've been at it since six this morning. Damn it Carlin, I've had everyone working overtime so this could be done before I left. I'm sorry it hasn't worked out. I'm disappointed too."

They had been planning on the trip to San Francisco for the last two weeks. Carlin needed to be there for a meeting and they were going to incorporate some together time by the bay. Truth be told, she knew Sue seemed to be making an all out effort to get the project done in time. Seeing the apparent anguish on her lover's face she sighed.

"Hey, I will just come back on Friday." She put her hand on Sue's shoulder and squeezed gently. "Once this is over we can plan a special weekend."

Sue's face lit up. "Thank you." She got up, went to the door and closed it before taking Carlin in her arms. "I miss you already," she growled seductively. "Promise I will more than make this up to you when you get back."

"Mmm-hmm, I'll hold you to that." Carlin held Sue close. "Why don't I call a cab and you walk me down to the parking garage so I can get my bags."

Sue bent her head so her lips could capture Carlin's. "Sounds like a plan." She let go of Carlin and rushed to her desk as the phone rang again. "Yes."

"No, don't do anything...I will take care of it now." Hanging up she looked at Carlin standing at the door. "Sorry, looks like I can't even go with you to the garage."

Carlin shook her head slowly. "From the sound of your conversation I guessed as much." She quickly walked over to Sue and gave her a kiss. "See you when I get back."

* * *

"Please put your seats in the upright position and fasten your seatbelts." The sound of the flight attendant's voice brought Carlin out of her musings. She gently ran her fingers over her lips remembering the feel of Sue's on hers. She would be lonely over the next several days without her partner. Although, knowing all the work that was ahead for Sue, she doubted she would have seen much of her anyway.

The plane hit the tarmac with a thud and the wheels screeched as the breaks were applied. Carlin pulled out her cell phone and listened to the ringing on the other end. "Hey, how's it going?"

"Hi. We are all here knee deep in a database." Sue sounded distracted. "Where are you?"

"We just landed and they are about to open the doors." Carlin's eyes surveyed the passengers who were standing up to retrieve their carry on luggage. "I wish you were here. I miss you."

"Me too." It was difficult for Sue to speak freely with all her co-workers nearby. "Listen I need to get back to this. I'll call you tonight."

"I love you." Carlin knew Susan wasn't free to speak, but she still longed to hear the words.

"I know." Sue paused and looked around her. "Carlin," she whispered, "me too."

A smile crossed Carlin's face for she knew of Sue's reluctance to say even that at work, but she did. "When we speak later I will tell you that risqué bedtime story you like so much."

Sue laughed. "You are so bad." Her attention was drawn to one of her co-workers. "Hey, I really need to go. Sorry."

"No worries babe, we will catch up later. Bye, love you."

"Me too, bye."

* * *

Her cab traveled for thirty minutes before it pulled up in front of the San Francisco Marriott. Carlin didn't really care for the looks of the building, but it wasn't her choice. She had booked rooms for the little getaway she had planned with Sue at Point Reyes Seashore Lodge. She sighed as she thought about how their plans didn't work out.

Throwing her bags on the bed in her suite, Carlin read the message that was left for her. *We are all meeting in the Atrium for drinks. See you then, Mark.* She wasn't in the mood to socialize, but really had no choice. In her capacity as the director for new acquisitions for her the company, it was important that she made the effort and attend. "Oh, Sue why aren't you here with me?" She knew why of course...*Sue's work...it is always Sue's work.*

She arrived in the atrium lounge and saw Jenny Blakely standing next to Mark Resonant, her immediate boss. Scanning the room further she noticed Benson Armstrong hovering over a tall blonde woman who he was obviously trying to seduce. *Nothing ever changes* she thought as she smiled briefly at Nick Dobson.

The man held out his hand. "Carlin it is so good to see you. How was your trip?"

Taking a deep breath, *show time*, Carlin took the man's hand. "It was ok. I see everyone is here."

"Yep same old gang as last December."

The get together and meal with her fellow attendees was boring to say the least. Carlin didn't want to be there and found it difficult to concentrate on trivial conversations. The most irritating was the fact that Benson decided to sit next to her. He took every opportunity to whisper something suggestive or touch her hand. Finally, she had to lean over and tell him *knock it off if you want to stay employed*. When they met in the conference room the next day she would make sure the slimy man was far away from her. All the interaction she wanted with the others was to do her job and give her presentation. The sooner they were done the sooner she could be on her way home to Sue.

Going back to her room she tried to contact Sue but only got her voice mail. Disappointed, she plugged in her laptop and sent Sue an email, flicked on the television and surfed through the channels. She was amazed that out of all the stations available that there was nothing of interest for her. She tried several more times to reach Sue, but only heard the canned *leave a message*. Blowing out a breath she grabbed her room key and wallet and left the room.

The lights were low as the elevator opened on to the top floor of the hotel. The sight of San Francisco from the View Lounge was nothing short of spectacular. Her many attempts to reach Sue were unsuccessful putting her in a depressed mood and not finding a table to sit at didn't help. Sitting down on a stool at the circular bar she caught the eye of the bartender.

"What'll it be?"

"Scotch straight up."

While she waited for her drink she swung around in her seat and surveyed the area. From her vantage point, she could see the lights of the city flickering in the distance. Fleeting, her mind turned to Sue and how much she would have enjoyed the place. *She always loves the spectacular*, she thought before looking elsewhere. The tables were all occupied by either couples or what she surmised were business associates. Off in a corner by the window was an astonishingly beautiful woman sitting by herself. The woman seemed to sense Carlin's stare and looked up with a

smile. Carlin glanced around to see who she was smiling at but saw no one. When her eyes drifted back to the woman she received a broad grin. Carlin lowered her eyes and turned back towards the bar and her newly arrived drink.

"Well, well isn't this my lucky night," a familiar voice said in her ear.

Carlin didn't need to look, she knew who it was. Benson Armstrong had been after her ever since he joined the company fifteen years earlier. "Ben, shouldn't you be calling your wife?"

"Darlin', why would I want to do that when I can have your company?"

"You're drunk, Ben. Go away."

"Hey, barkeep, I'll have what she's drinkin' and you can bring her another too," he said loudly. Leaning in, he put his arm around her.

Carlin grabbed the hand that had attached itself to her shoulder and pushed it away. "Get your hands off of me."

"You know I don't know why you are playing so hard to get. We both know how much you want me," he slurred.

Carlin's eyes fixed on the blurry eyed drunk. "Go away and leave me alone. As I've told you before, you're not my type.

Ben bent in to give Carlin a kiss.

"Hey, I finally found a table," a sexy voice said. The woman Carlin had noticed in the corner was standing by her side nudging Ben out of the way.

"Great I'll have two beautiful babes tonight."

Cold blue eyes fixed on the man. "I wasn't speaking to you." The eyes soften and focused on Carlin. "You ready?"

Carlin smiled sweetly. "Yep, lead the way."

"Don't forget your drink."

Once the two women were away from Ben they began to laugh.

"Thanks so much he was getting hard to handle."

"My pleasure. The table is over here."

Carlin was shocked. "You really want me to sit with you."

"Of course," as she looked back over her shoulder. "He's still watching us."

Once they were seated at the table the woman offered her hand. "Helen O'Connell."

"Carlin Whittaker. Glad to meet you Helen rescuer of women from obnoxious drunks." She couldn't help but smirk at the woman.

"Mmm-hmm, my pleasure ma'am."

Carlin turned her eyes away from the blue ones that seem to be probing her inner being. "Thank you." Carlin was uncomfortable as her mind worked overtime in figuring out how to gracefully leave. Never had she been tempted to indulge in an affair or look at another woman in the romantic sense of the word since she'd fallen for Sue. Yet, here she was actually having drinks with a complete stranger and a part of her said *go for it*. "Are you in town for business Helen?"

Helen raised her drink to her mouth and eyed the pretty woman across from her. Putting her glass back down on the table she said, "Yes, I am. How about you?"

Strange as it seemed, Carlin wanted to have a conversation with the woman. The niggling feeling that she was somehow betraying Sue didn't seem to bother her. *After all, I'm not doing anything wrong. I'm merely having drinks and a conversation with a person who came to my rescue. If Sue had been here instead of working, Ben wouldn't have had the opportunity to hit on me. Therefore, Sue should be grateful, she reasoned. Damn why am I telling myself all this? It's just drinks.* "Yep here for a quarterly meeting to map out strategies for new projects and acquisitions." Taking a quick sip from her glass she continued, "What do you do Helen? If you don't mind my asking."

"No, not at all. I am here to obtain a deposition from a potential witness."

Carlin's eyes widened. "You're with the police?"

Helen laughed deeply. "No, far worse, I'm a lawyer."

"Oh..." Her eyebrows scrunched together. "I thought paralegals did that sort of thing."

"Nope. In my firm it is the lowest of the low in lawyer rankings that gets that honor." Helen laughed. "Hey, it gets me lots of frequent flyer miles."

"Yeah I guess that could be an advantage. I live near Atlanta . Where do you call home Helen?"

There was a slight, but only if you knew this woman well, hesitation before she replied, "Vegas."

"Gambling capital." Carlin knew her response was lame but she didn't know what else to say.

Helen crossed her arms on top of the table and leaned in creating a more intimate appearance to the conversation. "I love Atlanta . It is such a great city. Have you ever eaten at Rib's?"

"I love that place..."

The next two hours flew by as the two women engaged in lengthy conversations that involved just about everything under the sun and more. One subject neither one talked about was their current relationships. Carlin had an idea that Helen was hiding something about herself as they skimmed over topic after topic. Then again, wasn't she.

Carlin yawned. "Oh sorry. It's not the company. It has been a long day and I'm still on East Coast time." She looked at her watch. "Oh wow it's almost midnight."

Helen chuckled. "That's like what...three in the morning for you?"

"Yes. I think I need to get some sleep."

The woman's eyes across from her pierced her. "Are you staying here?"

Carlin couldn't resist gazing back at the woman. It left a fluttering sensation in her stomach. At that moment she was transported back to the heady days of being a teenager and all the wonder that brought. "Yes, on the concierge floor."

"I'm a floor below you. We can ride the elevator down together if you like. I'm rather tired myself."

As the two women stood in the otherwise empty elevator they avoided speaking, each lost in thoughts. When the bell dinged for the concierge floor Carlin smiled at the other woman, "Guess this is where I get off."

The door opened and Helen stepped out to prevent the door from closing. "Thank you for the delightful evening of conversation. I had a wonderful time." Her voice was low and sexy with a hint of breathlessness.

Carlin couldn't help but be drawn into the blue eyes as she paused after exiting the car. "Yeah, I did too." She stood for a long minute close to Helen. Her mind playing dangerous games with her as it taunted her to offer Helen a nightcap in her room. Her legs felt weak and she was about to kick caution to the wind when the image of Sue came to her mind. Reigning in her out of control emotions, she spoke again, "I thought I would have coffee and a roll at the Garden Terrace in the morning if you'd like to join me." Carlin cocked her head slightly to one side and shrugged. "That is if you're not busy."

Helen gave her a slightly predatory smile and leaned in to let their lips meet. The kiss was the kind that seems to linger on and on. The elevator began to ring insistently and Helen broke from the long slow kiss and grinned. "You better get some sleep." She stepped back into the car and let the door close.

Carlin stood there completely flabbergasted wondering if what just happened was real. *Yes it was*, she thought as she reached up and touched her lips. In a daze she walked to her room and went through the motions of opening the door.

Locking the door behind her she slipped off her shoes and collapsed on the king sized bed she'd requested, fully expecting to share it with Sue. As she placed a forefinger to her lips again she wondered what would have happened had she grasped the courage by both hands and asked Helen inside. One part of her was thankful she didn't have the chance to find out while another was berating her for

being so pathetic about the whole scenario. *No way would I have cheated on Sue or...would I?*

Checking the phone she saw that there were no messages, Sue hadn't called. Dragging herself from the bed she switched on her laptop and minutes later stared at an empty inbox. Sue hadn't replied or even read the message she'd tagged to know when her partner had received the mail.

In a daze she walked over to the shower with her mind on one thing and one thing only; that beautiful kiss she shared with Helen. The devils in her mind tormented her on what else might have been a beautiful memory if she hadn't been such a coward.

* * *

After a restless night, Carlin had woken the next morning with a new resolve. If Helen was staying another night she would ask her to join her for dinner. She arrived at the Terrace Garden at seven and took a table that was positioned so she could watch the entrance she thought Helen would use. Sitting alone nursing her first cup of coffee she waited willing Helen to enter the restaurant. For almost two hours she waited, watched and hoped and felt profoundly sad when she realized Helen would not be joining her. *I should have told her what time. Damn.* She couldn't wait any longer or she would be late for the meeting. Arriving at the main desk she stood nervously while she waited for someone to help her. She would leave Helen a message inviting her to dinner this evening.

"May I help you Miss?"

"Yes, I'd like to leave a message for Helen O'Connell."

The man punched a key on his computer and looked at the monitor. "I'm sorry Miss we don't have anyone by that name registered here."

"Yes you do." Carlin realized she didn't know what floor Helen was on she just knew it was below the concierge level. "Has she checked out?"

The man looked at the monitor. "I don't have any record of that person in this hotel at anytime."

Carlin was confused as she walked away from the front desk. *Why isn't Helen registered?*

"Hey Carlin," a voice called out. Jenny Blakely was walking hurriedly towards her. "Glad to see you. I thought I was really late."

Carlin looked at the woman distractedly. "No, you aren't late. Shall we go?"

The kiss had been nothing short of amazing and the thought and feel of it haunted Carlin. The whole time she was discussing a company that would be coming up for sale she thought about the kiss. At times she had to be reminded that her input was required. When they had concluded the business of the day, she refused the offer of others to join them for dinner. Instead she hurried back to her room and turned on her computer. She searched every available search engine in an attempt to find Helen in Las Vegas .

Over the next days she spent every single minute she had free turning over all possible stones in her search. She even bought software that would allow her access to information that was not freely available to the casual searcher. *Still nothing...I've found nothing. It is like she doesn't exist. She touched her lips again and knew she did indeed exist. No way could she have been a phantom or part of a dream, it can't be just can't.*

Adding to her dilemma was the fact that she had only been able to speak with Sue once. Her partner was so deeply involved in her project that she didn't seem to have even five minutes to share with Carlin.

Friday dawned and the final breakfast meeting came and went for Carlin as if it didn't matter a damn. Her demeanor had been so blasé that Mark had dispatched Jenny to inquire whether she was having doubts about her commitment to the company. Mark knew the value of Carlin and had no intention of losing her as an employee. She had a wonderful rapport with every customer even though her intentions were to take their company over. They all appreciated her professionalism and her down to earth sympathetic approach to corporate take-over. If it was a money issue he would impress on the woman that as soon as he returned to the head office he'd increase her salary.

Jenny touched Carlin's arm. "Do you have a minute?"

Carlin looked blankly at the woman. "You'll have to walk with me I need to get my things and tie up some loose ends before I catch my plane."

"I won't take long." She tried to keep up with Carlin and was grateful when they stopped for the elevator. "Carlin, are you thinking of leaving the company?"

Clearly confused by the question, Carlin replied, "What are you talking about?"

"Well...Mark was concerned because you seemed distracted and uninterested during the meetings." She paused for a moment. "Is something going on? Can I help?"

"You can tell him the only place I'm going is the airport and then home." She was annoyed by the question and the invasion of her privacy.

"So you're still on board?"

Carlin just shook her head. "I have to go."

Jenny went away partly satisfied, but had doubts when Carlin's answers were vague.

Once Carlin had her luggage in tow she went in search of the one person who might have answers for her. Benson Armstrong was the last person she wanted to speak with, but it was a necessary evil. He was the only other person who had seen Helen. If he confirmed they had been together that first evening it would put an end to her thoughts that she was going mad.

Seeing the man standing near the checkout desk she hesitantly approached him, "I need a word Benson." Carlin gave the obnoxious man a look that brooked no argument.

Benson swallowed hard. He had avoided any one on one contact with Carlin since his stupid drunken attempt to hit on her. She had made it easy for him to accomplish that goal by being so solitary during the last few days that it bordered on antisocial. "Sure what can I do for you Carlin?"

Taking a swift indrawn breath, Carlin came to the point. "Do you remember the first evening we were here?"

Raising a hand in defense, Benson quickly interjected, "look I'm real sorry about that evening Carlin. I'd drank too much. I'm real sorry. I can't even remember what I said or did, but knowing me, it wasn't good."

Exhaling the breath she'd held, Carlin nodded her head. This was of no use and it was apparent he probably wouldn't remember any details of that evening. *Damn!* "No problem."

"I'm glad we are okay." He looked at her with a face filled with questions. "...we are aren't we?"

Carlin gave him a small smile that didn't reach her eyes. "Yes, we're okay." Turning away dejectedly, she felt that Helen had been nothing more than a figment of her imagination. Maybe she had conjured all this up because on some level she was angry with Sue for not choosing her over work. It was at that moment that Benson spoke again before leaving quickly, "tell that gorgeous blue eyed friend of yours I'm sorry too."

Her eyes widened with Ben's revelation. Helen was real. She actually had been in the hotel and they had shared drinks and that unforgettable kiss.

* * *

Looking out the window of the airplane, Carlin couldn't get the image of Helen or the sensation of the kiss out of her mind. That kiss. That one incredible kiss, would haunt her for the rest of her life. *How can I share my life with Sue wholly if I don't tell her about this episode in my life?* Perhaps this was the catalyst that would make her re-evaluate their relationship and take a long hard look at their life together. *Is our relationship still all I used to think it was? Is Sue still the one? Granted things have been strained between us and there were times when I felt certain Sue was drifting away. But, doesn't that happen to all couples?* Her mind whirled in uncertainty.

One thing she knew for sure was that Helen existed. As she recalled a part of their conversation...*I am here to obtain a deposition from a potential witness, she reason that Helen was working under the strictest secrecy. Maybe that is why she gave me a fictitious name.* That thought begged the only question there was...*do I want to know the truth and find Helen?*

The plane finally descended and landed. Carlin impatiently waited to disembark as

other passengers crowded past her. Once she left the plane she hurried towards the terminal and her waiting partner. She needed to see Sue and be grounded in the love that they shared. The thoughts of Helen and that one extraordinary kiss would not interfere in her reality with Sue.

When she was fifty feet from the terminal entrance her eyes began scanning the smiling faces for the one pair of eyes she knew would be looking for her. The closer she drew to the crowd the more her brow creased in bewilderment. Sue was not there. *Where is she?* Dipping her hand in her pocketbook she pulled out her phone and pressed speed dial.

After listening to a voice say leave a message she spoke. "Hey, it's me, where are you? I thought you were meeting me at the airport...well I'm here."

Carlin progressed to baggage claim, her eyes still scanning everywhere for Sue. Once she had secured her luggage she walked through the automatic doors to hail a taxi. She wasn't surprised that Sue wasn't there. This isn't the first time Sue has put her job ahead of me. Annoyed with the situation she growled silently until she felt her phone vibrate. When she read Sue's name on the display she answered angrily. "Where are you?"

"Babe, I'm sorry I lost track of time. We are just getting ready to run this program and see if we've resolved the problems." When Sue heard no response she blew out a breath and added, "Please don't be angry. I really am sorry."

Carlin listened to her partner's explanation of why she hadn't met her. *She's sorry once again* was all she could think. Sue was head program engineer in charge of the project and had told her that her career was riding on a successful result. Once they discovered a major glitch in the program, and after many unsuccessful tries to solve the problem, they had to resort to rewriting the entire program. *Different day...different problem...same bullshit.*

"I see. I'll just catch a cab and meet you at the house," she said coolly.

"No...no let me get this going and I will pick you up." Sue said half-heartedly. "It will take some time for this to run before we can tell if it will work correctly."

"Sue, don't bother. In the time you take to get done and here I could be home. I'm tired and frankly don't want to hang around this airport waiting for you."

"Carlin...I'm sorry. Will you forgive me?"

"Yeah, sure. I'll see you when you get home."

Once she closed her phone Carlin she walked towards the nearest taxi. While riding home her fingers touched her lips and the vision of Helen materialized in her mind.

* * *

Carlin woke up suddenly when she heard the door open. She had fallen asleep on the couch and now her back ached from the uncomfortable position she was lying. Glancing at the clock on the mantle she saw it was ten thirty .

"Hey, sleepyhead it's good to see you." Sue leaned in for a kiss.

Pulling back, Carlin looked at her partner. "Have you been drinking?"

"Oh, yeah we had a celebratory drink for the successful run of the program." Sue sat down next to her lover and hugged her close. "So, tell me about your trip. Anything exciting happen?" Her voice was filled with laughter as she knew Carlin loathed business trips.

Carlin's hand went instinctively went to her lips. Unable to help herself she mentally compared the kiss Sue had just placed on her lips with that of Helen's.

"Same old, same old." She yawned. "Listen I'm really tired so I think I'll go to bed."

Sue snaked a hand under Carlin's shirt. "Hmm, not to sleep I hope."

Closing her eyes, Carlin drifted into the sensations coursing through her body. Sue was real. "No, sleep isn't what I had in mind."

* * *

Sue needed to go back in to work on Saturday morning for a few hours and Carlin had to admit she was glad. Their night of passion had satisfied her physical needs, but for the first time something was lacking. Helen's kiss haunted her on the most primal of levels and she was at a loss to understand why. She spent the morning bent over her computer searching every known database for Helen O'Connell. Over and over she came up with the same big-band vocalists of the forties. Every

ancestry database she searched came up with women who were too old, too young or dead. Finally she admitted defeat and switched off her computer.

She poured herself a cup of coffee, unconsciously sweetened it with sweet and low, flicked on the television to a news channel. For a long time she stared out the window lost in her thoughts of Helen while partially listening to the drone of the newscaster. When she heard the words, *forensic facial reconstruction*, she turned her full attention to the news story. Putting down her cup she practically ran to her computer and switched it on. She did a Google search for facial reconstruction software and was rewarded with a large variety of programs. After comparing the features of all the programs focusing on those that she could download immediately, she finally settled on one. She was suddenly glad for all the computer classes Sue had insisted she take that allowed her to work through the new program easily.

Her mission now was clear. She would use her new program to manufacture a picture of Helen then travel back to San Francisco and find someone, anyone, who would tell her how to find the woman. When she heard the door open and Sue call out *I'm home*, she quickly shut off the computer.

Guilt filled her mind as she saw Sue's smiling face. "How'd it go?"

"Fantastic," Sue said as she kissed Carlin on the cheek. "Everything is humming along and we have declared it done." She swiveled her partner's chair around and sat in her lap. "Now I do believe you said something about a special weekend once this project was over." Sue nuzzled Carlin's neck. "What do you say lover, want to go away with me?"

Carlin didn't know what to do or say. Sue was her love, the one person she had counted on for the last twelve years and yet now she compared every kiss to that of Helen's. What she didn't understand was why she couldn't get the woman off her mind. The very fact that she was now composing a picture of the woman should have scared her, but it didn't. She felt excitement while she waited for the recognition software to download knowing that soon she would see what had only been a memory. Feeling Sue in her arms she knew that her love for the woman was real and Sue was who she wanted... *isn't she?*

"Sure where do you want to go and when?"

"Next weekend works for me. Maybe we can both take Friday off and make it a long weekend."

Carlin thought for a moment then made her decision. "Let's take Monday off instead. I may have to go back to San Francisco for the day this week."

"In that case why don't I go with you and we can spend the weekend by the ocean."

"No!" Carlin blurted out. When she saw the confused look on Sue's face she added, "I'm not sure if I will be going so it would be silly to make those plans." She breathed a sigh of relief when Sue smiled.

"You're right. How about I make reservations for Hilton Head?"

Carlin pulled Sue in close and hugged her tightly. "I love you."

"Me too."

* * *

Once again Carlin was glad that Sue had to go into work on Sunday. It was the last day for Sue and her team to make sure the program was fully functional before the presentation on Monday.

With great deliberation Carlin layered various parts onto the face she was creating. Soon the image began to take shape as the face of Helen came into focus.

Looking at the time on her computer she realized she had been working non-stop for six hours. Sue had been gone for most of the day and she grew concerned. She dialed Sue's work number and waited as she heard ring after ring. *Maybe she's on her way home.* She dialed Sue's cell phone number and was relieved to hear Sue's breathless voice. "Hey."

"Where are you? I was beginning to worry."

"Just a minute," Sue said distractedly.

Carlin heard voices in the background and wondered what was going on. Her eyes drifted to the image on the monitor.

"I'm back. Sorry to worry you. We're all celebrating success." Sue giggled and held her hand over the phone. "Give me a minute Freddie," she whispered. "Listen Carlin, I need to go now."

Silence.

"Hey, I deserve this time to let down after the last week."

"I'm sure you do," Carlin said coldly.

Sue began giggling again. "Listen I will be home as soon as I can," she said exasperated by the conversation.

"Yeah, call me or take a cab if you're drunk." Carlin hung up the phone and looked at the emerging image of Helen.

Sue didn't arrive back home until after eight which resulted in a huge argument. Carlin suspected her partner was drunk and was angry that she drove home in that condition.

"Well, for your information I didn't drive home. God, Carlin you act like you think I'm stupid."

"Just how did you get home?" Carlin asked angrily.

"Freddie drove me."

"Freddie drove you? Why couldn't you call me Sue? Are the only people important in your life those that you work with?"

"Fuck you," Sue screamed before storming into the bedroom and slamming the door.

Carlin clenched her fists and willed her heart rate to slow down and her anger to abate. *Have I always known this side of Sue? Has she always been this selfish? If she really cared about me she would have asked me to join her in the celebration.* A great sadness filled her heart. She started for the bedroom to make up with Sue, but stopped. Turning, she sat down at the computer and switched it on.

Carlin worked late into the night perfecting the picture of Helen. Finally at around four in the morning she printed out the final image of the woman who preoccupied her thoughts.

* * *

Monday morning found Carlin scurrying around putting herself together for work. She had overslept because she had spent the few hours she slept on the sofa. Sue just moved around her moaning that her head hurt and mumbled something like *why did you let me drink so much?*

Carlin just patted her on the backside and said, "you did it to yourself babe. I had nothing to do with it," before she stepped into the shower. When she emerged Sue was gone.

Before leaving for work Carlin printed out a three by five photo of Helen and tucked it into her purse. On the drive in she pulled it out every so often until her mind screamed...*what the hell are you doing? You are turning into a possessed woman.* She knew her inner voice was right, but the pull of Helen was growing in intensity. For her own peace of mind she needed to find the woman and verify that she exists.

* * *

Carlin organized all her files and notes regarding the meeting in San Francisco the week before. She needed to write a report and meet with her co-workers and bring them up to speed on the new acquisition possibilities. Opening her desk drawer she gazed at the picture of Helen as she touched her lips. At first she was so deep in her memories she did not hear the low ring of her phone.

"Whittaker." Her eyes continued to be focused on the photo in her desk drawer.

"Carlin, its Mark Resonant. How was your weekend...did you recover from the trip last week?"

"Yes, Mark, all rested and ready to go."

"Carlin, the reason I'm calling is to set up a time that we can get together for a meeting."

"About what," she said absently.

Mark heard the distance in her voice and his concern for her staying with the company increased. "Is everything going okay?"

Carlin frowned. *What the hell does he mean by that remark? My private life is none of his business.* "Why do you ask?" Her voice was edgy and defensive.

"Listen, I think we need to have that meeting sooner than later. If you are dissatisfied with any aspect of your job I need to know what I can do to rectify that."

As she stared at the photo she suddenly smiled. "How about we get together tomorrow morning? I will catch the red eye and be there first thing in the morning."

Mark was taken aback by the sudden change in Carlin's demeanor. "Are you sure? I can come there if it would be easier for you."

"No, I will be there in the morning. After we meet I will need to take the rest of the week off."

"To interview for another job?"

"No, it is personal." She debated on telling the man she had no intention of working elsewhere, but decided against it.

"Alright then, I'll see you in the morning."

"Right, see you then."

After hanging up the handset she smiled and buzzed Marge the group's secretary.

"Yes, Ms. Whittaker."

"Marge, would you please book me on a flight tonight for Chicago ."

"Do you want the return flight to be tomorrow?"

"No, I will be going on to San Francisco after that so you will need to book a flight there for tomorrow afternoon. Will you leave the return date open?"

"Yes. Do you want me to make the arrangements for a hotel?"

"No, I will take care of that myself."

"Okay. I will email the details to you as soon as I have them."

"Great." She was about to hang up but added, "Marge I will be back in the office next Tuesday. Will you have any calls I receive forwarded to my voice mail?"

"Sure will."

"Thank you."

With several quick keystrokes, Carlin made reservations at the San Francisco Marriott. *Tomorrow*, she thought with happiness and trepidation. Then she dialed Sue's number.

"Hi," her voice was soft.

"Hi," Sue responded seriously. "Listen I'm sorry about last night. I should have asked you to join me yesterday. I guess you think that I am a jerk."

Carlin slid the desk drawer closed. "No I don't. Last week was rough for us both."

"I promise I will make everything up to you when we go away next weekend. I've made reservations at the Westin."

Suddenly Carlin was filled with guilt for her thoughts about Helen. Sue was the woman she was committed to and she was thinking of betraying her. *Not really*, she reasoned. *I just want to solve the mystery of who Helen really is.* That was enough justification for her. "Great, that is one of our favorite places." She paused. "I need to go to Chicago tonight then on to Frisco."

"So that trip did materialize after all?"

"Yes, Mark wants to have a meeting with me first." She laughed. "For some reason he thinks I want a job with a different company."

"Why in the world would think that?"

"Don't know, but I might be able to squeeze a few more dollars out of him to pay for our trip this weekend."

Both women shared a laugh. "Carlin, what time is your flight? I will take you."

"I would like that very much. Why don't we have dinner before I go? We haven't had much alone time lately."

"Sounds good to me. I'll meet you back at the house around three, get you all packed and say our goodbyes before dinner." Sue's voice lowered an octave, "I want you."

"I want you too baby. I love you very much. Did you know that?"

"Yes, I do know."

Carlin's guilt was making her uncomfortable with her decision. "See you at three...bye."

For a long while Carlin sat at her desk just staring at the phone. Her mind was jumbled with thoughts of her commitment to Sue and her emerging fascination with a virtual stranger. *How can I even think about doing this...how can I not?* Slowly she opened the drawer again.

[Concluded in part two](#)

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~ That Kiss ~

Erin O'Rielly

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Disclaimer

Love/Sex: This story features relationships between adult women. If this bothers you, is illegal in the State, Province or Country where you live or if you are under the age of 18, find something else to read. There are loads of general stories out there.

Language: There is the use of a few expletives.

Violence: There is no violence in this story.

Hurt/Comfort: There are scenes of heartache to be dealt with by the characters.

Acknowledgment: ...Thank you for all your help Carmen and Vi. A special thanks to my sister for editing.

Dedication: .For my friend Julie whose unwavering support has given me wings to once again fly.

Author's Personal Note: I have learned...that a rat can dress itself up in new clothes and even don a new hat with a little feather in the band then strut around as if it were something else...at the end of the day though, it is still a rat. Or, as a wise woman once said...same ho different dress.

That Kiss

Conclusion

* * *

With the time change Carlin's plane landed in San Francisco on Tuesday at four o'clock . Her meeting with Mark had been cordial and financially beneficial for her paycheck. She received a handsome raise and a broader job description. All in all she felt she was on the fast track to bigger and better things within the company. The time she spent traveling to the west coast gave her the opportunity to map out a plan for finding Helen's true identity. Her fascination with Helen wasn't about sex; in fact that didn't really enter into the equation. It was something deeper than just the physical.

By the time she had checked into her room and unpacked Carlin was ready to put her plans into motion. First she called Sue to let her know she had arrived safe.

Sue answered the phone breathlessly with a laugh. "Hello."

"Sue? What's going on? Aren't you home?"

"Hey, Carlin. Me and the guys are out for a drink." She laughed and Carlin heard her say, *I need another.*

Fury rose and Carlin's cheeks turned red. "You certainly are spending a lot of time partying with them...or is it someone in particular?"

"Don't get your panties all in a wad. It's not like you're here. What do you want me to do? Sit at home and wait for you?"

"Yeah, well that works two ways." Carlin realized the futility of the conversation since Sue was obviously intoxicated. "Just wanted to let you know that I'm here," she said coolly. "I'll call you tomorrow, if I get a chance."

Carlin closed her phone and made her way to the front desk. Approaching the matronly older woman behind the main reception desk she took a deep breath and quickly glanced at the nametag - Joyce. She had rehearsed her story, had a small picture of Helen in her purse and a twenty held tightly in her hand.

"May I help you ma'am?" an older, dour woman asked.

"Yes, thank you Joyce. I'm certain you can help me." She had learned long ago that if you start a conversation with positive expectations the other person would do their best to comply. "I stayed here last week and one of your guests was most kind to me when I found myself without enough cash for dinner. I would like to repay her." She took out the photo of Helen and placed it on the counter. "Do you know this woman?"

The woman looked at the picture and Carlin noted a brief look of recognition before she shook her head. "I'm sorry ma'am. Even if I knew who this was I could not divulge any information about our guests."

So much for the positive approach . She slid the bill on the counter next to the picture. "Are you sure you can't help me out?" she asked in her most persuasive voice.

Again the graying woman who apparently knew only how to frown shook her head. "I would lose my job and I can't afford that," she said with a blunt tone.

Carlin reached in her wallet and added an additional twenty to the other one. Still the woman refused to answer her questions. Realizing the futility of her efforts she picked up the photo and money and went to the Garden Terrace. Her stomach suddenly was growling loudly to be fed.

* * *

Carlin sat at a table near flowing water as she moved the food on her plate around with her fork. Although she hadn't eaten in many hours and her stomach complained, she really wasn't hungry. Her encounter with the uncooperative desk clerk who she knew recognized the picture of Helen, put her in a reflective mood. Tomorrow she would go to a bank and get several hundred dollar bills. One thing she knew was that money talked. Her offer of forty dollars was too little for someone to risk their job. She would make sure her next offer would be one that would not be refused. She would also wait until the person behind the desk was younger, hungrier and pleasant.

The waitress approached her table. "Is there something wrong with your meal?"

Distractedly Carlin looked up at the young girl and then to her plate. "No, no the food is wonderful. I'll just take the bill now," she shrugged, smiled and paused briefly. "I wonder if you might be able to help me out."

"I will try." The girl sorted through her bills until she came to Carlin's and placed it on the table.

Carlin reached for her purse and fished inside for the picture of Helen and showed it to the woman. "Do you by any chance know who this is?"

A bright smile crossed the young woman's face. "Yes, she has been in here and I've waited on her."

With her heart pounding Carlin cautiously asked, "Do you know her name?"

It was then that the girl looked at her suspiciously. "You have her picture but you don't know her name?" She began to back away.

"Wait. Please don't go. I can explain." She recognized the doubt in the eyes searching her. "Please," she said gently, "this is very important."

Something in Carlin's voice told the girl to listen. "Okay."

"I was here last week and this woman helped me out of a really bad situation when a drunk tried to accost me. We had a few drinks and I got this picture of her and I want to repay her for her kindness." Her eyes pleaded for understanding. "Nothing underhanded," she shrugged, "just trying to repay a kindness." She had generally told the truth and held her breath as she waited for a reply.

"I don't know her name. All I can tell you is that she comes in here every Wednesday and she is a good tipper."

"Thank you," Carlin said softly. "Can you tell me what time she usually dines?"

"In the evening is the best I can do. Listen I need to go I've got orders up."

"Thank you." She signed her room number to the bill and tucked forty dollars in the bill holder.

* * *

Armed with the knowledge that Helen could be found in the Garden Terrace every Wednesday for dinner Carlin sat where she hoped she could view all entrances. Her stomach was doing flip flops and her heart was beating double time. Ashley, the waitress from the night before greeted her with a smile.

"Hi, you're back. Can I get you something from the bar?"

Grateful to see a friendly face Carlin smiled back. "I sure could use a scotch on the rocks."

"Sure thing." Ashley began to move away but stopped. "You're the one who was looking for that lady right?"

"Yes," Carlin said cautiously.

"She usually sits over there by the water." Ashley pointed to a table very near the one that Carlin was seated at.

Getting up, Carlin moved to the other seat at her table so she could watch the table. When her drink arrived she gladly swallowed the amber colored liquid. Absently she touched her lips and momentarily closed her eyes. When she opened her eyes she saw the very woman who had inspired such delicious thoughts standing in front of her.

"It's you," Carlin whispered.

Helen smiled, pulled out the vacant seat and sat down. "Yes. I hear you've been looking for me." She nodded towards the young waitress who was lurking nearby.

Carlin could feel her face flush as she struggled to speak. "I...I..." Coughing slightly she tried again, "I wondered what had happened to you. They told me you weren't registered at the hotel."

A drink was placed in front of Helen. "Can I get you ladies anything else?"

Helen smiled sweetly towards Ashley. "No, we will let you know when we do. Thank you."

Carlin held up her glass. "I need a double."

"Be right back."

A deep amused laugh emanated from Helen. "That bad huh?"

"You have no idea."

For a long time Helen's blue eyes searched those opposite her. After the new drink was delivered she spoke, "Why are you stalking me? "

"I'm not," Carlin blurted out. "I just wanted..." Her face flushed. "Oh, hell I guess that is what it looks like but I..."

Seeing Carlin's anxious expression Helen held up her hand. "Let's see if I understand this correctly. You came into this restaurant and asked the staff about me a week after we briefly met. You also inquired about my status as a guest. Is that correct?"

"Yes," Carlin answered sheepishly before reigning in her emotions. "Why did you give me a fake name?"

"I didn't."

"But, they said you weren't registered."

"I wasn't...it's complicated."

"Life generally is." Then it occurred to Carlin that this woman that she had fantasized about for a week had someone else. *Don't I?* "A husband, partner...significant other?"

Helen chuckled. "Why is everything always reduced to a relationship?" She shook her head. "Why were you looking for me Carlin?"

She remembers my name that's a good sign. Unconsciously she touched her lips. "That kiss we shared...it simply was...I've never felt anything like it."

Blue eyes focused on a distant spot refusing to look in Carlin's direction.

"I'm sorry. I've spoken out of turn." Carlin scraped her chair backwards. "I won't bother you anymore." Suddenly she felt very foolish for everything she had done in her pursuit of this woman.

"Don't go," Helen whispered softly. "It's complicated." She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. When her eyes opened they centered on

Carlin. "It was a remarkable kiss. It took every bit of resolve I had to let that elevator door close." She let out a small derisive laugh. "I usually don't exercise such control."

Suddenly she stood up. "Will you come with me?"

Taken aback Carlin automatically asked, "Where?"

"You'll see." Helen motioned to Ashley and handed her a twenty. "That should cover it." She looked at Carlin. "Shall we go?" When Carlin didn't move she added, "Please."

* * *

Things were moving at such a rapid pace that it wasn't until they were in a taxi speeding down the roadway that Carlin finally spoke. "Where are you taking me?" she demanded.

Helen did not speak again until the cab stopped a short time later and she got out. "Please get out we're here."

Carlin exited the cab and looked up at the building rising before her. The silver letters above the entrance spelled out Fox Plaza. "What is this place? Is it where you live?"

"You'll see," Helen said mysteriously as she walked towards the doors. "Are you coming?"

Not knowing why she went with Helen in the first place, Carlin could only shake her head. *I'm really losing it.* "Yeah," she said as she caught up with the woman.

Each woman nodded at the couple that shared the elevator with them. Like their previous elevator ride each was silent lost in their thoughts. When the doors opened they exited and Carlin followed Helen a short way down the hallway. Helen took a key out of her pocket inserted it in the lock and opened the door.

The practical part of Carlin's brain was telling her to turn around and run away from the situation. The curious part wanted her to forge ahead and resolve whatever it was that she was feeling for Helen.

As Helen went inside she said, "Ruthie, it's me I came back."

Cautiously Carlin followed the woman inside the door. What she found was a warm, cozy apartment filled with what could only be described as memories. She saw a woman appear who she thought was a bit younger than Helen. Her hair was blonde and her face was rather pleasing to look at. The body, which was not fit, was a bit round but well proportioned.

"Why did you come back?" Ruth asked before staring at Carlin. "Who is this?" Her eyes darted to Helen's face. "Is this Carlin?"

Helen nodded.

Taken aback Carlin stood there agape wondering *what the hell is happening*.

"How is he doing?" Helen asked of the other woman.

"I was just reading to him...I think he is about to fall off to sleep."

Helen turned to Carlin. "Please come with me."

Still in a daze, Carlin dutifully followed the woman into a bedroom. There she saw an elderly gentleman lying in the bed. His face lit up when he saw Helen standing there.

Helen stood beside the bed and bent down and kissed the man's forehead. "How are you feeling tonight Pops?"

"About as well as can be expected for an old man." The man laughed and began coughing.

"There is that better," Helen asked as she gently lifted his head and back.

"Yes," he coughed once more then stopped. His eyes focused on Carlin standing in the doorway. Nodding his head in Carlin's direction he asked, "Is that her?"

"Yes." Helen motioned for Carlin to come closer. "Pops, this is my friend Carlin Whittaker."

The old eyes on the worn face looked Carlin up and down before the man smiled. "She is exactly as you described her." He held out his frail, shaking hand in the direction of Carlin.

Having no other choice, Carlin approached the bed and took the man's hand. "It is a pleasure to meet you sir." Although the hand was cold and seemed feeble the man's grip was strong. Up close she could see that his eyes were the same blue as Helen's. As he let go of her hand the blue orbs slowly closed.

Seemingly out of nowhere Ruth appeared at the opposite side of the bed. "Pops, why don't I finish up the chapter?"

The old man opened his eyes and smiled. "That would be nice."

"I'll see you in the morning." Helen gently kissed the man's cheek then took Carlin's hand and led her from the room. She partially closed the door behind them before proceeding down the hallway. Once in the living room she said, "Please sit down. We need to talk."

Carlin's mind was whirling with so many questions that she didn't know what to do or say. Sitting down in the upholstered chair she began to speak but stopped when Helen held up her hand.

"I can tell you have many questions so let me tell you a story and maybe that will answer some."

All Carlin could do was nod her head.

"That is my grandfather in the other room. Six months ago he had a serious heart attack. The doctors told him he could no longer live alone and would have to move to a nursing home or live with family. He refused." Helen smiled fondly. "He is a stubborn old coot...said he

wouldn't leave his home or be a burden on his family. Finally we got him to agree to move into this apartment and have a full time nurse."

Ah, Ruth is the nurse.

"The only way he would accept the nurse was if family was with him too." Helen stared off into the distance for a moment. "So, the family devised a plan...my sister Ruth..."

Did she say sister?

...and I stay with him in shifts from Tuesday morning until our parents arrive on Thursday. They leave on Sunday when my brothers arrive. Ruth and I live out of town so we have a suite at the Marriott." She shrugged. "We stay there when our shift is over...that is why I didn't meet you for breakfast last week."

Carlin's mind was spinning even faster if that was possible. There were even more questions now. "Are you really a lawyer? Do you live in Vegas or somewhere else? Why do they know who I am? Why didn't you just tell me this last week?" Agitated she added, "Do you have any idea what I've gone through to find you."

Helen sucked in a deep breath and pulled her chair closer to Carlin's. "Yes, I am a lawyer and I do live in Vegas."

"Don't tell me that! I checked it out and there isn't a Helen O'Connell in Vegas much less one that is a lawyer."

Looking upward before focusing on Carlin, Helen spoke, "many years ago I foolishly married a man. I use his name, Hargrove in my law practice. I am H.M. Hargrove. I thought it presented a better image rather than a name that clients would liken to a big band singer and so-so actress."

Carlin listened to the words and realized how foolish she had been. She had pursued this woman with abandon not really knowing anything about her. Suddenly she felt embarrassed and ashamed of her actions and lowered her head. "I'm sorry."

"For what?"

Ruth appeared. "Helen, he heard your voice and wants to say goodnight."

"Hold that thought...I'll be right back."

Almost at the same instant, Carlin felt the vibration of her cell. "Hello," she said quietly.

"Caarrrlin," a laughing incoherent Sue slurred. "I just wanted to call and tell ya..."

Cutting off Sue she said anxiously, "I can't talk right now." She heard the indistinct music in the background that Sue was singing off key to. "Sue, are you drunk? I hope your aren't driving."

"Me drunk?" She laughed loudly. "Never, and no I'm not driving, Freddie is. You know Freddie; she's my right arm."

"Sue, I will call you later. I can't get into this now," she said softly but firmly.

"Why? Are your clients more important than me?" Sue belligerently said.

"Are you on your way home?"

"Yeeesssss. What's it to you?"

Carlin got up and moved into a corner and turned her back to the room. "Is Freddie spending the night?" She could feel anger rising. Sue spoke much too often about her co-worker and all of a sudden she knew why.

Sue sobbed and her words became even more incoherent. "I...I don't know whatcha mean."

The conversation was going nowhere and Carlin certainly didn't want to get into it...not here. "I will call you later."

"Don't bother," Sue screamed.

Carlin heard the phone go silent and knew Sue had hung up. Several minutes later she felt a hand touch her shoulder.

"Is everything okay?" Helen's voice was filled with genuine concern.

Turning around, Carlin tried to smile, but found one would not come. Her search for Helen had taken on a fanatical life of its own just as her relationship with Sue seemingly was unraveling. Suddenly she felt exhausted both physically and emotionally. "Can we go somewhere else?"

"Of course." Helen pulled Carlin in and held her tightly. "Let it go," she whispered.

All the frustration, disappointment, exhilaration and sleepless nights had finally caught up with her. Tears cascaded down Carlin's cheeks as she leaned into Helen.

* * *

Thirty minutes later the two women were sitting at a small table in the View Lounge. *Has it only been a week since I was last here?* Carlin thought as she nursed her drink. Helen, the woman she had frantically searched for was sitting across from her and she hadn't a clue of what to do next.

"I have a partner," Carlin whispered. Raising her head she looked directly into Helen's eyes. "I'm so confused." She took a sip of her drink. "In my business life I am considered self assured. I would imagine some would say I am cocky." A small smile crossed her face. "I thought Sue was everything to me until..."

"The kiss?"

"Yes, that kiss. I haven't been able to get it or you out of my mind ever since." A tingle went through her body as she looked at the woman whose kiss had such a profound effect on her."

"Nor have I."

Carlin realized the truth of those words as she recalled that Helen's sister and grandfather knew her name. "Are you in a relationship?"

"No, my work is my relationship. Except for that brief idiotic marriage I haven't had any serious commitments. Especially for the last six months. Since I've been here during the week my weekends are filled with catch up. Fortunately, with the internet and readily accessible information, I was able to work out this situation with my firm." Her face was filled with grief.

Uncharacteristically Carlin reached across the table and held Helen's hand. "Nothing is more important than family, Helen. Jobs will come and go but being here for your grandfather when he needs you is a one time thing." She squeezed the hand she still held.

"Each time I see him he is weaker. When I'm not with him I am anxious until I see him again." She shook her head. "I don't know what the family will do without him. He has been a rock for us all."

"And now, you all are his rock. I think that is wonderful."

"Perhaps." Helen closed her eyes as sadness and tiredness gripped her mind and body. "I need to get some sleep. Ruthie expects me at five."

Carlin pushed her chair back. "Let's go then."

They stood close to each other in the elevator car. When the bell rang and the doors opened Carlin leaned in and pressed the close door button. Turning she took Helen in her arms and kissed her. The kiss of the week before paled in comparison to the slow, passionate kiss they now shared.

As the elevator doors opened again Carlin gently took Helen's hand and led her to her room.

Carlin caressed Helen's face. "You look so tired."

"I'm exhausted." Helen looked at the bed and sighed. "I'm sorry."

"I understand completely," Carlin said compassionately. She took Helen's hand, led her to the bed and gently pushed her to sit down. She then dialed the front desk and asked for a four-thirty wake-up call. "How about I hold you while you sleep?"

Gratefully Helen smiled as she stretched out on the bed and Carlin took her in her arms. They both soon were asleep fully clothed and safe in each other's arms.

* * *

Sitting in a window seat, Carlin watched the landscape pass by below. In three hours she would be meeting Helen again and they would explore if there was a future for them. At their last meeting they agreed that both their lives were too complicated to make any decisions about a relationship. Carlin needed to sort out what she felt for Sue and whether or not she wanted to continue with that bond. For Helen, her grandfather's condition was paramount along with the heavy work schedule her devotion to him had created. They had agreed to meet again in six months when hopefully their lives would be more settled.

She let her mind drift to her arrival back home after her last trip to San Francisco. Since Helen needed to leave in the late morning after they had spent the night in each other's arms. Carlin caught a flight out too. The two women spent their last moments together in the airport terminal discussing the obstacles facing their lives. For Carlin it was a comfort to have someone to talk to and know that she was safe. She valued Helen's encouragement and her logical take on the situation with Sue. What she didn't know was what she would find when she arrived home. Sue had been increasingly erratic over the last months and Carlin never knew what to expect at any given moment. All her attempts to discuss about the strange behavior with Sue were rebuffed with, "Oh, stop being so dramatic. There is nothing wrong." As a result of her conversation with Helen, she realized their relationship was far from idyllic.

She had tried unsuccessfully to call Sue and let her know what time her flight would arrive. Not only was there no answer on her cell, home

or work phones, the voice mail didn't work on any of them either. When the taxi dropped her off in front of their home she was puzzled to not see any lights on. She unlocked the door, turned on a light and was surprised to see her home in disarray. Pizza boxes and beer cans were strewn all about and there was a definite odor of stale smoke.

"Sue," she said softly fearing she might alert an intruder if she spoke to loudly.

Carlin moved into the kitchen which had every surface literally covered with dishes and garbage. Cautiously she walked into their bedroom. "Sue," she said again. The bed was rumpled and clothes, some she didn't recognize, were strewn about. A chill of fear ran up her spine as she heard a slight noise from the bathroom.

Opening the door she didn't see Sue until she looked in the bathtub where her partner was laying naked. "Sue," Carlin cried out as she rushed to her side. Her eyes scanned Sue and then focused on the needle lying near an arm with many puncture wounds.

"Who did this to you?" Her voice was filled with distress and compassion as she knelt down and leaned in closer. Her nostrils were immediately assaulted with the odors of beer and sex.

"Carlin, you came to my party." Sue attempted to pick up the needle. "Come on and join me. This stuff is wonderful!"

Anger rose in Carlin as she stood up. "Are you telling me that you did this to yourself?"

"Huh?"

"Did someone attack you Sue and force you to do drugs and have sex?"

Sue looked at Carlin as if she were crazy. "Hell no. Freddie said this would take the edge off and she was sooooo right."

In a blur of motion Carlin turned on the cold water and raised the lever for the shower.

"Hey!" Sue tried to cover her body from the onslaught of cold water.

"Get the hell up," Carlin screamed, "and clean yourself up."

Going back into the bedroom, Carlin went to the bed, pulled back the sheets and covered her mouth in disgust. There were multiple *skid* marks on the sheets along with other unrecognizable substances. She rapidly walked to the kitchen kicking trash out of her way as she went. After retrieving a box of large trash bags, she returned to the bedroom and gathered up all the bedclothes and stuffed them in the large black bags.

Sue, still naked, stood in the bathroom doorway. "Hey, I'm sorry I was just having a little party...you know to celebrate my new contract."

Cold eyes fixed on Sue. "You didn't even bother to have protected sex. How many people did you share that needle with?"

"It wasn't me having sex there." Sue pointed to the bed. "And, I didn't share needles with anyone." She took on a defensive pose.

"Liar."

"I am not!"

"Sue, you reek of sex and those bite marks all over your body didn't just appear there. There are track marks up your arm. Do you think I am stupid?"

"Well, you are never here."

"Don't go there!" Carlin picked up all the clothes on the floor and threw them in bags as well.

"What are you doing with that stuff?" Sue asked belligerently.

"Throwing out the trash." Carlin stopped what she was doing and moved within inches of Sue. "Get your things and get out of my house."

"It's my house too."

Carlin's voice, cold and distant said in no uncertain terms, "Not anymore. Now get everything you own and get out." Her eyes turned to the bedside clock. "You have two hours."

Carlin left the room with the box of garbage bags in tow. In the living room she proceeded to clean up the trash.

For a long moment Sue stood motionless. Surely the drugs had dulled her senses and she had heard Carlin wrong. She heard the rattling of cans and glasses in the other room and realized exactly what her partner had said. "She can't do that to me!" she said as she hurried out of the room.

"I have no intention of leaving," Sue screamed as she held her hands on her bare hips.

In a flash Carlin was upon her again. "You have two choices. You can leave on your own or I will throw you out. I will remind you that I *do* own this house."

For several long moments the two woman stood locked in each other's gaze. "You don't mean this baby," Sue's voice was soft and pleading. The look of anger and hate in Carlin's eyes was unmistakable. "You'll be sorry."

"I already am."

* * *

One month later Carlin had sold the house along with all the contents, except for personal items. She had discovered that Sue and Freddie had been having an affair for almost a year. The major problems that supposedly arose with Sue's project turned out to have been minor. Sue merely wanted to have the time alone with Freddie. Carlin realized that Sue was not alone in the failure of their relationship, but Sue's actions resulted in its demise.

Carlin threw herself into her work traveling extensively around the world. She managed to personally visit and inspect every company that was considered for acquisition. Although she longed to speak with

Helen she honored their agreement of no contact for six months. On several occasions she dialed Helen's number only to hang up before it rang. She needed to sort out her life and job before she could ever consider any type of involvement.

After their break up Sue's dependency on drugs increased so dramatically that she eventually was fired. Ironically, Freddie who had hooked her on drugs was promoted to take Sue's place. It was at that point that Freddie showed her true colors and ended all contact with Sue. Once Carlin found out that Sue was living on the streets she made it a point to find her. For days Carlin held her former lover in her arms as she withdrew from the effects of the drugs.

Sitting in a darkened room holding a trembling Sue in her arms Carlin reflected on the events that had lead her to that point. If she was brutally honest, she could admit that much of the trouble between them had been her fault. She had been driven in her job to find the best acquisitions and beat the competition to them. To be fair though, Sue too had made her job a priority once she was promoted to department head.

Carlin tried to pinpoint the moment when they both started to exist separately. She had always had a problem with Sue's excesses with alcohol, but chose to overlook that because she loved her. Many of the arguments and misunderstandings they had were a result of Sue's drunken rages. But, as Carlin held Sue she knew that wasn't the reason for their drifting apart. It was on a much deeper level. Then, with a clarity one seems to only get when they are tired and emotionally spent, she knew the moment she began to fall out of love with Sue.

*

They were vacationing in the Bahamas three years earlier. The time had been spent leisurely sitting on the beach soaking up the sun. The week that Carlin had hoped would give them some much needed alone time hadn't materialized. Like most vacations they went on, Sue insisted on going out to clubs each night and partying. She always would say she was on vacation and needed the outlet. It was on their last night on Paradise Island that Carlin had arranged a special candle

light dinner for them. She wanted to spend their last night in the island paradise alone.

"What do you say after we finish here we go back to the room and spend some alone time?"

"You're kidding right?" Carlin's face must have told Sue she was serious. "Babe, this is my last night here and tonight is the big fiesta night! I can't miss that."

As Sue chattered on about where she wanted to go and what she wanted to see Carlin realized the truth - Sue never used the word 'we', only 'me'. For the next three years she listened for Sue to say 'we'. Those words were rarely spoken.

*

Carlin allowed Sue to stay in her guest room on the condition she would get treatment for her addictions. Although Sue made overtures to resume their relationship, Carlin made it clear that would never happen. She would never trust Sue again and reasoned that was no way to have a partnership. Reluctantly Sue agreed since she really had no other choice.

* * *

Sitting quietly at the table where they first shared drinks, Helen watched the elevator intently. It had been six months since she last spoke with Carlin and she wondered if her feelings for the woman would be the same.

Her life had changed dramatically over the last six months. Her beloved grandfather lost his fight with heart disease and passed away two months earlier. Even now when she recalled his face, his voice or his smile she felt bereft. His last words to her as she held his hand before he passed were "grab for the brass rings in life Helen." She had taken him at his word and began looking for all the opportunities that were around her for happiness. When she saw the elevator doors open and Carlin step out she knew that the woman may

just be the brass ring. She stood up and smiled broadly as Carlin approached.

For a long moment the two women just stood motionless until they embraced.

"It's so good to see you."

Carlin breathed in the scent of Helen and sighed. "I was so sorry to hear about your grandfather's passing." Helen had sent her a brief note about the man's death and she responded with a message of condolence.

Pulling out of the hug, Helen smiled sadly. "Thank you. I miss him every day. Come sit down. I ordered you a drink."

Carlin's heart was beating rapidly and she found it hard to take her eyes off of Helen. The tired weariness that was in her face the last time they met was gone. In its place was a look of peace, albeit with a hint of sadness.

Over the rim of her glass Helen looked intently at Carlin wondering what her life had been like over the last six months. There was no doubt that the woman was radiant and happy to see her. But, one thought lingered in Helen's mind...Sue.

"Helen you..."

"Carlin I want..."

Both women spoke at the same time. Smiling Helen said, "Please, you first."

Carlin closed her eyes in an attempt to find some coherent words to say. Her mind was filled with all the wonderful things she had rehearsed to say to Helen when they met. Now, with reality staring her in the face, she didn't know what to say. Repeatedly she opened her mouth to speak, only to close it when the words wouldn't come.

"You know I won't bite. Why don't you just tell me what you want to say." Helen steadied herself for what she knew was coming. *She's going to tell me that she and Sue are still together and will be forever.*

"I...I... You know I had everything I wanted to say to you in my head and now that you are here I can't seem to find the words."

Helen reached over and patted her hand. "Just start."

Nodding her head Carlin began. "I can't tell you the number of times over the last six weeks that I reached for the phone to call you. The time short time we spent together has made such a profound effect on my life." Glancing down she saw that Helen's hand was still on hers. Her eyes returned to focus on Helen's expressive blue eyes. "I would like to explore the possibility of a relationship with you."

Helen squeezed Carlin's hand once again before removing her hand. "What about Sue?"

What followed was a long frank discussion about their lives for the last six months. Each finally admitting that the connection they had felt six months earlier was still there. They agreed to take their time and get to know everything about each other. And, if it was meant to be they would be together.

Standing side by side in an otherwise empty elevator, Carlin took Helen's hand and looked longingly into her eyes. "This is where it all started," she said softly before turning and kissing the woman.

As the elevator jerked to a stop their lips parted. What they had experienced in the moment of their first kiss rocked their worlds and their lives would be forever etched by the power of that kiss.

The End