

## ~ Remembrances ~

by KG MacGregor © 2005

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This is the sequel to [\*Expectations\*](#), my contribution to the Academy of Bards 2005 Valentine Special, and it takes place many years later. Yes, I'm afraid it's the dreaded 25-year leap. You may be wondering why I would start a couple of ladies down a path of sweet romance and not follow through with more of their tales. The truth is, I began this story first and had to back up to tell their Valentine's tale. I know this time shift stuff isn't everyone's cup of tea, but I hope you enjoy it just the same.

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### *Ritz-Carlton, Half Moon Bay*

Leo watched as the mother of the bride snatched a flute of champagne from a passing tray and discreetly ducked out of the ballroom. All night, Claudia Fisher had been at the center of the celebration, introducing her friends to her new son-in-law; dancing with all the men in his family; and making certain all the details were managed so the two hundred people in attendance would have a good time. She was overdue a few moments of escape.

The wedding and reception had been an elaborate affair, worthy of the five-star hotel that overlooked the Pacific Ocean. Leo overheard that the bride herself was footing the bill, which was probably in the high five figures. She remembered that Claudia's husband Mark was from a wealthy family, and he had probably earned lots more as a residential developer. Leo had run into him a couple of times at photo shoots and hadn't liked him much. He was one of the most impatient people she had ever met, and she was neither surprised nor particularly saddened to learn he had died at forty-one of a heart attack while waiting for an overdue delivery on a job site.

Leo returned to her corner for her camera. Private moments were usually off-limits at events such as these, but she couldn't resist following Claudia to see if she could capture something special on film—something both mother and daughter might one day appreciate as a keepsake of this happy occasion.

Moments later, she spotted her quarry in an overstuffed chair in a corner of the hallway, obviously exhausted. As she drew closer, she could tell that Claudia's eyes were closed and her bare feet were tucked beneath her, a pose that made her look far younger than her forty-eight years. Claudia had kept her trim figure, but Leo suspected she had a little help keeping the auburn hair. She had always thought Claudia was a pretty woman, but in repose she was especially beautiful.

Any photographer worth her salt would see this as a scene worth saving.

Claudia's eyes blinked open when she sensed the flash.

Leo lowered the camera and smiled apologetically. "Sorry ... That shot was too good to pass up."

"It's okay. I just had to get out of there for a few minutes."

"I don't blame you. I caught your daughter out here about an hour ago in the same chair."

Claudia laughed. "The poor girl's been running on pure adrenalin for the last three days." She straightened out her legs and wiggled her toes. "My feet are killing me."

Leo eyed the patent-leather spiked heels on the floor. "I'm not surprised. I don't believe human beings were meant to wear shoes like that." No way would she be caught in high heels ... or a dress either, for that matter. Tonight was about as formal as Leo ever got-black slacks, a black form-fitting shirt, and *flat* black shoes.

"I probably shouldn't have taken them off. I don't know how I'm going to get them back on."

"Keep pouring the champagne and no one will notice a barefoot woman." Leo set her camera on the coffee table next to Claudia's empty glass, fighting the urge to sweep the woman's feet into her lap as she took a seat on the adjacent sofa. "It was a lovely ceremony-one of the most beautiful I've ever done. And I've done at least a thousand."

"Thank you. But I can't take any credit for it. Eva and Todd planned it all."

"Then take credit for raising a daughter with such good taste."

"I'd drink to that but my glass is empty."

"You want me to get you another?"

"Thanks, but I'd better not. I'm already dangerously close to telling my former sister-in-law that her earrings make her ass look big."

Leo joined her in an evil laugh. "So whose idea was it to hire Simms Studio?"

Claudia looked at her for a long moment before finally answering. "Eva's ... but she asked me about you and I promised her you'd do a great job. I couldn't believe that other outfit canceled so close to the wedding."

"I was kind of surprised to hear that too. But I guess things come up." Not for Simms Studio, though. Leo always honored her business commitments. "I appreciate the recommendation."

The mother shook her head. "No, I should be the one saying thank you. Eva said you rearranged your schedule to be here."

Once she realized that the Fisher-Powell wedding was Claudia's daughter, Leo had tabled her

plans to visit her mother in La Jolla in order to take the job. "I wasn't about to miss another Fisher wedding." She regretted the words as soon as they left her lips.

Claudia sighed as she recognized the allusion "I didn't know how not to hurt you, Leo ... but I thought it would be worse not to invite you at all."

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that." It was a miserable start to their first real conversation in years, and Leo needed to fix it fast. "You did the right thing. I just ... couldn't come."

"I understand."

Leo leaned back and studied the sorrowful look on Claudia's face. "The truth is that I wasn't about to miss a chance to see you again." She had been looking forward to this night for the last three weeks, ever since she got the desperate call from the bride-to-be. The prospect of seeing Claudia always knotted her stomach, but she seldom passed up an opportunity. Since they parted twenty-four years ago after a too-brief romance, they had seen each other a few dozen times, most of those at the annual school photo sessions or while running errands around town. Rarely did they talk beyond casual banter; but Leo always treasured the encounter and managed to ride the high for at least a week, even knowing it would hurt to come back down to earth.

"I'm really glad you're here."

"So am I."

The emotional moment was shattered when the ballroom door opened and two boisterous men walked past on their way to the elevators. Both stopped to extend their congratulations to Claudia.

"I bet you're tired too," Claudia said when they were alone once again. "You've been on your feet all day."

"But not in high heels. Whoever invented those things should have to wear them all the time."

"Did you get a chance to eat? There's an obscene amount of food in there."

"Yes, I did. Thank you."

They sat in awkward silence for a moment, both staring absently at Claudia's bare feet. Leo had long dreamed for a chance for the two of them to really talk again. In her fantasies, Claudia would say that her love had endured the years, and then they would mend this awful chasm and start anew. But now that they were together, Leo was content merely to share the quiet company of this woman she had loved so deeply for so much of her life.

"I'm sorry, Leo. I think I've used up all my small talk for today."

The words cut like a knife, but Leo was determined not to let it show. Instead, she fell back on

the one thing that had always given her confidence and security. "It's okay. I probably ought to go back inside and get some more pictures for your daughter."

"No! Please don't go." Claudia suddenly leaned forward and placed her hand on Leo's knee to stop her from standing. "That's not what I meant at all. I'm not very good at this."

Leo had no idea where this was going, but anything Claudia wanted was fine with her-as long as it wasn't for her to get lost.

"I've been trying all night to figure out a way for us to talk. If all else failed, I was going to be brave and ask you to dinner or something."

"You want to go to dinner?" *Yes, I can do that.*

"I just want us to talk again. There are so many things I want to say to you, and I don't know where to start."

Leo's eyes darted between Claudia's pleading look and the hand on her leg, the latter like a brand burning through to her bones. "You know you can talk to me about anything."

"That's always been true, hasn't it?"

Leo smiled. "Just for you."

"I want to hear all about you, Leo. We have so much catching up to do. How are you?"

Leo relaxed against the sofa cushion when Claudia leaned back into the wingback chair. "Good ... the business is doing very well. You remember my nephew, Josh?"

Claudia nodded.

"He's all grown up and he's working with me now. He took over most of the portrait work."

"Which must be why you don't come to the school anymore."

"Yeah, it's good experience for him. I miss it, though. It was always fun."

"I used to look forward to see you at school. It was one of the best days of the year." She said it softly, as though admitting to a secret. "So what are you doing instead?"

"Magazine stuff ... industrial brochures ... I had an exhibit down in Santa Barbara a couple of years ago."

"I wish I'd known that. I would have come."

"I would have liked that." The lull that followed threatened to send both of them back into their

respective shells, but Leo forged ahead, not wanting their time together to end. "What about you? Still teaching third grade?"

"Fifth grade. I made the switch a few years ago." As if reading Leo's mind, she continued, "And I'm still practicing the principles of the Pygmalion Effect."

"I remember. That was the day we met." She gave Claudia a warm look. "And I went crazy trying to find out everything there was to know about Claudia Galloway."

"And I was pumping everyone I knew about Leo Simms."

Both women smiled at the memory.

"Did you know we were set up that night at Nora Valentine's party?" Leo asked.

"What?"

"Remember our blind dates? They had just broken up with each other."

"Oh, right! What do you we were mean set up?"

"It was all orchestrated by Denise and Nora so you and I would get together without me thinking I was on just another blind date. Nora said I always sabotaged my dates because I knew they were going to be miserable before I ever went. So she got her friends to go along with it and trick us into thinking they had broken up."

"Where did you hear all of this?"

"Denise finally spilled her guts one night when we were having a fight." Leo realized too late that she was implicating Claudia in her disagreements with Denise. Their conflict actually had more to do with Leo's reluctance to let Denise as close as a real partner needed to be.

"You and Denise were together a long time, weren't you?"

"Eleven years."

"I have to admit, that one surprised me. I never would have guessed the two of you had that much in common."

Leo chuckled. "Maybe that was our problem ... or one of our many problems. We always had a good time together, though. She still makes me laugh."

"So you two are still friends?"

"Yeah. We even got back together for a little while after Nora died, but it didn't last. It was fun, but it wasn't what it needed to be ... for either of us." It wasn't anything close to what Leo had

felt for Claudia.

"I was really sorry to hear about Nora. That was so sad."

"Yes, it was. And I got your card, by the way. Thank you. It meant a lot."

"You know ... speaking of cards ... you were the only one of all our old friends to send something when Mark died. I really appreciated that, Leo."

"I couldn't stand to think how much that must have hurt you, losing your husband and your child's father. I wish I could have been there for you ... you know, to give you a shoulder."

"That's what it was like when I got your card, so in a way, you were there."

Leo nodded. She liked knowing that.

"That really was a difficult time for me. Most people don't know this, but Mark and I had separated just before he died. We hadn't filed the papers yet, but he had moved out."

"I had no idea."

"Like I said, hardly anyone knew. I think most people who knew Mark were surprised it lasted as long as it did."

Leo didn't know how to respond to that. She had never understood why Claudia had married a man like that in the first place.

"Leo, I've wanted to tell you for a very long time how much I-

"There you are! I thought I might find you hiding out here."

Leo recognized the heavyset woman coming from the ballroom as a teacher from Claudia's school.

Claudia groped the floor with her feet for her shoes and started to push herself from the chair. "You caught me."

"Don't get up. You deserve to take it easy after the kind of day you've had. I just wanted to say thank you for everything. They are such a lovely couple."

"Thank you for coming, Lena."

The two women briefly embraced and Lena took her leave.

Leo half expected Claudia to end their conversation after the interruption, citing the need to return to the reception. Instead, she settled back into her chair.

"I remember her. First grade?"

"That's right. Lena Owens."

"She was right about Eva and Todd. They look very happy together."

"They are. If I have to give up my daughter, I can at least be glad it's to someone who worships the ground she walks on."

"It's obvious they love each other very much."

"I'm really happy for them. And I adore Todd's family. I hope Eva knows how lucky she is to be getting such a great set of in-laws."

"Did I just detect a tiny bit of cynicism?"

Claudia snorted. "What do you think? You met my in-laws. Now you know why we had to wait until dark to have the wedding."

Leo laughed heartily. She had always loved Claudia's sense of humor. "I seem to remember that was our first sign of trouble-your mom didn't like me much."

"It wasn't you, Leo ... not really. It was me she didn't like back then. She just couldn't handle the idea that I wasn't going to get married and give her grandchildren. And that's exactly what would have happened if she hadn't gotten sick." In an instant, Claudia went from impish to sad, her eyes filling with tears. "Then all I wanted was to make her happy-no matter what it cost me."

"I know, I know." Leo leaned forward and rested a comforting hand on Claudia's forearm. "Please don't cry. You did what you had to do."

Claudia pushed away the tears, but they wouldn't stop. "I think she would have come around if she had gotten to know you, Leo. She would have seen how happy I was."

"But she wouldn't have held your daughter before she died. And I bet that single moment of joy was worth her whole life."

"I just wish there had been another way ... and that I hadn't been so ..." Unable to find the word she wanted, she simply waved her hand in the air.

Her heart soaring with hope at Claudia's admission, Leo bent on one knee as she leaned forward to cradle her in her arms. "We can't change what happened then. All we have now is from here forward." Unable to stop herself, she planted a soft kiss on her temple.

"Mom?" The new bride appeared out of nowhere. "Are you okay?"

Claudia nodded as she composed herself.

"Your mom was just saying how happy she is for you and Todd. And I made the mistake of pointing out that she forgot to cry during the ceremony."

Eva knelt before her mother. "I'm about ready to call it a night. Todd and I are ready to go upstairs and sleep together-and I mean sleep."

Claudia laughed. "I think that would constitute a bad start."

"No kidding. But I have to throw the bouquet to Tracy first."

"You already know who's going to catch it?" Leo asked, picking up her camera to head back inside.

"Trust me. She's the only one who wants it."

Claudia grimaced as she squeezed her swollen feet back into her shoes. Leo helped her to her feet and the three women slowly made their way back toward the ballroom. Eva walked ahead, giving them one more moment alone.

"Hold up," Leo said. She took a tissue from her pocket and gently dabbed the streaked mascara from Claudia's face. "You look beautiful tonight."

Claudia took her hand and gave it a squeeze. "And you are more dashing than ever, Leo."

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Leo zipped the leather pouch and set it by the door of the ballroom with her tripod so she could take one last look around for a stray lens cap, light filter, or anything else she might have overlooked. Throughout the evening, she had ferried her supplies to her car when she was finished with them, leaving herself only one load at the end of the night.

She had dragged out the packing-up process for as long as she could, disappointed that Claudia hadn't found her to say goodnight. Her hopes for more time together had faded when she watched the overnight guests, including Claudia, head for the elevators en masse. This wasn't exactly the best place for them to talk, she told herself. Claudia had obligations to the guests ... and besides, tonight was about Eva and Todd, not Leo.

There was so much more Leo wanted to say, things she had practiced at home and in the car on the way to the wedding. But in those few brief moments together in the hallway, her nerve had left her-as it usually did. Maybe they could have dinner, like Claudia had said ... if one of them could get up the nerve to make the call.

The hotel staff was already cleaning the room, breaking down tables and carting off dishes and used linens. An industrial vacuum cleaner drowned out most of the banter among the workers.



Leo shouldered her heavy bag and grasped the tripod, keeping one hand free for her car keys. She stepped out into the cool California night and walked to her car, stopping first at the trunk to secure her gear for the trip home. She swallowed hard to calm the lump in her throat as she slid into the driver's seat and buckled up. Seeing Claudia again had been great, but now it was time to let her go back to her other life.

Leo waited until she was ready to back out before turning on her headlights. That's when she saw it-an envelope tucked beneath her windshield wiper. The note inside bore a simple request:

*Sunset Suite - 5th floor. Please come, Leo. - C*

The thought of not going never entered her mind.

Five minutes later she rapped gently on the door, afraid after a few moments that she had come too late and Claudia had gone to bed. Her heart began to pound when the lock clicked and the door opened to reveal the one and only person she had ever truly loved.

"I was afraid you wouldn't see my note ... and then I thought maybe you did, but you didn't want to come."

"How could I not?"

Claudia had already dressed for bed in yellow silk pajamas, her tears of an hour ago freshly scrubbed away. She reached out her arms and Leo stepped into the embrace. "It's been so good to see you again."

For several minutes, they stood perfectly still in the foyer, Leo soaking up the euphoric sensation of holding Claudia in her arms. "All you ever have to do is call me." She closed her eyes as soft lips pressed against her throat.

"I've missed you so much, Leo." Claudia turned her face into Leo's and their lips met.

The kiss was even sweeter than Leo had remembered-and more than she had ever allowed herself to dream. An inch at a time, her hands crept down Claudia's back, stopping when her fingers met at the base of her spine. Even through the silk, she could feel the warm skin. "I remember everything about you."

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Leo stretched her legs as the sea breeze wafted through the curtains to tease her awake. The sheets at the Ritz-Carlton were probably the softest she had ever felt, but the real luxury was the smooth skin of the nude body beside her.

"Good morning."

She felt the warm breath in her face and opened her eyes to Claudia's contented smile. "Hi, beautiful."

"It was just like you said last night ... remembering."

Leo wriggled to wrap both arms around Claudia and pull her close. Their night of lovemaking had been the most physically and emotionally intense experience of her life, as they poured themselves totally into one another. There was no mistaking the love they felt, but one question remained, and it scared Leo half to death to ask it. "Have you come back to me?"

Claudia met her gaze with sparkling eyes. "Yes."

"I won't ever let you leave again."

"I'm going to hold you to that." Claudia kissed her gently. "I never stopped wanting to be with you."

"What kept you?"

"It wasn't that simple ... nothing was. After Mark died, I got tangled up with my in-laws about his estate. They knew we were separated and they contested everything about his assets." Claudia pushed herself up so that she was leaning against the pillows, her breasts tucked beneath the sheet. Leo snuggled close and rested her head in the crook of Claudia's arm. "I couldn't have cared less about his money, but I wasn't going to give them any ammunition to screw Eva out of what was rightfully hers."

"They look like they've got money of their own."

"People like the Fishers never think they have enough. Which reminds me-now that my daughter is a Powell, I'm changing back to Galloway."

"Ah, the woman I fell in love with." Leo craned her neck to deposit a kiss on Claudia's cheek.

"Anyway, by the time we finally resolved the estate, you were seeing Denise."

That was seventeen years ago, and there was no question in Leo's mind that she would have left Denise for Claudia in a heartbeat, no matter how callous it would have seemed. She would have done anything to be with the woman she loved.

"And then a few years ago, you stopped coming to the school ... so I thought you probably didn't want to see me anymore."

"I always wanted to see you. I even thought about calling a couple of times"-it was much more often than that-"but I always chickened out."

"Why, Leo? You knew I wanted us to be friends."

"Yeah, but I ..." She sighed heavily.

"What?"

"I didn't think I could be just friends with you. I always felt so empty after we saw each other ... and I hated that there was so much about you that I didn't know, or that I couldn't be a part of."

"We have so much to make up for." Claudia hugged Leo's shoulders and kissed the top of her head. "And we'll do that, right after the wedding breakfast."

Leo tightened her grip. "No, you made me promise not to let you leave me again."

"Come with me." Claudia began to climb out of bed.

"I can't show up in yesterday's clothes. Your daughter would be scandalized."

Claudia snorted. "I doubt that. Knowing Eva, she'll be wearing ragged jeans."

"Have you ever told her that you used to be into women?"

"What do you mean used to be? Weren't you paying attention last night?"

Leo grinned. "Oh, yeah."

"I told Eva all about you, thanks to a bottle of tequila that we shared on her twenty-first birthday."

"And she was okay with it?" Leo followed her into the bathroom, both of them comfortably naked. She leaned in the doorway as Claudia adjusted the shower controls, feeling as though she might burst with happiness at the simple familiarity of the moment.

"Are you kidding? She thought it was cool as hell."

"No way!"

"And not only that-it turns out my daughter had a girlfriend her freshman year at Berkeley."

"So it really is a phase?"

"I guess. She digs guys." She stepped under the steamy cascade and added, "A mother has to ask herself where she went wrong."

Leo laughed and went in search of her clothes, which were scattered along with Claudia's pajamas throughout the suite. There was much yet to be resolved-how much time they would take to get reacquainted, what their future might hold-but the details of what happened next

meant nothing to Leo. All that mattered was that she and Claudia were together again.

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Leo dropped her heavy camera bag and pressed the button for the ground floor. She had waited in the room for ten minutes after Claudia left, insisting that the presence of all the Fishers at the hotel called for discretion. It wouldn't do for the mother of the bride to be seen walking out with the wedding photographer. Leo planned to drive home and shower, and Claudia would come to her house mid-afternoon.

"Hold the elevator, please!" a male voice called.

Leo lunged and caught the door, looking away in embarrassment as the newlyweds rushed aboard.

"Good morning," Todd said amiably.

"Good morning." Leo could feel both of them looking at her, and it didn't help at all when she glanced up to see their accompanying grins. "Congratulations again. It was a beautiful wedding."

"I can't wait to see the pictures," Eva said. "Thank you again for taking us on at the last minute."

"You're welcome. Thank you for choosing Simms Studio." *Could I have said anything stupider than that?*

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"I bet you're pretty proud of yourself, aren't you?" Todd whispered into his new bride's ear as they took their seats at the center of the table.

"Look at her. She's like a whole different person. And she would never have called Leo on her own."

Claudia sat between Todd's father and grandfather at the end of the table, laughing animatedly at their conversation.

"So you think they got back together?"

"Why else would Leo have been on the fifth floor? She sure didn't stay with *your* parents."

"I have to admit, your mom looks pretty happy this morning."

"I should hope so. I'd hate to think we canceled that other photographer and forfeited his deposit for nothing."

"You'll think she'll ever figure it out?"

"Even if she does, I can't imagine she'll care. Mom deserves to be happy for a change, and I think this time she has a chance."

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