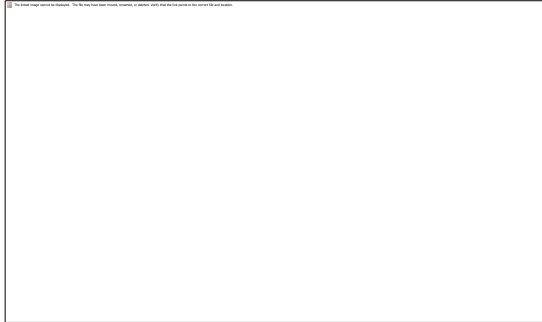


~ Touched by Love ~

by Alex Tryst

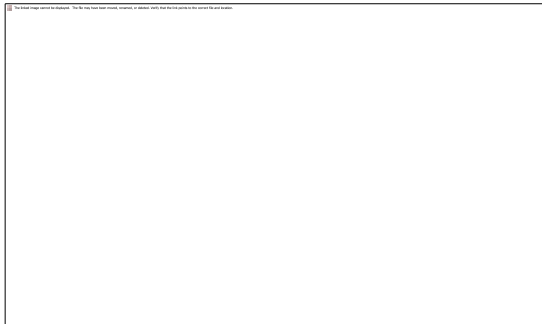
Copyright January 2004



Dedication: To my wife, you are my fondest wish.

Comments welcome: alextryst@hotmail.com

Now on with the show.....



You arrived today a little later than normal. I was already sitting in my usual chair looking out the window of the library and waiting for my inspiration to come. You looked as if something was bothering you as you flopped down in your standard chair after flinging your overcoat into the seat next to you.

As usual you paid attention to no one, instead focusing on your own work. Your long, wavy, dark hair was pulled up in a loose bun, a traditional look for you. I often wondered why you wore it that way. Wisps of your hair fell loose about your porcelain shoulders. You were wearing a floral frock that looked like something bought from a vintage consignment shop.

My attention was drawn to your hands as you unpacked the large notebook seemingly always present in your bag and several pens. I could see that your long fingers were stained with black pen ink already. Immediately your hands began to move over the paper as you furiously began to write. My gaze drifted up to your face. It held absolute concentration, your dark brows furrowed. For a moment I just watched you, taking in your features. The profile of your face, the strong defined nose and the graceful line of your jaw set my own hands in motion as inspiration took me.

You were my unknowing subject as I intently studied you, drawing an exact representation as I wondered about what you were writing. Your ritual had been the same over the last several

months that you had been frequenting the library. I had always noticed you, intrigued by your presence, but it was the first time my thoughts had caused my own creativity to blossom. Just as I was finishing the drawing of you, I heard you sigh and lean back in your chair.

Suddenly the bluest eyes I had ever seen found mine. For a moment I couldn't breathe. Your stern appearance did nothing to dissuade me from holding the gaze. I knew in that moment I had to meet the woman who inspired my latest sketch. However, before I could make any sort of move in your direction, you were drawn back to your own work.

The hours passed with only silence between us. My eyes kept being drawn to you, and every once in awhile yours found mine. Finally, when I could stand no more, I gathered my courage and moved across the room. I stood on the other side of the table from you quietly for a several moments before you looked up at me. I put on my best smile.

"Hi," I greeted cheerfully.

"Hello," distantly you replied.

"My name is Elora Duke. I've noticed you in here several times before. Are you a writer?"

"Elora?" you questioned. "You were aptly named."

"Why do you say that?"

"Elora means light. I'd say that fits you perfectly."

I knew you were referring to my white blonde hair and pale blue eyes. "I suppose it does. What's your name?"

"Virginia Wolf."

"Like the author?"

"Spelled differently though," you mumbled, looking back at your paper.

I could see what was obviously a manuscript. "You're a writer. How coincidental."

"Screenwriter actually. And you, Elora?"

"Well, I'm nothing nearly as exciting, just an advertising director."

"With a passion for drawing," you mentioned, nodding your head toward my sketch book.

I still had it open to my current piece. Flipping it around so you could see it, I said, "I hope you don't mind, but the image of you fast at work had to be captured."

You studied it for a moment. "Your picture flatters me. That's not what I really look like."

"It's how I see you," I countered.

Meeting eyes with me again, you gave me a smirk. "How long have you been studying me?" you asked.

"I've noticed you every day for three months. I have been sitting only a few tables down from you the entire time. Did you just notice me for the first time today?"

You nod and follow my hand to where I had gestured. "Well, I admit I'm always so focused when I come here that I try to block everything else out to work. Today though I kept feeling something burning my skin. Turns out it was only your gaze. Why have you been at the library so much?"

"I've been looking for inspiration for ad campaigns. I draw better here. Today I finally found something extraordinary."

"Again glozing does nothing for me."

Even though your tone was icy, I was not about to give up the conversation that easily. Your eyes would not allow me. Putting my belongings down on the table, I placed my hands on the flat surface and leaned toward you. "I'm not fooled by your attitude, Ms. Wolf. Secretly I think you're intrigued."

"What makes you think that, Ms. Duke?"

Giving a cunning grin of my own, I plainly replied, "Your eyes. They are dilated."

You laughed lightly for a moment at my bold declaration. "You think you are so clever, Ms. Duke. What makes you think you are the cause? It is after all rather dim in here," you bantered casually.

Sensing the change in your tone, I felt safe in getting more personal. "Perhaps we should go to this coffee shop I know of around the corner where it is nice and bright to test the theory."

Again you smiled at me and quickly shook your head. "You are young, Ms. Duke."

"What does that have to do with anything?"

You shook your head once more. "Ms. Duke, thank you for the invitation, but I must decline."

"Why? I'm just asking you for coffee." I pressed.

"No. You are asking me out actually."

"So? Is there a problem with that? You're declining based on my age, aren't you?"

"How old are you, Ms. Duke?"

"Stop calling me that. I'd really like it if you called me Elora or Duke. All my friends call me Duke."

"All right, Duke. How old are you?"

"I'm thirty. How old are you, Virginia?" quietly I inquired.

"Older than thirty."

"Forty?"

"You are too kind."

"Forty-five?" I guessed.

"I'm forty-three, Duke, much too old to be seen with a kid like you."

"I'm no child, Virginia. You blame this on my age, but there is something else. What is it about me that doesn't appeal to you?"

"No. It's not your age, Duke."

"Then what?"

"If you must know, Duke, it's the fact that you're a woman," plainly you responded.

I looked at you in disbelief for a moment, wondering if that was the truth. Instinctively I knew it wasn't. Nevertheless I nodded. "All right, Virginia. I know when to leave well enough alone. However, I do know that your excuse is fallacious. I'm never wrong about lovers of women. It was nice meeting you. Good bye."

I walked all the way to the end of the aisle before turning to look back at you. As I suspected you were watching me but quickly averted your eyes to your paper. Smiling to myself I headed back to my office.

The next day when I arrived at the library I was surprised that you were already there. Never had you beaten me. For a moment I contemplated interrupting you, but you seemed so involved in your work that I didn't wish to disrupt your creativity. Instead, I just took my usual seat. My eyes stayed on you a long time though. Today I watched as your lips mumbled the words you were writing as if you were pondering their meaning as you placed them on the page. Suddenly you looked up catching me by surprise.

You blue eyes flashed for a moment, but there was no other indication that you even acknowledged my presence. Looking back to your paper your left hand came up to your mouth. You tapped the pen against your lips thoughtfully before returning it to your paper, leaving a black smudge on your pink lower lip. Quickly your writing hand found pace again. I merely watched for several more minutes before being motivated to draw you a second time as I had just seen you. However, this time I was bold enough to move closer to view you. Coming right up to the table where you were, I took a seat directly across from you. Even though I knew you sensed my presence, you didn't even look up at me as I began to sketch.

We went on that way for a long time, pretending not to see each other. However, after an hour, I stopped drawing and placed the sketch pad down in your line of sight. I saw your brows move, indicating you were studying it.

"Why didn't you tell me I had ink on my mouth?" you asked, vainly trying to rub it off with the back of your hand. It only made it more pronounced.

"Because it encompasses the essence of you, Virginia."

I saw the corner of your mouth quirk, but you still didn't look at me. "And you are so sure of my essence when you know so little of me?"

"I know you won't give me a chance to buy you a cup of coffee, because you're too involved in your work to try to make friends," I answered. "A woman like you would be too preoccupied to be concerned by a little ink."

Looking up at me, you gave your first genuine smile of the day. Your eyes squinted with mirth for a moment. "A persistent woman, aren't you? Won't take no for an answer?"

"Not from you, not about this."

Changing the subject you asked, "How is it that you can be away from your office so much? You're here every day."

"Family owned company. My father and I are partners. He knows my best ideas come from this library, so he's more than happy to let me have the time I want."

"But you've only drawn me for the past two days. I'm sure I'm not apart of an ad campaign."

"No. He still doesn't mind though. You see, I'm an aspiring artist on the side. My mother owns an art gallery, and I get a chance to exhibit my pieces. Most of the time my ad sketches end up in the gallery. These two of you are going to be part of a series I think."

"A series on what?"

"Inspired women."

You shook your head lightly. "Perhaps I should just accept that coffee invitation in an effort to get some peace," you jested.

"I'm sure a cup of nice black coffee sounds good right about now."

"What makes you think I like my coffee black?"

"Just a guess."

"I suppose you think you are never wrong about coffee drinkers either," you quipped.

"Well, am I wrong?"

"No," you answered.

"So what do you say? It's only a couple of blocks from here."

Quirking your right brow at me in deliberation, you finally conceded. "All right. One cup of coffee and then I must return to my writing."

"Fair enough," I answered with a nod.

Both of us gathered our belongings and made our way out of the library. There was silence between us for a moment. I could tell you were comfortable in the quietness and were in no rush to fill it with idle chatter. Going against my own nature of always trying to speak, I allowed the stillness to encompass us as we made our way down the street. My eyes wandered, taking in the trees, their changing leaves. The smell of autumn was in the air, cool crisp air that filled the lungs with refreshing sustenance. Dried leaves crunched under the heels of my dress shoes. Out of the corner of my eye I can see you struggling with your heavy bag.

Unable to stop myself, I turned and instinctively reached for it. "Allow me, Virginia."

Again those blue eyes so full of unexplored emotion looked at me. Reluctantly you let go of your bag but mumbled, "Thank you."

"You're most welcome." Wind whirled leaves around us. I saw you shiver slightly and fold your arms more tightly around your torso. I wondered where your jacket was. Since I was merely holding my own overcoat, being quite warm in my sweater, I extended it to you. "Here. Put this on."

"That's all right."

"Take it, Virginia. You're cold."

You took the jacket from me and slipped it around your shoulders. "Thank you, Duke. I was in such a hurry this morning that I forgot mine."

"It's no problem."

A few minutes later we arrived at the coffee shop. We found a cozy table in the back of the place to drop our belongings, and then I insisted you wait while I went for the beverages. Minutes later I returned with two coffees, one black the other with just a little cream. Placing the one with cream down in front of you, I took my own seat. You looked at it and then at my cup. Raising your brow at me, you gave me a questioning gaze.

"What?" I inquired, pretending not to know.

"You knew I liked my coffee black."

"I thought it was time for you to have a little change," I teased with a smile. When I saw you weren't amused, I stated, "I was just kidding, Virginia. This is yours." I switched the cups in front of us.

"You think you're funny?" you asked.

"No. I'm just hoping you think I am," I replied.

You gave a laugh. The rich sound reverberated through my ears and settled in my heart. My fascination with you was growing as you lowered your chilly persona. I watched as you sipped your coffee. As you brought the cup to your pouting mouth, I noticed you had merely wrapped your hand around it instead of using the handle. I picked up my own in the more traditional fashion and took a taste.

After a moment you inquired, "What are you thinking about, Duke? I see your eyes aglow in contemplation."

"Actually, I was just looking at your hands," I answered, dropping my gaze to your right one resting on the table. I brought my left one up from my lap and placed it near yours gathering courage to touch you. Bravely I let the tips of my fingers run over your delicate hand. "I was just pondering how many thousands of pages these petite hands have written. How many pens have these long thin fingers held?" I kept tracing over the contours of your hand a moment while I awaited a reply, but when I got none, I looked to your face again. Your gaze was glued to our touching hands. "Do you not like the fact that I'm touching you?" I queried, wondering what had brought on the sour draw to your face.

"You are married," you bluntly responded.

"I am not married," I contradicted. Seeing your eyes met mine, I could tell you were pondering my declaration. Your gaze dropped back to my left hand and the gold band adorning my ring finger.

"Then why the ring?"

"It was my grandmother's. I like wearing it, because it makes me feel close to her. Unfortunately this is the only finger on which it fits. Besides, it does have its uses like keeping dogs at bay," I joked. When my jest fell flat again, I asked, "Did you think I would invite you out for coffee if I was married?"

"I don't even know you, Duke. I can't make such an assessment of your character."

"Well, I assure you of my principals. I am not a woman who would do such a thing. Fidelity is important to me in a relationship."

"What else is important to you in a relationship?" you inquired in interest.

Shrugging my shoulders I thought a moment. "Passion, love, autonomy. You?"

"Independence is important to me as well. I've always believed there was the kind of love that consumed someone completely, an inferno of emotion, passion that burned and soothed simultaneously. Love like an eternal spring, always blooming, one unsusceptible to the changes of the seasons."

"I've never known love like that. Do you actually think it exists, or is that just a notion of your stories?"

"I would like to think it exists, Duke. It keeps me going to think one day it might touch me."

"One can always hope, Virginia. My ex-wife would think you were foolish for such a belief," I mumbled through another sip of coffee.

"You've been married? When was this? You're so young."

"We got married when we were twenty-two, right out of college and were divorced by the time we were twenty-five. I didn't know what marriage was then."

"And now you do?"

"I think so. I hope so anyway. What about you? Have you ever been married?"

"No, never."

"Have you ever loved someone the way you described?"

"No," you answered again. "You?"

"Never." There was a pause in conversation for a moment. I noticed that our hands were still touching.

Obviously you did as well. "Oh, the hands of youth," you reflected, taking the initiative to run your fingers over mine. "Strong, confident. I can feel the creative energy exuding from them. My hands used to feel like this, but time has stripped them of their power I fear."

"I still feel strength there, Virginia. I feel a soft femininity coupled with the wisdom and potency of age."

You chuckled. "And that's not even my writing hand," you teased.

I smiled at your attempt at a joke. "Tell me something, Virginia. When you aren't writing screenplays, what are you doing?"

"I'm a college professor. I teach screenwriting on the graduate level. Right now I'm on sabbatical to work on this project."

"And what are you writing about?"

"A mysterious blue-eyed blonde who stalks me in the library and won't take no for an answer," you quipped.

"Seriously. What's the screenplay about?" I questioned.

"I am being serious," you answered.

"Prove it to me."

With a shrug you pulled out your notebook and opened it. Placing it in front of me, you said, "Tell me if this doesn't sound like you."

I read the passage quickly. She had described me in ways I didn't even realize suited me until seeing her words on paper. "I thought you hadn't noticed me before yesterday. I wore the outfit you describe last week," I mentioned with suspicion.

"I suppose you did," you mumbled.

"And this is not a screenplay."

"No. It's part of my journal actually. You've been a distraction to my writing as of late."

"Should I be sorry?"

"No. I'm not after all," you admitted. "The distraction has been welcome."

I gave a brilliant smile. Wagging my index finger at you, I asserted, "I told you I was never wrong about women."

"We'll see, Duke." Checking your watch you mentioned, "I should get back to the library."

"Of course. Let's go."

We walked quietly again back to the building that was our mutual muse. I paused at the entrance for a moment, so you lingered. "Are you not coming back in?"

"No. I must get back to work."

"Oh, well, here's your coat," you said starting to take it off, but I stopped you.

"Keep it. You'll need something to wear this evening when you leave. I'll get it from you tomorrow. Here's your bag." I gently placed the strap over your shoulder.

"Thank you, Duke, for the coffee and the jacket."

"My pleasure, Virginia. I'll see you tomorrow?"

"I'll be here."

"Do you think I could convince you to make our coffee a standing date?"

"Let's do this one day at a time. Tomorrow sounds good."

"Great. I look forward to it."

The next day you had arrived before me again. However, you were already working diligently, so without a word, I slipped into the chair across from you. You didn't even bother to look up, but I knew you knew I was there. Pulling out my sketch book, I tried to focus on my latest project for work. We worked in silence for a long time, but after awhile I became aware of the fact that our legs were touching under the table. If you noticed, you didn't show it on your face.

My pencil stopped on the page, and I sat absorbing the feeling of the inadvertent caress of your knee against my slacks-covered thigh. My whole leg began to warm at the touch. I sat amazed at the tide of emotion that suddenly enveloped my body. You, the homeliest intellectual I had ever met, were causing a ripple of sexual current in my frame. I had never even imagined being attracted to an individual like you. Most of my conquests were women more like me, young, energetic, and animated. You were reserved, a woman who looked older than her forty-three years. Nevertheless, I was drawn to you in a way that was indescribable. Your face spoke of intimate stories yet to be told and your eyes of an ardor never having seen fruition. The magnetism of those blue eyes lured me, and I wasn't able to escape them. Right then I decided I had to find out more about you, find the meaning behind each crease on your brow. Suddenly I wanted to know it all. Even though I had never been interested in a woman like you, I was bold enough to take the opportunity presented to me and resolved to try to get you away from your work.

Patiently I waited until you looked like you were at a standstill before whispering your name. Instantly you looked at me. "How about the coffee now, Virginia? You need a break."

"I suppose I do," you answered. As we stood and collected our things you whispered, "Shoot."

"What is it? What's wrong?"

"I forgot your coat today, Duke. I'm sorry," you apologized as I slipped on my jacket.

"It's all right. No problem."

"I'll remember to bring it tomorrow. I was just so inspired this morning that I couldn't wait to get here."

"Virginia, it's fine. I'm glad you've had ideas. Come on. Let's go," I said, moving to take your bag without even asking. Once outside I asked, "Can you tell me about your ideas, or are they a secret?"

"I prefer not to talk about my work with people until it's finished. It gives me latitude to change things if I want. What an audience doesn't know they won't miss if I remove something."

"That's true. Very well. Tell me about something else. School perhaps?"

"What do you want to know about school?"

"Tell me about your classes. Have you taught any famous people?"

"A few. Since I only work on the graduate level, the people in my class are truly interested in the subject, which makes for some fascinating ideas. It doesn't take me long to separate the best from the rest. Some of those bests have made their names in film and television."

"And what about you? What kind of mark have you made?"

"I have collaborated on a few things which were successful. Enough about me though. What about you? Would I have seen any of your ad campaigns?"

"Possibly. My firm does mostly local and regional stuff. My expertise is the print ad where my father pretty much covers other mediums. I've kind of made a name for myself with my drawings as well. I like to think of myself as more of an artist than an ad designer."

You nodded. "Perhaps one of these days I should see your exhibit. All I know of is the few pictures you've drawn of me."

"It would be my pleasure to show you sometime," I offered.

You didn't answer, and we continued our journey to the coffee shop in silence. Even though you

protested, I bought both of our drinks that day as well while you merely waited at our same table from yesterday. I smiled as I approached. We both seemed to be creatures of habit.

Our break was filled with various questions for the other. Neither of us seemed to be rushed that day though, which pleased me greatly, for it left me with hope that you found me just as interesting. We stayed later than we had the day before, but finally you noticed the time.

"I really should return," you said.

For the first time I thought I heard a sliver of regret lining your voice. "Well, your work calls. You have to answer your muse while she's with you, and I really should get back to the office. I have a meeting soon anyway."

Going back to the library we stopped at the entrance as like the day before. Even though you were standing on a stair above me, I could still easily look down at you. I gave a charming smile. Deciding that was the moment for bravery, I handed over your bag to you as I said, "Perhaps you could give me my coat back this evening after I take you to dinner."

"I usually work here past dinner, Duke."

"Let tonight be an exception, Virginia. Please allow me the pleasure of your company this evening. I'll take you anywhere you would like to go."

You seemed to contemplate the offer for a moment before replying, "Not tonight, Duke. Another time maybe."

Forcing your hand, I pressed, "Tomorrow night then?"

You smirked and shook your head slightly, a behavior I began to recognize as one when you were flustered. "Not tomorrow night either, Duke."

"Friday night?" I continued.

You scoffed. "A woman such as you has better things to do with a Friday evening than make conversation with someone like me."

"Virginia," I complained. "Don't try to get out of this. I can tell you want to be with me. Don't make it hard on either of us."

"Oh, there you go again with your certainty. And what makes you think you are correct in your assessment of my want to be with you?"

"Your eyes again betray your real emotions, Virginia. Please have dinner with me. That's all it has to be."

"Very well. Dinner then Friday night?"

"Friday night it's a date. We'll talk more tomorrow. I'll see you later."

"Good bye, Duke. Have a nice rest of the day."

"You too. See you tomorrow."

Going back to my office, I was greeted by my father sitting behind my desk. "Well, Elora, where have you been? We having a meeting, and I don't see any ideas lurking around your desk."

"Not to fear, Dad, I have them right here. See for yourself," I said pulling my sketch book from my bag. I turned it to the appropriate page and presented it to him. "What do you think?"

His smile revealed him. "It's superb. I love it. However, they still need to love it."

"I know, which is why I have two back up ideas. Here. Look at these." I moved around the side of my desk, so we were standing shoulder to shoulder. My father flipped through the pages in interest.

"All very good but let's go with your first drawing. Who is this?" he questioned as he idly studied the first of many sketches of Virginia. "You seem quite taken with her."

"Yes. She's a woman I met at the library. She's fascinating, Dad. I have a date with her on Friday."

"A date? With her?" he asked skeptically. I knew what he was thinking. "She's so plain, not to mention old. How old is she?"

"She's forty-three. She might seem plain to you in body, Dad, but not to me. She's brilliant, and there is something about her face. She's mesmerizing. I haven't been able to stop drawing her since we met."

"So I see. Well, she certainly isn't the type of woman I'm used to seeing you with, but I suppose I should just let you get this older woman itch out of your system. Be careful though. I wouldn't want you to get hurt."

"Not to worry, Dad. She may be older than me, but I'm pretty sure I'm the one that brings all the experience to the table."

He nodded. "Well, she can't have had too many dates looking the way she does."

I shrugged. "I don't know. Enough about Virginia though. Let's go close this deal," I stated.

The following day when I arrived at the library you were nowhere to be seen. Not thinking much of it, I went about my own business, but an hour had passed without your arrival, making me concerned. In the past three months you had never been that late before. As the hours drifted,

I started to wonder if you were coming at all and if I had done something to offend you. I waited until the light of the afternoon began to fade before giving up on you. Dejectedly I returned to my office feeling void. I had no idea just the mere presence of you had filled me with a sense of purpose over the past few days. Thursday was a repeat with you noted absence from the library.

When Friday morning came, I called my father and told him I would be working out of the office that day and then immediately went to the library to see if you were there. As I had hoped, I saw your dark head bent over the table. Emotions of irritation and jealousy overtook me as I saw you sitting there, but knowing I had no right to feel stood up, I pushed them aside as I approached you softly. Coming up beside your chair, I hovered next to you until you finally looked up at me.

"Duke, what are you doing here? You don't normally come in until the afternoon," you stated with obvious surprise.

"Well, I thought you might be avoiding me, so I decided to come stalk you again," I joked half-heartedly.

I could tell you understood my meaning, because you gave the usual uncomfortable shake of your head. "I've been busy trying to write. I could not focus with you around, so I needed a change of schedule," you said looking back to your paper.

"I understand. You don't have to explain it to me. I was just concerned. I wanted to be sure you were all right."

"I'm fine. Thank you for inquiring."

Hearing the distant tone in your voice again, I knew we had fallen out of our ease with each other, but I didn't know why you suddenly seemed content to keep me at bay. "Are we still having dinner this evening?" I questioned hesitantly.

"Duke, I really should work tonight."

My heart sunk at the rebuff of my invitation. Unable to walk away though, I bent down, so my mouth was close to your ear and whispered, "Why are you doing this, Virginia? I'm trying to be your friend. Why are you pushing me away? Why are you standing me up this evening?"

"I need to focus on this. You have exhausted much of my writing time this week already. Now I really should work on this piece. I have a deadline to meet."

I sneered at her reply. "I want the truth, Virginia, not what you invented to make yourself feel better about turning away my kindness."

"Fine, Duke. I will tell you the truth. Forgive me for trying to spare your feelings. Truth be told, I do not wish to go out with you. You claim that you only want to be my friend, but just as you say you can read my eyes, I can read yours, Duke. You mislead with your enticement of friendship. How many have actually fallen for that inducement?"

Seeing that you were not meeting my gaze, I leaned in closer, forcing you to meet eyes with me. I could only hold them for a moment before you turned away, but I saw what I needed. "You're scared. Why, Virginia?"

"I am not frightened, Duke. I simply know nothing about you and therefore do not feel comfortable with your suggestion of dinner."

I shook my head in disbelief. "Very well, Virginia. We will not go to dinner this evening. Continue to deceive yourself if you wish. As for me I will find someone else with which to have a pleasant evening." As I turned to leave, I saw my coat you had brought to return on the chair next to you. For a fleeting moment, I contemplated taking it but then decided against it. I wanted you to have something of mine to force another meeting between us. Looking back at you, I dug into my pocket for a business card and pen with which to write my cell phone and home numbers. "In case you change your mind, you can call me at any of these numbers." You reluctantly took the card from my hand but said nothing. "See you later, Virginia."

Fighting against my instinct to try to talk sense to you, I walked away from the table. It took everything in me not to look back. I made it out of the library and stood in front of the building for several moments. Curiosity got the better of me though, and I retreated back inside. Sneaking to a well-hidden spot where I could see you, I watched for a few minutes as you simply sat in your chair looking at my card. Your fingers traced over the numbers in thought. It was enough of a sign to renew my hope.

Leaving the building I got into my car and drove back to my loft. I spent the rest of the morning drawing and staring contemplatively out my front window at the water in the distance. You were never far from my thoughts.

That night I dressed for the standing invitation with friends for drinks. I had the full intention of simply forgetting you for the night, but as I got into my blue BMW, the urge to drive to the library was too overwhelming to ignore. I had to see you, to see if you were still working as you said. Arriving there shortly before closing, I walked over to your normal seat. I was surprised and yet comforted by the fact that you were just as I had left you that morning. Your dark hair had fallen partially out of its usual bun, tendrils cascading down your back. I could see in your hunched posture that you had been in the seat for many hours. You were still focused.

Walking quietly to where you were, I stood behind you for several moments. I was drawn to touch you, but I refrained sensing you weren't even aware of my presence. Figuring I should try to gain your attention without startling you, I only leaned into the back of the chair next to yours and waited for you to take notice. It was just a minute before those blue eyes connected with mine.

"Duke, what an unexpected pleasure," you mumbled looking back at your work.

"I came to retrieve you, Virginia. You have worked far too hard today. It's time to stop and eat. You probably haven't left this table since this morning. Have you eaten anything at all today?"

You consulted your watch. "I didn't realize it was closing time already. The day has gone too fast."

"Come. I'll take you to dinner. You have to eat."

Your eyes drifted over me for a moment without a word. Gazing into my eyes, you quirked your brow. "That certainly is an interesting outfit, Duke, Where are you going?"

My own blue eyes moved over my clothes. My denim shirt was untucked from my khaki pants and my favorite navy tie with the little daisy print hung loosely from my neck. Casually putting my hands in my trouser pockets, I answered, "I was going to have drinks with some lady friends. However, I'd much prefer to take you to dinner. I know this quaint little place overlooking the water. It's secluded and quixotic. Please? The library is closing, and you are bound to be famished after writing all day."

In your eyes I saw you contemplating the offer. "Very well," you reluctantly accepted.

"Wonderful. Gather your things while I call to make a reservation," I instructed before stepping away to make my phone call. Within a minute you were by my side. Immediately I took your bag and shouldered it.

"Here is your coat, Duke," you mentioned extending it to me.

"Thank you. My car is just outside. Come on."

Quietly we walked out into the autumn night. Without a word I gestured toward my car in the parking lot. You followed just half a step behind me. Going to the passenger's side, I used the remote to unlock the doors before opening yours for you. I saw you hesitate before sitting on the black leather passenger's seat. Making sure you were comfortable, I closed the door and proceeded to my side of the car. Gently I placed your bag in the back seat before sliding behind the steering wheel. Closing the door of my sports car, I put the key in the ignition and turned it over. The engine immediately came to life. I let it idle for a moment while I secured my seat belt and made sure you had done the same. I looked at you for a second and watched your eyes investigating the vehicle. I saw your discomfort clearly, but I didn't address it. Instead I hoped you would feel more at ease once we had settled at the restaurant. Stepping on the clutch, I slipped the car into first gear and smoothly pulled out of the space.

Neither of us said anything as I drove us to the main road heading toward the historic district of the city. Wondering if you would be more comfortable with some distraction, I asked, "Would you like some music?"

You shrugged your delicate shoulders. "If you would."

"Here. Pick something," I suggested handing you my CD case. I had a plethora of music from which to choose, so I hoped at least one genre would suit you. Curiously I watched and waited as

you idly flipped through the collection, reading the titles of each one. After perusing all of them you slid one from its sleeve and handed it to me. I smiled in amusement but not surprise at your choice of classical Chopin. I put the CD into the slot to load it and then adjusted the volume. The rest of the twenty minute ride was made in silence.

Since there was no parking lot at the restaurant, I was forced to park on the street a few blocks from the establishment. Chivalrously I went to open your door for you. We walked together up the street. Several couples were out that evening, and I could see their bewildered watching. I acknowledged to myself that we did make an interesting pair with the dichotomy of our outfits. With you in another unadorned period dress and me in my tie and khakis, I knew we did not look as if we belonged together. However, I ignored all the stares as you seemed to and progressed the few blocks to the restaurant.

Once inside the establishment, I greeted the host with familiarity as I had been there many times previously. He gave me a friendly smile and informed us that our table was not yet ready but that if we waited at the bar, he would come get us shortly. I nodded in agreement and instinctively guided you to the bar area by your elbow. You didn't resist when I touched you. Moving us up to the bar, I asked what you wanted.

"I don't drink much," you informed me.

"Well, let tonight be an exception for you, Virginia. I want you to have a good time. Now what you would like? Some wine perhaps? How about a nice red wine? That would suit you I bet."

"The tannins will make my face flush," you stated.

"That's all right. It's just me. They have this smooth, rich, buttery merlot that would be great. I know you'll like it."

"That sounds fine if you are having it."

I nodded and ordered two glasses for us. You took a tentative seat on one of the stools, and I simply hovered close to you. I could tell you were looking around the place inquisitively. The dim lighting and dark colors of the bar made it difficult to make out all the details. I looked around as well, wondering what this night would hold for us if we didn't find something to talk about soon. I was not used to such prolonged silences. Seeing that most of the patrons were my age, I wondered if that was going to make you uncomfortable.

After a moment you looked at me. "This is a fascinating establishment. The design of this space is brilliant. Some of this art is quite impressive as well."

I nodded in agreement. I saw your eyes looking at a charcoal sketch that hung behind the bar in interest. "Do you like that?" I asked, hoping you did, for it was mine.

"It's amazing. The way the artist captures the subject is incredible. It seems as if it is a still frame of life. The art is in motion. I can see where the subject is going and from where she has come by

this one piece. I've never seen anything like it." You squinted for a moment as if concentrating closely on a particular aspect of the piece before looking at me again. "It's signed E. Duke. Would that be someone you know?" you questioned.

I shrugged shyly. Your admiration of my work affected me more than any other critics had in a long time. "Yes, I drew that. I saw this woman down by the water one morning ten summers ago. I was down there with my sketch book drawing boats, but there was something about her that struck me. I had to draw her. Later I did this charcoal representation."

You looked back at the picture for a moment before stating, "This woman was not a stranger to you, was she? It is so intimate."

"The moment in which I drew her she was a stranger, but I introduced myself to her that morning before leaving. We became friends for awhile. I did this piece years later."

"More than friends," you stated with certainty.

"What makes you think that?"

"It's obvious. The voluptuous curves of her body are contours your hands traced before they drew this piece. Am I correct?" I shifted nervously for a moment. I saw thoughts cross your face. Suddenly seeing the light of recognition in your blue eyes, I knew you had pieced together the puzzle of the mysterious drawing. "Ten years, did you say? Is this your ex-wife?" you inquired in interest.

Plainly I replied, "Yes."

You nodded as if taking in the information. Your eyes drifted back to the drawing. "When did you do this charcoal?"

"In the middle of our divorce. I was upset one night and missing her desperately, so I drew her to life. It was this very moment you see in which I fell for her. This one moment of watching her standing on the pier feeding the ducks in the early morning hours changed me forever."

"You are an extremely talented artist, Duke."

"Thank you. That means a great deal coming from an esteemed writer such as you. Your form of art has always intrigued me. To be able to see a blank page and fill it with images only using words is so fascinating to me."

"Well, I feel the same way about those who choose other mediums of art. I think it is brilliance to be able to take convoluted diverse lines and bring something to life like this piece. Now I am anxious to see your other works."

Blushing slightly at the praise, I gave a nod. "Well, that certainly can be arranged." Before either of us could say anything else, the host came to get us and show us to our table. Quietly we

moved through the room which was diffused with soft candlelight. Almost all the tables we passed held couples involved in intimate conversation. Reaching our destination, the host politely held out the chair for you. I waited until you had taken your seat for doing the same. Both of us gazed out the window over the water. Lights from the sailboats in the marina glimmered on the otherwise black expanse.

"This is an extraordinary view," you said. "I would think it would be even more incredible in the light."

"Yes. Sometime I'll have to bring you for an early dinner instead of this late one," I declared casually as I opened my menu. You did the same. Idly we talked over meal choices until our server came to the table. Since we had both already decided on the food we wanted, we immediately gave him our order before I requested a bottle of the same wine we had been drinking at the bar be brought to us.

The meal passed with easy conversation about art and particular people we both found intriguing. The mutual interest seemed to dissipate the nervousness I was feeling about our first informal date of many more to come I hoped. I noticed half way through the meal that you had been correct about how wine affected you. Your cheeks began to blush as did the tip of your pale distinct nose. I found it charming. In the lull between dinner and coffee, you excused yourself from the table for the restroom.

I leaned back in my chair in your absence and sighed. Things had gone better than I had hoped. Pondering my next move, I decided to try to get you to agree to go by the art gallery with me once we had left. I took a casual sip of my wine as my eyes flitted around the restaurant. Meeting the eyes of an older woman who I knew, I raised my glass in her direction. She smiled at me. I wanted to go over to her but didn't want to leave the table until you returned. She beat me to the decision though by approaching the table.

"Elora, what a surprise," she said leaning to kiss me on the cheek as I stood. Taking my tie in her hand, she played with it a moment. "What's with the tie tonight?"

"Date actually."

"You're on a date?" quizzically she inquired. I saw the disbelief in her fair eyes. "With the woman who is sitting with you? She's not exactly your type, is she?"

Before I could answer, I saw you coming back to our table. I saw a flash of unknown emotion on your face as your eyes drifted down to where she was still holding my tie in her hand. "Um, Mother, this is Virginia Wolf. Virginia, this is my mother, Elizabeth Duke," I presented with a smile.

"Virginia, it's a pleasure to meet you," my mother said extending her hand.

You took it. "Likewise, Mrs. Duke. I was not aware that I would be meeting any of Duke's family this evening."

My mother tilted her fair head back as she chuckled. "She has you calling her Duke? Some things never change, do they Elora? I didn't mean to interrupt your meal. I just wanted to say hello to my daughter."

"Who is that at your table, Mother?"

"A prospective buyer of one of your pieces actually. Would you like to meet him?"

"Could I pass? Virginia and I were really hoping for a quiet evening."

"Certainly. He'll be by the gallery in the morning. You can meet him then."

"Great."

"Well, it was nice meeting you, Virginia. You two have a pleasant evening."

"Good night, Mother." Once she had left our table, I pulled your chair out for you again. Returning to my own, I apologized, "I'm sorry about that. I hadn't even realized she was here until I was sitting alone."

"I now see where you get your looks," you mentioned.

"Yes. We are cut from the same mold. However, there are some notable differences."

"Obviously. Your mother is stunning."

"And me? What am I?" curiously I inquired, wondering what you thought of my looks.

Studying me for a moment you answered, "Dangerous."

I laughed lightly. "That is an accurate sentiment," I stated as our coffee arrived.

Once our meal was complete, I paid our bill. Picking up your overcoat from the chair next to me, I simply held it open for you. You paused for a moment before stepping into it and allowing me to assist you. It was the first time my hands got to caress your shoulders. My mind raced at the possible softness of your skin under your simple dress. Slipping on my own jacket, I let you to lead us out of the establishment.

Looking at you as we made our way back to the car, I inquired, "Would you like to see my drawings at the gallery?"

"Is it open?"

"I have a key. It isn't far from here. It would give me great joy to show them to you personally."

You checked your watch. Seeing your movement, I did the same. It was already after ten that night. I hoped you wouldn't use the late hour as an excuse to decline. After a moment of deliberation, you responded, "All right since it is close."

Getting to the car, I opened your door. For the first time, you smiled at the gesture and thanked me. A few minutes later we pulled into the small alley and then parked in one of the two spaces behind the gallery. You looked around for a minute questioningly, but I reassured, "This is just the easiest place to park. Come on. We'll go in the back door."

Getting out of the car, I locked it by the remote and then led the way to the back door. I unlocked it and quickly deactivated the alarm before flipping on the lights. Allowing you inside I relocked the door behind us before motioning you to follow me. Leaving the office space, we moved to the gallery showroom. I turned on just enough light to illuminate the space intimately. From there I let you take the lead, following you around the floor in silence to allow you a chance to absorb the pieces of various artists. Coming to my work, you slowed your pace. My section was filled with a variety of subjects from people to boats to ad campaign ideas. Slowly you studied each one with interest, but then you stopped in front of a self-portrait.

"It's always so interesting to see the way people perceive themselves," you murmured.

"I was merely doing a drawing exercise. My features are not a precise reflection."

"But that is what makes it so fascinating. It makes me wonder why you chose to sketch particular aspects of your face differently than what they truly are. Why did you elongate your nose? Why did you draw your ears smaller? Why is there a curl to your lips?" you asked rhetorically.

I smiled inwardly at the idea of you being that aware of my features. To me it was a sign that you had been learning the curves of my face just as I had been yours. "There are more upstairs if you would like to see them," I revealed when you seemed to have exhausted the work in front of you.

"All right. Show me."

Escorting you out a side door that led into a dim hallway, I reset the alarm and extinguished the lights. I took the stairs ahead of you. Unlocking the door at the top landing, I repeated the process with another alarm and then flicked on more lighting. I closed the door after you entered. I saw you looking around quizzically.

"Where are we?" you asked.

"My loft. I live above the gallery. Why don't you take off your coat and stay awhile?" I suggested stripping off my own jacket. I extended my hand toward you, waiting for you to remove it. I could tell you were hesitant but finally handed it to me. Stowing them in the closet, I reached for your hand. I felt the calluses of a hard day's writing on your palm. My own body responded to our touch. I thought I saw the feeling register on your face as well. Silently I led you to the area where I did most of my work. Papers littered the drawing table. Leaving you there, I headed toward the kitchen. Within minutes I was back at your side though pressing yet another glass of

red wine into your hand.

I drank in silence as I considered my next move. Getting you into my apartment was almost too easy. You seemed too preoccupied with my work to notice the thoughts reflecting on my features. Unable to stop myself from my desires, I reached with my right hand toward your hair. The bun was starting to fall loose, so I gently removed the pin that had held it in place. Beautiful long hair tumbled free. The wild waviness enthralled me. I had to feel it for myself. Moving in behind you slightly, I let my body brush lightly against yours as I filled my hand with the softness of your dark mane. Instantly your body tensed, but you said nothing. Trying to calm you, I seductively whispered into your ear, "Your hair is amazing, Virginia. I have wanted to feel it through my fingers since I first saw you. The unruliness of the tresses betrays a secret allure you possess." I felt your quick exhale, encouraging me to continue my course. My nose nuzzled the soft fullness of your hair taking in the ambrosia of the floral scents. My hot breath moved over your ear and neck, hovering so close to pressing my mouth against your skin.

Just as I was about to taste my desire for the first time, you pulled out of my ensnarement putting space between us. You looked at me thoughtfully for a moment. You seemed so much more accessible with your hair flowing freely. You appeared more like the woman I had seen in my dreams with the flush of your cheeks, a combination of wine and awakening I hoped. Not allowing you too much time to think, I stepped to you, closing our distance to none at all as my right arm came around you. You took a ragged breath but retreated away again with a hand held up to stop my advance.

"Duke, please do not do this," you pleaded.

"Why not, Virginia? What is wrong with seizing the moment and enjoying the mutual want?"

You shook your head at me, a sure sign of your discomfort. After a moment you dared meet my eyes. "Duke, this is quite an elaborate web of seduction, and I am sure many women have fallen for this lure. I suppose I should be flattered you have given me so much consideration as to plot a way to get me back to your home under the pretense of seeing your work. However, I beseech you not to persist with your course of action."

"Why, Virginia?" I inquired moving toward you again. Seeing you retreat a few more steps, I realized you were uncertain of what I was going to do. "Virginia, I would never force myself on anyone. I would not do anything without your consent," I assured you as I came into your personal space again. I couldn't help myself. I was unable to stay away from you. "I just cannot disregard my body's need to be close to you. There is so much energy that surrounds you. Surely you can sense that."

You didn't meet my gaze. I figured it was because if you had you would not be able to deny me. Instead you kept your gaze solely on my tie as if to ground yourself before you floated away with the tide of emotions between us suddenly. We stood closely together for several moments, not touching and yet letting the verve of raw feelings dissolve the distance. Timidly I reached out to feel you a third time. My hand reached its destination cupping the left side of your jaw.

However, before anything more could transpire you pulled away pleading, "Please, Duke. I cannot proceed in this manner."

I sighed in defeat. I sensed there was a wall around your desires that I would not be able to scale in one evening. "Very well, Virginia. I give you my word. I will not try to initiate anything between us for the rest of the night. I do not want you to be uncomfortable here on your first visit. Forgive me. Please come back to my table and view my drawings."

That night after staying at my loft for an hour I took you home. Driving up the row of faculty housing for the local university, I waited for you to signal which one was yours. When you did so, I pulled to the curb and turned off the car. Going to your car door, I opened it for you. Silently we walked up the pathway to your house. I hovered on the landing as you unlocked the door, wondering if I was going to get an invitation into your abode. I assumed not since the awkwardness we had at my apartment was still lingering between us. Once you had successfully unlocked your home, you turned to look at me. I handed you your bag.

"Well, thank you for your company this evening, Virginia," I began.

"Thank you for dinner and the exhibition of your pieces. They were fascinating."

"I'm glad you enjoyed them. May I ask what your plans are for the rest of the weekend?"

"Working on my project. I am further behind than scheduled. I really need to focus."

I nodded in understanding. "I guess I will see you sometime Monday then in the library. Have a great rest of the weekend," I said, not making a move toward you. I had promised not to do so the rest of the evening, and I was determined to keep my word, even though I desired to touch you. Before I could change my own mind on the matter, I slowly started to walk away and get into my car. I sat at the curb and waited until you were inside before driving away.

The next day I slept late. I had a difficult time going to sleep when I had returned home, because I kept replaying the evening in my mind. I ended up staying at my drawing table lost in mental images of you and sketching until I saw the dawn of the new day on the horizon. Finally dragging myself from bed, I showered and dressed to go down to the gallery. I knew my mother would be expecting me there that afternoon.

When I arrived there, my mother was speaking to some prospective buyers, so I wandered around waiting for her to finish. Moving through my own pieces, I noticed that my self-portrait was missing. Just then I heard her say, "Well, good afternoon, Elora. I expected you much sooner."

"I'm sorry, Mother. I had a late night."

"Well, that must mean things went well with Virginia."

I shrugged. "I'm not sure. Everything was fine until we went back to my place. Then it just sort

of fizzled. We'll see. Where is my portrait?"

"Oh, I loaned it to a potential buyer. They are interested in your work but wanted to see it with their other décor before buying, and they thought that piece most closely resembled the size and style they wanted."

I nodded, not giving it another thought. "So, where was this gentleman you wanted me to meet? Did I miss him?"

"No. He'll be here this afternoon to finalize the purchase."

"Which one did he buy?"

"Your whole collection of boats."

"He bought seven of my drawings?"

My mother nodded. "That means you will have to get busy on producing some pieces. Your section is starting to look awfully bare, which is never a bad thing, but I always like to keep you in stock as much as I can."

"I have some things I can bring from downstairs. If nothing else they can hang here to take up some space."

"All right. I'll come up a little later to help you decide."

"Perhaps my time would be better spent upstairs drawing, and you can just call me when he gets here. How does that sound?"

"Sounds good. See you in a bit," she replied. The rest of the day was spent drawing and then meeting the man who had bought many of my pictures.

On Monday I returned to work. My father was already there reviewing some ad campaigns we had done previously. He smiled when he saw me. "Elora, how are you? How was your weekend?"

"Fine. Busy with drawing."

"I heard your mother sold a lot of your sketches this weekend. Congratulations."

"Thanks. He was one of those high-society types from Washington, D.C. Maybe he'll motivate his acquaintances to see some of my things."

"That would be ideal. You know your mother was thinking about opening a second gallery down there. This might be just the push she needs."

"We'll see."

"How did your date go? Your mother told me you seemed a little disenchanted on Saturday."

I shrugged. "It did not go as I expected, and that is for the better and the worse. Mother met her. Did she tell you that?"

"Yes, she said she stumbled upon the two of you at dinner. Your mother thought she was not exactly your type but had nothing negative to say. She said Virginia seemed nice, distant but nice. What went wrong?"

"I misjudged her I suppose."

"How?"

"I assumed I could conquer her the way I had other women," plainly I answered. I always told my father the absolute truth, even in matters of my affairs, so I saw no reason not to do so with Virginia.

He nodded. "I see. She was not as pliant and willing as some other dates you've had?"

"No. Everything went well until we got back to my place. As soon as I made a move to touch her, she stopped reacting positively to me. I don't know if it was nerves on her part or real disinterest. I thought we had more chemistry, but I guess I could be wrong. I don't think I will know for sure until I see her this afternoon at the library. She seems skittish when it comes to me. We'll see. I would hate to think I have ruined an emerging friendship."

"Maybe you haven't. Although maybe that is all she wants from you. Would you be able to handle that?"

"I don't know, Dad," I confessed. "Have you ever compelled to with someone for reasons you can't even express? There is just a need to be close?"

"Of course. I feel that with your mother, and I feel that with certain friends I've had over the years. Some people just have that bond regardless of the type of relationship."

"That's how I feel about Virginia, Dad. Although I admit I lean in the romantic direction."

"Then you mustn't give up if you feel that strongly. Come now. We have work to do here. Try not to think about her until you see her this afternoon."

Trying to take his advice, I started on my work. However, you were not far from my thoughts. I kept seeing your eyes in my mind, the sight of your long dark hair free from its confinement. You were beautiful to me, Virginia, and I could not stop thinking about you. I stayed at my office until lunch before heading to the library.

As I got to our usual spot, I saw you there, deep in thought. I did not wish to disturb you with my presence, knowing that you were already behind on my account. Instead I took the seat I had taken before I introduced myself, far enough to not be a distraction but with a perfect view of you.

I don't know if you even realized my presence, because you never even looked in my direction. Both of us worked on our respective projects for hours. I was busy looking out the window and sketching the view when I felt a presence at my shoulder. Looking up I was surprised to see you there.

"Virginia, hello," I greeted with a smile.

"Are you avoiding me, Duke? You did not even bother to address me when you came in."

"I did not wish to bother you. I know you are busy. Since you are taking a break though, please sit," I suggested gesturing to the chair next to me.

You took it. You looked out the window for a minute. "Now I understand why you always sit here. This view is spectacular."

"Yes, it is."

"What are you sketching today?" you asked looking at my book.

"Someone came into the gallery and bought a third of my collection. I'm under strict orders from my mother to get some more work in the gallery as soon as possible," I teased lightly.

"That is wonderful. I'm happy for you."

"Thank you. How was your weekend? Did you get a lot of work complete?"

"Actually yes. I am back on track for the most part. Of course I really need to finish this before my sabbatical is over. With Thanksgiving coming up next week and then the holiday season, I do not have that much more time before I have to return home."

I looked at her quizzically. "Home? I thought you lived on campus?"

"Oh, that is only for my sabbatical. A friend who is a professor at the local university is letting me stay at her house while she is away teaching at another school. I teach at American University. I will be going back shortly before Christmas."

"Oh, I guess I didn't realize that. For some reason I thought you taught here," I mentioned, suddenly saddened at the thought of the woman I was interested in being forty-five minutes away. Suddenly the month we had left to share with each other seemed so short. Trying to downplay what I was feeling, I gave you a smile. "Well, we must make the most of your time left here then. Had I known that I would shown you some of the historic spots, but it isn't too late for

that. Perhaps I could take you on a boat ride in the bay. You must spend some time on the water, and my parents are going to have to pull their boat out soon. What do you think?"

"I would like that, Duke."

"Great. Sometime this week? We could go in the afternoon and have dinner out there. What do you say?"

"I think I can fit that into my schedule if I'm diligent with my writing the rest of the time. Are you able to get away from work though?"

"I'll make time. Friday is probably best if that is all right with you."

"That is fine."

"Wonderful. I look forward to it."

"So do I, Duke. In the meantime do you have time for coffee this afternoon?"

I looked at my watch. It was getting late. "I have an even better idea. What about dinner at my favorite Irish pub later?"

You shook your head. "I really should not if we are going out on the boat on Friday."

"Right, very true. I only have about half an hour before I have to get back to work, so coffee will have to be brief."

"I do not mean to rush you. If you cannot go, we can do it tomorrow," you mentioned.

I smiled. You seemed a little friendlier with me that day than you had when I had left you on Friday night. "Tomorrow then. For now sit with me and enjoy this view." You turned to look out the window. I moved my chair a little closer to you without a protest. Putting my arm around the back of your chair but making sure not to touch you, we both gazed at the view and chatted about the beauty of the world from the window.

The rest of the week followed in similar fashion. We did not speak much at the library, knowing that each of us had work we had to accomplish. However, we took a little time for coffee twice. Early Friday evening I met you at the library for our water excursion. I had dressed casually in a pair of jeans, a heavy navy sweater, and brown hiking boots. On my head I wore my favorite navy and green baseball cap. You were wearing one of your usual vintage-style dresses with a long overcoat and a hat of your own.

You smiled when you saw me enter the building. Immediately I returned that grin as I reached for your bag, which you had already packed in anticipation of my arrival. Looking at your outfit, I questioned, "Do you think you will be warm enough in that?"

You shrugged. "I hope so. I do not have anything else warmer."

"Not to worry. If you get really cold, I have an extra sweater in the car we can bring with us. Come on now. This is going to be so much fun," I said extending my arm to you. You took it much to my pleasure.

Walking you out to my car, I opened your door as usual. Stowing your bag in the back with the food for our voyage, I got into my seat. It didn't take us long to get down to the water. I grabbed the bags of groceries out of the back as you let yourself out of the car for once.

"Do you need help with anything?" you asked from behind me.

I looked over my shoulder to answer but realized you were only standing mere inches from my body. I felt a contact on the hip of my jeans. Covertly I glanced down to see your petite hand resting there. It was the first time you had ever touched me on your own accord in a provocative manner. I tried desperately not to read too much into the small action as I answered, "I have it but thank you anyway." After gathering everything, I mentioned, "The boat is this way."

We strolled down the dock to my parents' large sailboat quietly. Reaching it I climbed aboard first and put down our belongings before turning to help you climb onto the boat. Then I unlocked the cabin and proceeded to place our bags inside while you simply hovered around outside.

"This is quite a sailboat."

"My parents have had this a long time. Just let me do some preliminary checks to make sure everything is okay before we head out on our expedition. I would not want anything to happen and get stuck out here."

"I understand."

"Just make yourself comfortable."

"I'll start unpacking our food if that is all right."

"Certainly. Go ahead."

I moved to the helm while you went into the cabin. I tested the motor just to make sure we had an alternative mode of transportation should the wind fail us. When it roared to life, I was confident we would not be stuck on the water. I untied the boat from its slip and gave it a gentle nudge to help us in the right direction before jumping aboard again and quickly starting on the sail. You came back onto the deck minutes later and took a seat next to me. We were silent.

After a little while I turned toward you and inquired, "Would you like to learn how to sail?"

"Would you teach me?"

"I would be thrilled to teach you. Here. Give me your hand," I instructed taking you by the forearm. I placed your hand on the rutter next to mine. After just a moment, I took my hand away, so you were steering alone. "You are doing it," I mentioned.

You smiled. "This isn't too hard."

"Not at all. You just have to mind the sail. If it starts to come around, you have to remember to duck is all," I stated with a smile. You nodded. "Do you feel comfortable enough to be left alone while I work on dinner? I'll leave the cabin door open in case you need to yell for me."

"All right," you replied a little unsure it seemed.

"You'll be fine. Just keep us going up the right side of the bay and be mindful of other boats."

Going into the cabin, I quickly began the task of making us dinner. I wanted to make something intimate for us but had limited abilities on the boat. To that end I went ahead and bought most of our food pre-made. Thankfully when I pulled it out, it was still lukewarm. Serving two plates of the baked chicken, green beans, and rosemary baby potatoes, I slipped them into the small oven. Then I turned my attention to the wine I had selected for the night. Opening the bottle I grabbed two glasses and made my way back to where you were sitting.

I smiled and joked, "You're still here. That's a good sign. How about a glass of wine?"

"Sounds wonderful. Thank you."

I poured two glasses and handed one to you before taking a seat on the other side of the rutter. I placed my hand on top of yours. "Your hands are cold. Would you like a pair of gloves?"

"I have a pair of my own. I was too afraid to let go to put them on while you were gone," you admitted with a slight blush before digging into your coat pocket. "Aren't you cold? You don't even have on a jacket."

I shook my head. "This sweater is really warm, and I actually put thermal spandex on under my jeans, because I knew it would get cold out here. I'm quite warm."

You touched me on the arm and lightly caressed my sweater for a moment. It took all my energy to remember to breath. "I like the texture of this sweater. The whole outfit suits your personality."

"Thank you I suppose. I like that hat you're wearing," I mentioned.

"Oh, this thing? I have had this for years. It just happens to be my favorite."

Half an hour later we were at the destination I had in mind, so I dropped the sail. Quickly our boat stopped its movement in the water and simply floated on the tide. I dropped the anchor as a

precaution, so we wouldn't beach the boat on accident. The sun was just setting, so we sat together quietly and watched it descend in the west as we sipped our wine. Once it was gone and twilight had grown to dark, we moved into the cabin for our meal. You took a seat at the cozy table after removing your hat while I pulled out our plates and set them down.

"Wow. This looks fabulous, Duke. Did you make this yourself?"

"Unfortunately not. I wanted to make something but didn't have the time or resources on the boat to make something this lavish, so I had to buy it. However, it is from one of my favorite little gourmet shops. I hope you enjoy it."

"I know I will. It smells delicious," you answered waiting on me to sit with you before beginning.

I took my cap off before raising my glass. "Bon appetite," I stated with a smile into your blue eyes.

I watched you take your first bite. "Oh, this is wonderful," you applauded. "You will have to tell me where this place is."

"Even better I will take you there some night," I said before changing the subject. "Do you have any Thanksgiving plans?"

You nodded. "I am going to visit my family."

"Where are they?"

"In Pennsylvania. My brother is driving down to get me on Monday, and we will go back to my parents' house. I will be back the following Monday. What are you doing?"

"This year it will just be my parents and me. We usually get together with other family, but everyone has decided to do their own thing, which is fine. My dad and I will probably just watch football all day. It will be a nice change of pace for us all. The Washington Redskins are taking on the Dallas Cowboys, which is always a big game. We would go, but my mother didn't want to this year, so we'll watch it at home. Do you have a lot of siblings?"

"Just a brother and a sister. Both of them are married with children. I am the youngest. Do you have any siblings?"

"No. I am an only child."

"Could I ask you a personal question?" you inquired hesitantly.

"Of course. What do you want to know?"

"How do your parents feel about you being interested in women?"

"They are fine with it. There has never been a problem, at least of what I am aware. To me they have always been supportive. I never felt apprehension in telling them like some people do. Maybe it is the fact that I am their only child, and we have always been so close. What about your family? How do they feel about you?" You shifted nervously and dropped our gaze. It was obvious by your quick withdrawal from our conversation that I had asked an inappropriate question. "I'm sorry, Virginia. We do not have to discuss this if you are uncomfortable."

You nodded and took a sip of your wine. Still you said nothing for a moment. Finally you whispered, "They do not know. No one knows."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that no one knows, Duke. My whole life I have hidden the fact."

"Why?"

"It was necessary growing up, and then when I was an adult I did not know how to express myself that way. I figured I would simply be alone forever or eventually marry a man for the companionship. Then you came along and saw right through me in just one glance. It frightened me."

"I am terribly sorry. That was not the reaction I was hoping for, Virginia."

"I know, but I was scared by you but intrigued at the same time. You just exude this confidence I always found admirable in people."

"You can have it too, Virginia."

You shook your head. "It is too late for me."

"It is never too late. You just have to learn how to trust people, Virginia. Surely you have friends in which you confide. Do you really think they would turn away from you? You live in the D.C. area, a city with a large gay influence. The culture is there if you want to learn it."

"I am learning a lot from you already," you stated with a small smile.

"Well, I am here for you. You can talk to me about this any time you feel the need. We are friends."

You nodded. "Yes, we are friends, and I appreciate your friendship more than you know."

After dinner I cleaned up our dishes while you just sat and talked to me. Then we moved back to the deck for stargazing. We sat closely together looking for constellations, but I could tell you were shivering. Knowing there was a blanket on board, I excused myself, returning with it moments later. I handed it to you.

"Thank you, Duke. You are always so thoughtful," you mentioned unfolding it.

"It would be best if we sat on the floor of the boat out of the wind," I suggested. I took a seat and leaned back against one of the cushions. That left little room for you, but I patted the space between my open legs. I saw you hesitate but then sit where I had indicated. I wrapped my arms around you and pulled you back against me. Your body was tense, but you did not pull away from me. Instead you covered the both of us with the blanket. Remembering what I had learned over dinner, I knew I would have to tread carefully as to not panic you, so I decided to go against my own instincts and just hold you closely. I had no idea how much time passed nor did I care. I felt blissful holding you in my arms. After awhile you seemed to relax into my embrace, and your head found perch in the crook of my neck.

Since you hadn't bothered to put on your hat again after dinner, I felt your soft waves of hair against my skin. Instinctively I let it down for you, but this time you didn't protest as I began to play with it idly. Instead I was surprised when I saw your left arm reach and wrap around my neck. I didn't complain just enjoyed as your long fingers tentatively explored my light chin-length tresses. I was pleased you were beginning to trust me by being so open.

The night continued with a quiet tone. Neither of us spoke much, but our bodies said more than words could. Your form went from rigid to yielding in the course of the hours in my arms. In turn I made sure not to make any inappropriate actions and take things too far for you, so nothing else occurred except the intimate cuddling. However, the fact that I was able to touch you, caress you without the fear of rejection made my heart flutter with hope and joy at the turn of events.

Sometime after midnight I realized I was beginning to doze. As much as I was enjoying the night, it was getting late. Wondering if you were getting tired as well, I whispered your name. There was no response though, making me realize you were already asleep. Briefly I pondered the best course of action. Figuring it would not be a problem to just stay where we were, I reached behind me to one of the seats and grabbed the extra coat and sweater I had left there. Gently I maneuvered both of us into a lying position against the floor of the deck and then placed my jacket under your head as a pillow. I used my spare sweater to do the same for myself. Our bodies were generating a comfortable heat between us, so after snuggling against you, I merely closed my eyes and drifted to sleep holding you.

Sometime later I awoke to the sound of my name. Opening my eyes I realized that you were now awake and staring at me contemplatively. I checked my watch. It read after one in the morning. Looking at you I mentioned, "It's late."

You nodded in response. "You were shivering. It is cold out here. We should get back to shore."

"I suppose we should. Why don't you go down into the cabin where it is a bit warmer, and I'll take us back to the marina?" I suggested.

"Are you sure you are all right to drive the boat? I can stay up here and keep you company."

"Only if you want but I will be fine."

"Then I will stay. Just let me get my coat."

You went into the cabin, and I slipped on my extra sweater and jacket before starting the engine. I wanted us to get back to the dock and out of the winter night air as quickly as possible. Moments later you returned and took a seat next to me, wrapping the blanket around the both of us. I gave you a smile and then proceeded to steer the sailboat back to the marina.

Once we got there and had tied the boat, I picked up all our belongings and locked the cabin. Together we walked quietly back to the car. I could tell you were tired. I opened the passenger door for you and made sure you were in your seat comfortably before moving to my own side. Quickly and quietly we made our way back to your small faculty house. You stifled a yawn as I walked you to the door.

"Thank you for this lovely evening, Duke. I had a wonderful time," you said wrapping your arms around yourself to stay warm.

"You are most welcome. I suppose I won't see you again until after you get back from your Thanksgiving holiday. I hope you have a good time with your family."

"Likewise for you. I will see you a week from Monday in the library?"

"I'll be there," I answered with a smile. "Shall we go for coffee and catch up on the events of the holiday?"

"That sounds good. I look forward to it."

"So do I. Travel safely." I stood there a moment longer wishing I could do more than just bid you farewell, but I didn't make any move toward you. I wasn't sure the gesture would be accepted, even after what had occurred earlier that night. Resigned that this good bye would be like the others, I simply smiled one more time. "Good night, Virginia," I finally said.

"Good night, Duke," you replied as I slowly began to walk back toward my car. I waited until you were safely inside before starting my BMW and driving back to my own condo.

For the next ten days my thoughts were constantly with you. I wondered what you were doing with your family and the possibilities of you revealing your secret to them. I pondered why you felt unable to express your true self to those who should have known you the best, because I didn't have the same problem to face.

On the Monday after the holiday, I was anxious to get to the library early. My father knew of my purpose and graciously allowed me the time to pursue my other desires by letting me spend the day at the library in hopes of spending more time with you. I was well-aware of the limited timeframe we had before you returned to American University, and I wanted to take advantage of all the time I could.

Arriving in the late morning, I took my usual seat near the window. I began drawing the landscape idly as I had done many times before as I waited for you. The hours passed without your arrival, making me wonder if you had returned safely. We had a coffee engagement, which I had hoped to keep. Of course the longer I lingered around the library, the more concerned I became, wondering if I was the reason you stayed away from the building that served as your muse. We had gotten more personal in our physicality and conversation, and the last time that happened you got distressed over my behavior. I hoped that was not the case with our boat trip. However, as the morning turned to afternoon without sign of you, I came to that conclusion. Determined to take matters into my control though, I decided to drive by your home in search of you.

When I arrived I gave a strong knock on the door. I didn't hear movement from within however. Giving it a few minutes and several knocks, I figured you had not returned as planned. Disappointed with that fact, I headed back to the office, knowing I had a large project on which to work.

Upon entering the office, my father stopped me in the hallway. "I thought you were taking the day off to be with Virginia," he mentioned.

"I thought so as well, but I just went by her house, and she wasn't there. I assume she hasn't returned from her trip yet. We were supposed to have coffee at some point today."

He nodded. "Well, I'm glad you are here. We have a lot to work on right now."

"I know. I have been thinking about our newest campaign. I have some ideas for you."

"Wonderful. Let's see them." With his encouragement I focused solely on work the rest of the day, brainstorming on new ad campaigns before heading to the art gallery to check on my mother.

She was surprised but pleased to see me. "I thought you were off courting your new love interest, Elora," she stated with a smile as she kissed my cheek.

"I thought so as well. Virginia is either not back in town yet or avoiding me again. Which I am not sure," I complained.

"Why would she be avoiding you, dear?"

I shrugged. "The night we went out on the boat things went well, maybe too well for her. She still has some issues concerning me, and I am not sure she is ready to face them. Nevertheless, I do not like the evasion tactic. As much as I find her interesting, she can be quite a nuisance as well. I am not sure this relationship has potential if this behavior persists."

"Don't give up on her yet, Elora. As you said, she has some issues, but if things are truly meant to be, they will work out to your advantage. I feel certain of that fact."

"We will see I guess. Right now I do not know my next course of action. I have no way to contact her, so I suppose it is best to wait until she calls me. It is either that or lurk around the library until she appears again."

"If she is avoiding you, then she won't call. Probably loitering is your best chance."

"True but at the expense of business. I cannot afford to spend all my time for the next month waiting for her to show at the library. I don't know what to do, Mother. I am interested, and I feel fairly certain that it is returned on some level, but I do not know whether or not waiting for her to come to terms with the situation is the best resolution. I am beginning to think I should just stop the pursuit, but at the same time I know that is not possible for me."

She gave me a hug and sighed. "Elora, is it possible that you are falling in love with this woman? Is that why you think it is so difficult to let go of the prospect of her?"

"Love? I never said anything about love," I quipped. "Where did you get that notion, Mother?"

She smiled at me. "Elora, don't pretend you don't recognize the signs. You've been enamored with the woman for some time. Now that she seems to be giving you the brush off you still want to pursue her. What other reason could there be?"

I shrugged. "It is difficult to love someone who is always so distant. I should just forget all about it. I am obviously wasting my time."

"Do what you want then, Elora. I still think you shouldn't give up on her just yet. She is interested in you."

Looking at her seriously a moment, I questioned, "How would you know that? You only met her that one time."

"Intuition, Elora. Don't give up on her yet."

Once again I shrugged. "We'll see I suppose."

Several days later I was down by the marina taking a walk and enjoying the view of the water when I happened upon you. You were sitting there on the pier in silence, your coat wrapped tightly around you and your hat sitting low over your face. I was surprised at first, because I had never known you to come down to the water. Nevertheless I decided to take a chance at speaking to you, even though you had been avoiding me the entire week. Walking up behind you quietly, I stopped just a few feet from where you were. You didn't seem to notice my presence.

Not knowing the best way to greet you, I simply asked, "Is this seat taken?" You turned and met my eyes with your blue one. They held a sadness I had never seen in your countenance before. Not waiting for you to answer, my concern led me into action. I sat next to you and inquired, "Virginia, what is it?"

"Hello, Duke," you stated flatly.

"Did you just get back in town?"

"No. I've been back since Monday."

I was taken back by the admission, being that it was now Friday, and you had not tried to contact me. Stoically I mumbled, "I see."

You let your gaze return to the water. Trying to divert the conversation, you inquired, "How was your holiday?"

"It was fine. What about yours?"

"The usual noisiness that it always is. I was ready to leave."

I nodded. "Virginia, why did you stand me up on Monday? Why haven't you contacted me this week?"

You didn't answer me at first. Instead I saw tears form in your eyes and slide down your fair cheeks. Unable to control my instincts, I reached out to your face, cupping it in my hand and gently wiping at the stream flowing over your features. You shivered when I touched you but didn't pull away from me at first. However after a few moments you leaned away from my caress.

Clearing your throat a little, you announced, "Duke, I have made an important decision. I think it would be best for me if you and I no longer saw each other."

"Excuse me? What do you mean? Why?"

"From the moment you entered my life, Duke, you have made it into something it has never been."

"Isn't that a good thing?"

"Not always. I was content with the way things were before you, and I would like to return to that. To do so means being without your company."

"You cannot be serious, Virginia. After all the progress you have made, why revert back now? Does this have to do with your family?"

You shook your head. "Duke, I have said all I wish to say on the matter. Now please go," you whispered as you dropped your head.

I saw a tear fall from the tip of your nose onto your overcoat. I couldn't believe you had just

dismissed me from your life without even a justified explanation. Furthermore the tears were proof that you were struggling with your choice as much as I was. For a moment I debated the right course of action. I wanted to stay and comfort you, but I wasn't sure my condolences would be accepted. It was obvious something had happened to make you come to this decision about our friendship, but I had no idea what it could have been. After a moment of silence, I realized that I couldn't simply walk away as you had asked. Instead I tried to comfort you by bringing an arm around your shoulders. Your crying began to grow in intensity, and you pushed me off of you.

"Please do not touch me, Duke."

I placed my hands in my lap. Knowing I had no option other than to do as you requested, I took a deep breath to gather my strength. "Virginia, I do not want to leave you, but I will respect your wishes. I hope that you come to realize I have wished you no harm, only happiness. Furthermore, I desired to be a part of that joy. Maybe someday we will meet again. However, until then I will always think fondly of you." I stood up from the pier and looked down at you. You didn't even try to meet my gaze. "Good bye, Ms. Wolf."

Without another word between us, I turned and walked away from you. Pain emanated from my heart and began to spread rapidly through my form with each step taken. I didn't want to do what you had demanded of me. Nonetheless my heavy footsteps continued to carry me farther from you, and I started to cry as well.

Two weeks passed without seeing you. I avoided the library, knowing that was your only solace. I wanted you to know that I was respecting your boundaries, but it was difficult for me to keep my exile. During that time I only went to work and the art gallery and spent as much time as I could looking for inspiration in other places than the usual. My drawing didn't suffer as much as my heart did. I found plenty to draw, although not from the world around me. I took to more abstract expressions of my emotions through sketches.

On Saturday morning the week before Christmas, I was in the gallery with my mother attending to potential buyers during the busy shopping season. Business was thriving that day. As I stood behind my makeshift desk completing a sale, she approached me.

"Elora, I need you to do something for me."

"Sure. What is it?"

"I need for you to make some deliveries for me. The other driver is overbooked as it is, and with less than a week for the big day, I could use an extra driver. Would you mind doing a few of them?"

"Are you sure you will be all right here alone?"

"Your father is on his way over to assist me. I will be fine until he gets here."

"Okay. If that is what you need."

She smiled at me. "You always have been the most wonderful daughter in the world. Here is the list. The art has already been loaded into the van. There is one return as the last stop. They are just returning a piece that was on loan. All the information is there on the schedule. You are a darling."

"Not a problem, Mother. I'll be back after I finish this."

Heading outside to the gallery-owned mini-van, I pulled on my winter jacket. Snow dusted the ground and flurries twirled in the light winter wind. It was unusually cold for that time of year. The sounds and colors of the season were everywhere in the downtown area where the gallery resided. I tried my best to get into the spirit as well, but I felt an emptiness since you had left my life. Knowing I had to represent my mother's company at every stop, I pushed my own feelings of regret far from my mind as my heart would allow and went to deliver the gifts people had bought from the gallery. Since I knew the area well having lived there most of my life, it was mindless work commuting to the various locations.

Within a few hours I was finished with my second to last stop. Getting back into the van, I picked up the clipboard that held the schedule of deliveries. Turning to the last page, I read the name and address of the person from whom I was picking up a piece. As soon as my eyes saw the name written there, my heart started to beat faster. I had no idea you had borrowed any artwork from the gallery. My mother never told me. I swallowed hard, knowing this last stop was going to be a difficult one, but I was determined to be a professional for my mother's sake. I drove over to the school and parked in front of your house. For a moment I just sat there fortifying my valor. I knew I had no choice but to do this. Going to the door, I gave a strong knock. Within a minute the door opened, and you were standing there in front of me.

Your surprise was obvious. "Duke, what are you doing here?"

"I have come to pick up a piece you had borrowed from the gallery," I answered formally.

"Of course. Please come in," you responded.

I stepped into the modest house you had been using on sabbatical, well aware of the fact that in all the time we had spent together this was the first time I had ever stepped foot into your dwelling. I stood in the small foyer while you went to retrieve the art. I noticed the bags sitting in the hallway. It appeared as if you were leaving. I remembered you had told me you would be going back to American University shortly before Christmas, so I assumed it would be that day, by the packed state of the house.

When you returned you extended the piece to me with the back of the frame facing me. As was usual practice, I began to inspect the piece for damage. As I turned it around to look at the actual art, my eyes widened in revelation. I looked at you quizzically. "You borrowed my self-portrait? You've had this hanging in your house for almost two months?" The implications of such a disclosure left my mind in a flurry of confusion.

"Yes, I borrowed it. At one point I was considering buying one of your pieces, but I think it is best not to do so at this time," you replied seriously.

"Of all my pieces, why this one? Why a picture of me?" You didn't respond, but I saw the answer in your eyes. It was the answer you had been afraid to voice since we first met. "You are interested in me as more than a friend, Virginia. Why didn't you tell me? Why did you go out of your way to make me feel isolated in my feelings for you?"

"Duke, this may be hard for you to accept, but I do not have feelings for you," you declared.

Hearing you deny the obvious set my temper a flame. "Liar! You have been lying to me this whole time! You have been lying to yourself! How could you do that to me knowing how I feel about you?"

Instead of answering my question, you simply said, "I think it would be better if you left, Duke."

"Yes, I think it would be better!" I yelled. I threw the drawing against the floor in anger. The glass cracked against the force. "You can keep the damn sketch! I don't want it any more! Maybe someday you will realize what you lost, Virginia!" Turning on my heels, I stormed away in a huff. I got half way down the walk before deciding to go back to the door. I pounded on it in fury. You answered as if you had still been standing there in the entryway. "One more thing, Ms. Wolf," I growled before pausing.

"What?" you snapped, obviously your anger starting to show.

Before I could change my mind, I grabbed you by the arms and yanked you toward me. Crushing my mouth against yours, I delved passed your soft lips, invading your mouth possessively as my hands slid from your arms around your back to bring you as close as possible. I felt your hands immediately at my shoulders, gripping my coat tightly. I couldn't stop myself for a moment as one hand found the nape of your neck and ran through your hair as the other pressed into your lower back, forcing your hips against my own. I groaned wantonly when I heard a tiny whimper escape you. When I could go without air no longer, I pushed you off as powerfully as I had brought you to me. Our gaze met. You were panting for oxygen, and your eyes held mix of emotions I had never seen grace your face.

I took a cleansing breath, my need to kiss you having finally been abated. The idea of turning away saddened me, but I knew you were about to leave for Washington, D.C., and I would not see you again. Looking into your blue eyes, the eyes I had come to adore, I whispered, "Good bye, Virginia." With that I descended down the snow-covered sidewalk to the van. I didn't bother to look back, knowing it would be too difficult to see you there after what I had just done. Tears rolled freely down my face as I drove back to the gallery. Nevertheless when I arrived, I tried to appear as if nothing was bothering me.

However, when my mother saw me empty-handed she stated, "I take it you saw Virginia."

"Yes," I whispered as tears came to the corners of my eyes at the mention of your name.

"It'll be all right, darling."

I shook my head. "Mother, why does it hurt so much?" rhetorically I inquired clutching my chest through my coat.

"Because you love her."

"Why didn't you tell me she had my drawing?"

"I thought you knew. Did you get it back?"

"I gave it to her. I do not want it now. It would only remind me of her."

"I understand."

"She is leaving for D.C. today. I'll never see her again."

"It doesn't have to be that way. D.C. isn't that far, Elora. It isn't like you don't know how to find her. Give it some time. Wait a couple of months and then go see her. Her attitude toward you might change given some time."

Spring found many changes in my life. Both of my parents felt it a wise professional decision to open offices in their respective careers in Washington, D.C. With that assessment came the fun but arduous task of finding a suitable building in which to house both establishments.

Fortunately for me, we all agreed on a building in the hub of the gay mecca, DuPont Circle. In the interest of keeping both businesses family-oriented, they asked if I would oversee them, to which I accepted, happy for the change of pace. Additionally to compensate for the additional expenses of the building, we all decided to sublet the top floor of our building to artists in search of studio space while I lived on the second and kept up the businesses on the first floor. Given the expansion of the businesses, a handful of people were hired to assist me, leaving me plenty of time to work on my own art.

However in all the transformations, one thing remained constant. The aching of my heart at your absence was as strong as the snowy day I had left you standing in the doorway of the faculty house. Now living in the same city as you, not too far from where you taught, you regularly were a visitor in my thoughts.

One day when I looked out the window of the gallery, I thought of you. The sun was bright in the sky, and the streets were bustling with noise. Around me my employees diligently worked, but I stood still, taking the time to admire the life going on around me and wondering if you had ever found any in your existence. As I stood there, my thoughts began to get the better of me, and I began devising a plan in which to see for myself if you had grown since our parting. Your school wasn't too far from where I was. Knowing my curiosity wouldn't wane until I saw for myself, I decided to visit the campus of my alma mater and your place of work that afternoon.

When I arrived at American University, I strolled through the buildings reflectively remembering my undergraduate days there. I had never told you about my own experiences there, always hoping there would be time to converse about my past over coffee at some point, which never happened. Knowing my way around well, even for not having been there in years, I managed to find the building where you had your office fairly easily.

Gathering my courage I entered intent on finding your whereabouts that afternoon. Wandering the corridors until I came to who looked like the department administrative assistant, I gave a friendly smile. "Excuse me. Could you tell me where to find Professor Wolf's office?"

"Certainly. It's around the corner, last door on the left."

"Thank you."

"However, she isn't there now. Right now she's in a class."

"Oh, of course. Do you happen to know where?"

"If you are coming in the main door of the building, it is the first door on the right."

I nodded. "Thank you. You have been most helpful." Going in the direction I had been pointed, I pondered the best way to make my presence known to you. I didn't wish to disturb your class. Heading outside I noticed there were windows into the classroom where you were supposed to be giving lecture. I peeked into one, and my heart seized at the sight of you at the front of the room.

You were leaning casually against a desk and wearing clothes I didn't recognize. A pair of jeans ornamented your trim legs, and sandals adorned your feet. You wore a light cotton blouse with long sleeves to round out the outfit. The only reason I even recognized you was that your long flowing hair was up in the bun I had come to expect. I stood there in the window for long minutes, unable to move at the sight of you. I was paralyzed by your transformed beauty. Suddenly I saw your bright blue eyes meet mine. Seeing your mouth stop in what appeared to be mid-sentence, I realized you saw me there. It took you a minute before you looked away to focus on your class again.

Knowing that you knew I was there, I continued to stand in the window looking on until class adjourned. At that point I wondered if I should come in to see you or if you would make your way outside to me. It was only a moment before you came through the door, speaking with a student as you did so. However, when you came within a few feet of me, you slowed your pace.

"Duke, what a surprise. What are you doing here?"

"I was just reminiscing about my old college days here and decided to stop in on you."

"You went to American? I did not realize that."

"I never told you. How are you?"

"I am fine. How are you?" formally you inquired.

"Busy actually. My parents opened offices here in D.C. and have asked me to oversee them. I live in DuPont now and run the second gallery and ad firm. Of course I have a few employees as well."

"Doesn't leave much time for drawing, does it?" you questioned.

I shrugged. "You have to make time for the things that you love, Virginia," I replied. Looking over your clothes, I mentioned, "I was not aware this was a look for you. I hardly knew it was you at first."

You nodded but didn't answer me as a voice called out, "Dr. Wolf."

Both of us turned toward the sound. I saw a gentleman with mussed dark hair and tweed jacket making his way toward us. He curved an arm around you when he reached us and unceremoniously dropped a kiss against your temple. I noticed that you didn't flinch at his touch.

"Dr. Katzen," you stated with a smile at him. "I would like you to meet Elora Duke. Duke, this is Dr. Leonard Katzen."

"Hi. Nice to meet you," he greeted extending his hand. I shook it. "And just how do you know the lovely Dr. Wolf?" he asked as his arm pulled you closer to his body.

Ignoring the jealousy that was gnawing in my stomach, I responded, "We met last fall while Virginia was on sabbatical."

He nodded thoughtfully. "You seem very familiar to me. Have we met before?"

"No. I don't think we have. I went to school here years ago."

"That isn't it," he answered. However then he turned to you. "I know. That drawing in your bedroom, Virginia, is of this woman, is it not?"

I saw you blush slightly but nod. The thought of him in your intimate space infuriated me, but at the same time I was intrigued by the knowledge that my picture was there as well. "It is, Leonard. Duke is the subject but also the artist."

"Well done. That is a true masterpiece. The first time I saw it I was spellbound," he said. Looking back at you he added, "I did not mean to interrupt. I was just wondering if we were still on for dinner this evening."

"Yes, we are."

"Wonderful. I will pick you up at six then," he informed you leaning in again for another kiss, this time to your cheek. "Have a pleasant rest of the day. Nice meeting you."

"You too," I mumbled before he left us alone. I looked down at you. I wasn't sure what to say at the display of affection I had just witnessed. Deciding not to address it for fear my feelings would be revealed through the tone of my voice, I said, "So, about these clothes. Tell me. Why the change?"

"It was time. I needed renovation in my life."

"What was the motivation behind such drastic measures?"

You shrugged as a lovely blush rose in your cheeks. It reminded me of the night I first took you to dinner when you consumed all that red wine. "I was finally touched by love," you admitted. "It had such a profound effect on me, Duke. I never realized the gamut of emotions that came with such a revelation. Suddenly I had a need to take on new adventures."

Seeing the glow of your blue eyes, I assumed you were speaking of Leonard. The way you responded to his intimacy was what I had always wanted from you. It hurt to realize I was truly unable to awaken your soul and that it took the attentions of an older man to do so. Nevertheless I put on a brave front, not wanting you to know the suffering of my heart at your declaration.

"Well, I am truly happy for you then, Virginia. You always wanted to be consumed by the fire of ardor. It seems to me by the flush of your face that you have succeeded."

"And what about you, Duke? Have you been touched in such a way?"

"Unfortunately not. Maybe there will be a time when I feel it again, but for now I remain as I have been, waiting for that woman to come into my life."

For just a second I saw a dimness hit your eyes, making me wonder why the sadness all of a sudden. It was only a flash though before you mentioned, "I am sure you would not have time to even entertain such a prospect if one came along right now. You are certainly too busy with your multiple careers."

"As I said, I make time for those things that I love or in this case those people. If she entered my life, I would definitely take the time to explore the possibilities."

You nodded. "Yes, that does seem like you." I saw you check your watch. "It is starting to get late. I really should be going. I have my dinner engagement soon."

I gave a nod in understanding. You wanted to be with your precious Leonard instead of me. Remaining as strong as I could, I answered, "Then you must go. You cannot keep Leonard waiting."

"Thank you for the honor of your visit, Duke. It was an unexpected pleasure."

"It was good to see you, Virginia. If you are still considering buying one of my pieces, you should drop by the gallery sometime. I have a large exhibit at the moment."

"I shall do that."

I gave the best smile I could under the circumstances. "Well, good bye, Virginia."

"Good bye, Duke. Take care of yourself."

"You do the same," I replied before turning my back to you and casually strolling back through campus. Even though I didn't turn around, somehow I sensed that you were watching my retreating form as it began to blend with the horizon. My parting seemed very much like the first time I left you that winter day. My heart protested the distance as it grew between us. The realization that you had found an equal partner in your interests that was not me was difficult for me to ingest, but I maintained my composure until I returned to my own dwelling.

It was there that I lamented as I had continually been grieving for your loss. However, that day was unusual in as much as I finally comprehended that we would never have the stolen moments we shared during the fall. What had been between us was now over and forever placed on the shelf of your mind to collect dust and never see light again. I knew in that moment I had to make a choice regarding my feelings for you. I had to opt whether I would lock your memory away to dwindle into nothing or acknowledge the fact that I was not ready to let go of my passion for you. In the months following our initial separation, I chose the latter, but I knew with certainty the first choice would be the only one I could make to keep my existence flourishing. Even though I did not want to let you go, I knew I had no other alternatives once I had seen you with the person who ignited flame in your bright eyes. Coming to that resolution, I made a conscious choice to finally put you out of my heart and mind. I decided to start afresh with my life, focusing on finding a companion of my own that could satisfy my heart's yearning.

A few Saturdays later I was in the gallery attending to potential buyers. Since the opening there had been a steady stream of interest in all the art, especially mine. It seemed that being the actual artist made the sale of pieces much easier. That day I was entertaining some customers with a story of my inspiration on a particular piece when some unexpected visitors entered the establishment. Looking up as the door opened, I saw you and Leonard holding hands and speaking secretively. You laughed lightly at something he had just shared. That rich sound reverberated through the store and settled into a hole in my soul. It had been so long since I had heard it. However, I didn't let any emotion show on my face as I returned to my own conversation, trying to close another sale.

Out of my peripheral vision, I eyed you as you meandered through the art. I saw you come to stop in front of one of my favorite pieces. You studied it critically for long minutes. When my potential buyers had informed that they wanted to consider the purchase before making a definite decision, I accepted the answer graciously, knowing that was my opportunity to walk over to where you were standing.

Your back as well as Leonard's were facing me as you both intently focused on the art in front of you. Trying to sound as polite as possible, I greeted, "Virginia, Leonard, how are you today?"

Both of you turned toward my voice. "Hello, Duke," you responded. Leonard issued a similar reply.

"You have been staring at this drawing from quite a few minutes. What about it intrigues you so much?"

"I guess I never realized you ever had the opportunity to view me this way. It is an interesting perspective. Not to mention it is an odd sensation to see me hanging on the wall for sale," you answered.

I nodded. "Well, if it makes you more comfortable, this art is not for sale, only for viewing pleasure. It happens to be one of my favorites. You are correct. This is an unusual angle of a person's face, one of yet to duplicate fully."

"When did you see me this way?" you asked in interest.

"On the sailboat. You were sitting next to me in your overcoat and hat. I saw just a hint of your face with the way your hair was pinned."

"It is amazing that you are able to do such a thing without a picture."

"Actually, I prefer to think of it as having photographs in my mind. I can see you as clearly now in my head as I did that night, every nuance of your features and clothes. The brief second is locked in time on paper as it is in my memory."

"You truly are an accomplished artist, Duke. I have only seen this handful of pieces other than the one Virginia owns, and I am unreservedly impressed," Leonard stated.

"Well, thank you for that sentiment."

"Are you sure this piece of Virginia is not for sale? I certainly would be interested in purchasing it."

I shook my head. "It is not for sale. I must keep a small part of this angel for my own collection. Besides you do not need a drawing when you have the real beauty in front of you. Perhaps another piece speaks to you just as strongly," I suggested gesturing casually around the gallery.

He smiled pleasantly at me. "I understand. It is hard to part with such magnificence. I think I will peruse the rest of the assortment. Excuse me."

Once he had left us, I turned to look at you. You gave an anxious smile in my direction. Thinking that it might be the drawing that made you feel that way, I said, "If it bothers you that much, I

can remove it from the gallery."

You shook your head, the traditional sign of nervousness. "I suppose I should be flattered to be captured so elegantly."

"Have you come to contemplate acquiring another piece?"

"I am still considering it. I noticed one you had drawn of the library where we met. I miss that place. It was magical to me."

"Well, if you buy that one then you can always have it at your disposal," I remarked with a smile, lightly trying to sway you to purchase. Instinctively we both moved to the topic of discussion.

"I love the way you have included all the details," you stated leaning in closer to the picture. I could tell you were reading the diminutive price tag that discreetly resided in the bottom right corner of the frame.

"I will make you a special deal, Virginia, being that we are such good acquaintances. You buy this piece, and I will have it framed for you any way you so desire for free."

You laughed lightly. "The piece is lovely but too large for my home," you explained.

"Well, if you want a drawing of the library, you could always commission me to make another version. I can make it smaller, so it fits in your space. What size would you want it to be?"

"No larger than half this size. I would want it for my study."

"Very well. I always do commission work with a deposit of half the price of the drawing. In this case I will make even charge you less than half of the price than this one and throw in the framing for free still."

"I still do not think that is within my means at this time even as much as I would like to have it."

"Well, you could get a reproduction instead of the original for a fraction of the cost. I do have one of those. Would you like to see one?" You nodded your head in interest. "All right. I will return momentarily." I left you there briefly and journeyed to the storage room where various prints were kept. Pulling out one of the reproductions of the library drawing, I came back to see you and Leonard chatting again. "Here you are, Virginia. The same beauty at a fraction of the cost. How is the size for you?"

"It is perfect. This is what I want."

"It is even the first number in the series of reproductions," I stated. "Are you sure you do not wish to commission a smaller version? It is worth the investment, much more so than this."

"I agree with Duke, Virginia. Buying an original would yield a higher resale value if you decided

to ever part with it. It is quite obvious Duke's popularity as an artist will only grow if the flow of people through the gallery is any indication," Leonard declared.

You seemed to contemplate our points for a moment. "Perhaps you are right, Leonard. An original would be a wiser investment and would complement the one I already have." He and I both nodded in the affirmative. "All right. I have changed my mind. I think I would like to commission a sketch of the library."

"Wonderful. Now tell me your vision. Do you want the same perspective as the other piece? Is there an angle you would prefer?"

"I want it precisely like the other one only smaller in scale. Make it the size of the one you are holding."

"Very well. That is easy enough. Why don't we go over to the desk and finalize the details?" I suggested.

We were strictly business as we sat at my desk drawing up the formal agreement for the commission. I was glad that I was able to sell you a sketch, especially after parting with one of my favorite pieces to you in a fit of rage. I knew the resale value of my self-portrait was immense given that I had just freely bestowed it upon you, so I was pleased to be recouping some of my loss due to my temper. After we both signed the agreement and you had given me a deposit check, I photocopied both items and returned one set to you. When it was finalized, you made a move toward Leonard again.

"Well, we should be going," you said taking his hand.

"Of course. Thank you for stopping in today."

"If you ever change your mind about the drawing of Virginia, please let me know. I am still interested in it," he announced.

"You will be the first to be informed, Leonard."

Later that day as I was working the evening shift, I received a call from Leonard which surprised me greatly. Nevertheless after our initial pleasantries, I inquired, "To what do I owe this call?"

"The university is honoring Virginia for her professional work and years of dedication to the school. I have been placed in charge of an appropriate memento that seizes Virginia's essence. That sketch I saw today in the gallery truly does that."

"Thank you for thinking so, but as I already stated that piece is not for sale."

"I realize that. However, after seeing it, I think you are the correct person to create such a piece that captures her. Would you consider doing such a drawing?"

"It depends on the circumstances."

"Well, here is what I am thinking. The committee in charge of this dedication is meeting next week. Do you think it would be possible to borrow that sketch or have you bring it to the meeting, so I can show them what I think is most appropriate? I think when they see it they will be as swayed as I was of your talents to commission you to create something for the ceremony. You inflect such emotion to Virginia on the page."

I considered the proposal for a minute. "When is the ceremony, Leonard? How much time would I have to create something? I am fairly booked with work."

"I understand, Duke. Unfortunately there are only four weeks until the observance. I do not know how much time is needed, but I have been at a loss until I saw that sketch today."

"Four weeks is not a lot of time. However, I think it might be able to work. I actually have several pieces of Virginia from my private collection. Maybe I should bring all of them to exhibit. I could consider parting with one of those if the committee can agree on something. Otherwise you all would need to concur on an idea. How long would that take?"

"I do not believe that should be difficult. They are all aware of the time constraint we are facing. The more you bring the easier it will probably be to decide on an approach. I am sure a traditional pose would go over best, but I will not know until we get into the meeting. I do not think convincing them of your abilities will be an issue, especially with your special connection with Virginia. This dedication is going to be a colossal event for the school. We will be attracting many different professionals that have worked with Virginia, which means celebrities will abound at this function. Actors and actresses as well as directors and producers will all be in attendance. Virginia knows about the event, but she has no idea the size of the occasion. The drawing and scholarship endowment they are creating in her honor are secrets. I believe it would mean so much to her to have you be the artist."

"All right, Leonard. I will come. Give me the information. I will need to coordinate a time to set up the work as well. It should take no more than an hour before the meeting."

"I will see that you have adequate preparation time. That will not be a problem. Let me give you the other details," he said before sharing the other relevant information regarding the meeting time and place.

The following Tuesday afternoon I stood studying my own pieces as I waited on the board members for the meeting. The first person to arrive was Leonard. "Duke, how are you?" he inquired extending his hand.

"I am well. How are you, Leonard?"

"Wonderful. This is quite a collection. I must admit I never imagined having such an extensive exhibit of one person."

"Virginia inspires me."

"She inspires many. Looking at this I am beginning to wonder if we can't do an exhibit of all these pieces as well as presenting the one we commission from you."

"That could always be arranged. My work can be loaned out for a price."

"Great. We will discuss that then. Please make yourself comfortable until the others arrive. When they get here, we will immediately begin with you. I would like you to show the pieces and tell us of any suggestions you might have. Then we will discuss the details. I feel fairly certain that most will feel a more traditional piece is in order though."

"That is fine. Whatever you want can be done."

I took a seat and watched as Leonard slowly made his way around the art. "You know, Duke, you say Virginia inspires you, but did you know the reverse is also true? Virginia finds you fascinating. When she returned from her sabbatical, I had never seen such fire in her eyes when speaking of another. She even showed me her latest work. Unsurprisingly the description of her heroine holds a striking resemblance to you. Perhaps you found a mutual muse in each other."

"I would find that greatly amusing, Leonard, especially since she showed no emotion to that end."

He shook his head. "Virginia does not show feelings in the typical fashion. She is much more subdued. However, once you are able to read the subtleties in her face, a door to places you have never experienced open for you. She can be full of feeling."

"Perhaps it is only your touch that makes her so," I mumbled, trying desperately not to sound jealous.

He shook his head again. "It is true I can read Virginia. However, I cannot sway her emotions in any particular direction."

Before we could continue on our path of talk, another person walked into the room. Immediately the topic of Dr. Wolf ceased. Leonard dutifully introduced me to everyone that entered the room. Instantly people were drawn to the sketches, which pleased me greatly. I could tell selling them on my talents would not be difficult as Leonard had projected. Once everyone has arrived, he gave me a gracious introduction before I began to speak a little about each drawing, trying to sway them of my abilities. However, once I had ended my few minute speech, there was no discussion on if I was to be hired, merely what kind of sketch best suited Virginia. I played along, drifting in and out of the conversation as necessary to facilitate the process, and by the time the meeting was adjourned that day, I had been commissioned for a piece with interest in having my other pieces of Virginia on display as part of the décor for the evening's events. I was even compensated for the short notice, which was significantly improved my attitude on the project.

I had mixed feelings about working on another piece of Virginia. It was difficult for me to attempt to set my emotions aside and focus on the work at hand, but the monetary compensation eased some of the tensions, so over the next two weeks I worked diligently on the pieces. Leonard checked in twice via phone to evaluate the progress.

I was so busy with it and my other obligations that I hardly noticed at first when Leonard arrived at the gallery a week before the ceremony. In fact it wasn't until he tapped me on the shoulder as I sat in the corner keeping a watchful eye on the gallery employees while I worked that I even noticed his presence.

"Duke, I hate to disturb you. You looked so intensely focused here, but I just wanted to comment on how beautiful the drawing is so far."

"Thank you, Leonard. I appreciate that, even though it was supposed to be a surprise."

"I won't tell anyone. The secret is safe with me," he joked with a smile. I noticed him slip his arm around the shoulders of the man next to him. "Duke, I want you to meet someone. This is Carl Snyder, the president of American University and my longtime companion. Carl, this is the talented artist we commissioned to do Virginia's piece, Elora Duke."

Flustered a moment I didn't say anything, but he didn't have the same problem. "Ms. Duke, I am pleased to make your acquaintance. Leonard has told me so much about you."

Recovering from my initial shock, I answered, "Nice to meet you as well. Call me Duke." I looked at Leonard for a moment. Confusion must have shown on my face.

"I knew it," he declared with a smile, pointing his finger in my direction.

"You knew what?" I inquired.

"You thought Virginia and I were together this whole time of our association."

I nodded. "Actually, yes, I did believe that. I am quite taken back by this revelation."

He nodded. "It all makes sense to me now," he mentioned.

"What does?"

"The reservation in your tone with me. When you came to show your pieces at the meeting, you stated that Virginia inspired you. I knew from those pictures that you meant more than artistically. Your feelings for the dear Dr. Wolf are obvious."

"That might be true. However, those feelings are not reciprocated and are not worth discussing."

"That is where you are wrong, my friend," he informed me.

"What do you mean?" I asked in interest.

"I told you that day that you had to learn to read Virginia's face. I can read it, Duke. When she speaks of you, it is with the greatest devotion and admiration."

"Professionally maybe," I quipped.

He shook his head. "More so."

I thought about it for a moment. "Leonard, the day that you and I met Virginia said something to me. At the time I thought she was referring to you. I had asked her why the change in clothes, and she said she had been touched by love, which was then the catalyst for transformation. Of whom was she speaking?"

"You, Duke. She was speaking of you. Of that I am sure. There is no one else that even matches the way you make her feel. It is true she underwent changes when she returned to school but for the better I believe. That first night that I saw her after she came back, she dragged me up to her bedroom to show me the prized possession she had acquired. It was a portrait of you, Duke. The way she spoke of the picture and of you made me realize that my friend of many years had finally found solace in love and yet just as quickly as she found it, she rejected the notion. I could sense the regret in her voice that evening, and that has not changed whenever your name is mentioned. Nevertheless, it was as if she made a decision not to let another opportunity slip from her grasp. Her brief encounter with you altered the way she viewed herself and her place in the world, and the revolution has been profound."

"Then why has she not said anything to me about this? There was an opening for such a declaration."

"Just because she recognizes her passion, does not mean she knows how to act upon it. Her vocalization skills are behind her heart. She needs time in order to learn the ways in which to express herself. However, I know positively it would be you with whom she would like to take that chance, Duke. Upon first meeting she can come across as studious and even self-interested. However, once you truly begin to melt the exterior, you find that she is shy and unsure, especially in such an area. You, on the other hand, are not. I can tell with your great confidence in the way you handle your business affairs. I see no reason why it would be any different in your personal life. I know I cannot direct your feelings, but I implore you not to disregard any emotions you have toward Virginia. Seize them and nourish them with her. She will be a better person for having such an experience, and as for you, love can only enrich one's life."

"So, you are telling me that Virginia Wolf, the woman who successfully avoided any intimacies with me while she was on sabbatical, is actually in love with me? Is this what you are saying?"

"It is precisely what I am saying, Duke. I have known Virginia for several years, and we are good friends. She still has not said directly what her feelings for you are, but I know when someone is in love. She has not even admitted that she is gay to me, and she has had plenty of opportunity to do so in a non-threatening environment but has not. It is possible you are the one

person she needs to vault her into the freedom of being herself. Just ponder it, Duke. I am not asking you to do anything against your feelings. I am simply saying if the chance arrives in which you two could explore the wondrous world together, please consider taking that journey with her. She is a fascinating woman."

"I already know that," I replied with a smile. "Thank you for what you have said, Leonard. You have enlightened me. Now if you will excuse me, I must get back to this piece. I am suddenly feeling inspiration about to burst through my fingers onto the page."

"Of course. I understand. I look forward to seeing this unveiled at the ceremony. By the way, have you started on your dedication speech?"

"I have thought about it some, but I have been focusing my energies on the piece."

He nodded. "Well, if you need any assistance, I would be more than happy to help you, but I am confident that you are as inspirational in your speaking as in your drawing, especially when it comes to Virginia. I will be in touch later this week to finalize the plans for transporting the art."

I nodded. "Sounds good. I look forward to Saturday."

When the day of the ceremony arrived, I was excited yet anxious as well. I hadn't spoken to Virginia since the day she and Leonard had come into the gallery, so I was nervous about seeing her again, especially in light of what Leonard had shared. Thankfully though, I had little time to ponder the event that morning, because I wanted to assist with the displaying of my pieces to make sure nothing went awry. It wasn't until that afternoon when I was staring at myself in the mirror after my shower that my nerves began to make my stomach flutter. Leonard and Carl had thought it a good idea to have me introduce the piece I had prepared, to which I agreed, but speaking to such a large crowd wasn't something I did often. In fact, I was used to much smaller arrangements with the advertising firm. I tried to think of it as one large pitch, but instead of selling an idea, I was promoting Virginia. Looking at it that way made the words flow as I prepared my speech. Nevertheless, I was uneasy about giving it, because I revealed some of my most intimate thoughts about the talented writer.

At seven that evening, I arrived at American University for the black tie dinner being held in Virginia's honor. Even though I had been in the same building just hours ago, it had undergone a vast transformation in order for the celebration, and the only reason I even recognized it was because of the art hanging on the walls. Everywhere I looked there was the face of the woman I loved in visions I had created. People seemed riveted by the pieces, most everyone hovering around them in great interest. My first instinct was to start pitching to them, but I held back knowing it was a night to honor Virginia, and so I resolved not to try to sell any work unless someone pressed me to it. Instead I ignored everyone, even the celebrities in attendance, and made my way over to Leonard and Virginia who were talking with some people by the bar. Leonard was the first to notice my approach.

"Duke, this is incredible," he stated as he extended his hand. "The art is even better with the other décor than I even dreamed."

"Thank you, Leonard. Dr. Wolf, how are you this evening?" I inquired.

"I am pleasantly overwhelmed, Duke. I never knew you had such a collection."

I blushed, feeling somewhat exposed by the quantity of pictures surrounding us. It was obvious that I admired the writer by my immense compilation. "As I said to Leonard, you inspired me."

It was your turn to flush graciously. "Well, thank you for being here on such a special night for me."

Before our discourse could continue, Leonard broke in and stated, "Allow me to introduce you, Duke, to some of American University's finest donors."

For the next half hour, the older man toted me around by the arm, introducing me to a plethora of people, leaving me no time to converse with the person I came to see. However, once we had taken our seats for the elaborate dinner, I realized I had been placed at the head table next to the guest of honor and all the important academics of my alma mater. As I sat talking with those around me, I found it interesting that Leonard and Carl were sitting opposite each other at the round table and pretending that they hardly had a relationship other than professional. I wondered if you hid your feelings from me due to the example of your counterparts. They were so distant from each other, so much so that I thought it sad they felt they could not be themselves at such a gathering. Nevertheless, I decided not to dwell on them. Instead I tried to enjoy your company.

You looked stunning that night. Your wavy dark hair was pinned up away from your face but differently than usual. It was more provocative, because it exposed the entire line of your neck. You wore a simple but elegant black dress, one that allowed a hint of cleavage to show. Even though it was by far the most conservative attire at the party, it was more than I had even seen on you before, so I couldn't help but take in the beautiful image.

You said very little to me during dinner, but as I cast subtle gazes in your direction periodically, I realized Leonard had been correct. Even though the emotions of your face were subdued, I began to recognize the delicate differences. Your blues eyes proved that even though you didn't say it, you were pleased to be in my company.

Shortly after dinner, the official speeches began. Many people from various professional areas took to the podium to voice their praise of the talented woman sitting next to me. I could tell you were flattered but somewhat embarrassed at all the attention as the president of American University followed by various movie producers and celebrities fawned over you. In the back of my mind I kept wondering how you would take to my speech, and I tried to calm myself as my time fast approached.

Carl had the obligation of introducing people before they spoke, so when he looked at me and smiled, I knew it was my turn. However, I waited until the appropriate moment to stand as he began, "Our next speaker is someone with whom you might not be as familiar, but I can assure

you after this evening, hers will be a name you will not forget. It is a special delight for me to introduce one of Dr. Wolf's very dearest friends and quite a talented artist herself. Elora Duke has graciously given us the essence of Virginia preserved through these drawings around us as well as one that will forever hang as an honorarium to Dr. Wolf's written genius. Duke, if you would please come up to make this dedication."

I took a quick glance in your direction as I stood. You seemed utterly surprised at the turn of events, but I smiled reassuringly before moving to the podium. Carl was still standing there waiting for me. I shook his hand cordially, and then he stepped back to the veiled piece standing nearby to wait until the correct moment to reveal the masterpiece.

"Thank you, Carl," I began as I turned the page of the notebook sitting on the podium to my speech. I looked at it for a moment and took a deep breath before turning my gaze toward the audience. "As Carl mentioned I am a good friend of Virginia's and coincidentally an alumnae of this fine institution, so when the school approached me about this special occasion I was deeply moved by the invitation to create something that would forever capture the brilliance of this talented writer. From the moment of our acquaintance, she has charmed me with her wit and words. However, it is those words, those powerfully written words that we come to celebrate this evening. Virginia Wolf has a rare gift. She is able to breathe life into her characters and alter our perceptions. Even more she is able to create tides of emotions within us all, feelings of love, sorrow, empathy, despair, and admiration, because we are one with the characters she brings to us. We recognize ourselves, our humanity in her words and thoughts. It is this greatness that we honor tonight. Dr. Virginia Wolf deserves to be lauded as an esteemed writer and a treasure to the academics of American University. Now before I unveil this gift to the school there is something I would like to say on a more personal note." I paused for a moment and met your blue eyes. Gathering my courage, I said, "Virginia, as most people in this room probably already suspect given the many drawings here in your glory, you have been the greatest inspiration in my life. Just as you have breathed sustenance into your beloved characters, you have opened my eyes and my soul with our cherished friendship. You always have had and always will have my complete adoration. Thank you, Virginia, for every moment we have shared. These are greater gifts than any I could bestow upon this school in your name." Seeing tears in your eyes, my confidence began to waver slightly. I hoped those tears were associated with pleasant feelings instead of sadness at my declarations. Breaking our gaze I looked to Carl and gave a slight nod. Moving my eyes back to the audience, I said, "Now in honor of this exceptional writer, I present to you all this token of American University's appreciation."

Walking over to where Carl stood, I helped him remove the black drape over the piece. I smiled at the drawing, because it was exactly as I saw Virginia. There she was captured in time sitting at the table in the library much as I had seen her the day we met diligently creating a masterpiece of her own. I didn't dare look at you for the anxiety I felt of what you thought of the piece. Instead, I shook Carl's hand again and quietly made my way back to my seat, because I knew there was one more honorarium to bestow before the night's end.

As soon as I sat down, you touched me on the arm. I looked at you. A trickle of tear mapped your cheek, but there was an upwards curve to the corner of your mouth. You leaned in toward me, so instinctively I did the same. I could feel your breath against my neck as your lips came

dangerously close to my ear. "Thank you, Duke," you whispered.

"You are most welcome, Virginia," I replied softly, sneaking my hand up to the cheek which no one could see and wiping some of the wetness from your face. I knew those were the only words you could say in the moment as Carl began to speak again.

As Carl began the final speech of the evening, he called you up in front of everyone. Graciously you went and stood by him, but throughout the whole talk, your eyes sought out mine. You were moved again, letting on ever so subtly in your eyes, as he announced the new scholarship in your name. When he encouraged you to make an acceptance speech, you were courteous enough to appease your anxious audience. You thanked everyone involved in that night's affair as well as many of your colleagues. However, then your eyes turned toward me, and you paused. To my great surprise, you said nothing in regards to me specifically, instead pointing out Leonard at the table. However, I did not mind, for it was that moment in your silence when your eyes peered into mine that I saw all I ever wanted. For just a second all was laid bare on your face. Your features spoke what you never had voiced, and for the first time I felt your love bridging the short distance between us.

After the official speeches, more mingling occurred. I found myself engaged in conversation with many people interested in my work, so I barely got a chance to spend time with you. However, as the crowd began to thin later in the night, I took a moment to scan for you. I smiled when I saw you making your way toward me.

"You look as if you have had about enough for one evening, Virginia," I mentioned. "Now that celebrity has been turned upon you, how does it feel?"

"Exhausting," you admitted. "Although, I must confess this has been a magical night. Never in my life did I imagine something like this ever happening to me."

"It was well-deserved, Virginia."

You blushed lightly. "That picture you drew of me is extraordinary, Duke. You have flattered in the most charming manner. Thank you for being a part of this evening. It makes it just that much more special to me."

"Well, I am glad I was able to participate."

You nodded in your usual nervous way, making me wonder what was on your mind. However, before I could ask, you inquired, "If you are not otherwise engaged, do you think you could drive me home? I think Leonard has other plans."

I nodded. "I think Leonard would prefer to be able to go directly to Carl's after this. It would be my pleasure to escort you home. Are you ready now?"

You nodded but looked at me quizzically. "How did you know about Carl and Leonard?" you questioned.

"They told me. Shall we go?" I responded casually.

"Yes. Just let me say good night to them."

A few minutes later we were headed out to my car. Both of us were quiet as I opened your door for you before moving to my own side. The only words during our ride were your directions to your place. When the car came to a stop in front of your building, I turned to look at you. Your eyes were on me as well. I could tell you were searching for something to say.

Deciding to assist you, I mentioned, "Perhaps I should walk you to your door."

"I think that is wise," you agreed. "Park in my space in the garage." You gestured with your hand toward the garage entrance. I pulled up to the closed door while you dug in your purse. You produced a swipe card for me to use, and after doing so I proceeded to follow your directions to your assigned space which was empty. Together we strolled to the nearest door into the building and took the elevator up to your floor. Since I had never been to your home, I was curious as to what your dwelling looked like. I imagined it being similar to your initial personality, subdued and impersonal. However, when we reached your door, you unlocked it while I lingered close by.

Turning to me, you looked as if you were contemplating your next move. I waited patiently, knowing this was something you had to do at your own pace. After an extended pause, you inquired, "Would you like to come in for some coffee?"

"Sure. That would be wonderful," I answered, glad that you had taken the chance. I let you lead the way inside and waited until you turned on the lights before proceeding further into the space. As soon as it was illuminated, I was drawn to the large picture window in the living area. "Wow. You have a quite a view of the Cathedral."

You nodded modestly. "I like to sit here and write. The Cathedral is so inspirational to me."

"I believe it would be. I would love to draw it sometime."

Pointing toward the small kitchen, you said, "I am going to start the coffee. Make yourself comfortable."

I did as you requested, taking a seat on your sofa and continuing to gaze around your condo. It was not as I had envisioned. In fact, there was such life in your abode, lively colors and intimate photographs of people I assumed to be family and friends perched strategically around the living room.

You returned a few minutes later and just stood there for a moment, finally asking, "Would you like the grand tour?"

"That would be wonderful," I replied.

You led the way into the first of two rooms off the living area. "This is my office. Right here is where your masterpiece of the library is going to reside," you announced proudly pointing to the empty space on the wall near the desk. "And in the next room is the master bedroom." I followed you in there and hovered in the doorway. I didn't want to make you nervous by encroaching upon your private space. However, I did note that my self-portrait sat on an easel facing the bed. I glanced at you as you flushed but said nothing about the intimate arrangement of my drawing, because I didn't want to sever our delicate connection.

Making our way back to the living room, we both took seats on the couch. You gave a long sigh. I smiled at you. "You seem tired, Virginia. Perhaps we should do coffee some other time."

"No. You just got here. I am tired, but my mind is too active with the night's events to rest. How long have you known about tonight?"

"About a month. Leonard asked me to do a drawing a few days after you all came into the gallery. I was not entirely certain I was the correct artist for the commission, but the committee felt differently."

"I am glad they did. It is a beautiful piece, Duke. I am always amazed at your ability to draw without using photographs as a guide."

I nodded. "It is a rare gift I suppose," I conceded.

After a pause in conversation, you stated, "I have to ask you something, Duke."

"What is that?"

"When you said Leonard and Carl told you about their relationship, what did you mean?"

"Exactly that. They came by the gallery about a week ago together. I saw the way they were with each other, and Leonard confirmed my suspicions. I take it that is not something everyone knows."

"No. The general opinion is that Leonard and I are in a relationship. It suits everyone involved."

I nodded. "I understand. I even thought that when I first saw the two of you together. You are good friends."

You gave a nod. "Leonard is the closest person to me. He knows more about me than anyone."

"How do you feel about the two of them? How long have they been in a relationship?"

"I believe they have been together for almost twenty years."

"That is quite an accomplishment," I mentioned. You agreed. "How do you feel about them as a

couple though?" I pressed.

"They are wonderful together. I wish they did not feel the need to keep it so secretive though."

"I am sure they do it for the safety of their professional careers. Although I am not sure they are deceiving anyone but themselves. Even with them sitting on opposite sides of the table I could see the love and adoration shared between them."

"I suppose you are correct. However, I think they feel better with it closed to any discussion." A lull ensued for a moment before you said, "I am going to pour the coffee. Be right back."

Minutes later you returned with two cups. You handed me mine. I smiled as I looked over the rim and saw that nothing had been added, just the way I enjoyed it. While we drank our cups, the conversation drifted to those in attendance that evening. You indulged me with stories of how you came about your famous acquaintances, and before either of us noticed, several hours had passed. It wasn't until I saw you stifle a yawn that I checked my watch. Noting the late hour, I smiled at you.

"It is late, Virginia. I must let you rest now. Your pretty eyes have grown tired. I can see it," I stated with a smile as I unconsciously tucked a piece of your hair back behind your ear.

You nodded and blush lightly. It was only then did I realize I had touched you. "You are right, Duke. It is late, but I have so been enjoying your company."

"As I have yours. We can get together again soon though. I promise. We won't wait another month before seeing each other."

"What about tomorrow? Can we go for coffee possibly?" you asked nervously.

"I have to open the gallery around noon, but I do not have to stay once my employees arrive. What about in the afternoon? We could go for a walk and do a little window shopping. Du Pont Circle is always full of life this time of year."

"That sounds wonderful. Shall I meet you at the gallery then?" I nodded. Picking up my discarded coffee cup, I stood. Without invitation or direction I took it into the kitchen to wash it. I heard your footsteps close behind me. "You do not need to do that, Duke. I can take care of it."

"It is not a problem, Virginia. Here. Give me yours," I insisted reaching for it in your hand. Our fingers brushed as you relinquished your hold. Neither of us said anything as I washed both cups and then placed them in the dishwasher.

"I should walk you back to your car," you stated.

I shook my head. "It is not necessary. Then I would feel obligated to ensure your safety back inside. We would be at this the rest of the night. I know the way. I will be fine. I will see you tomorrow," I said giving you a smile as we both moved toward the front door. We lingered for a

moment, neither knowing exactly what to say or do.

Finally you leaned toward me and planted a soft kiss on my cheek. It was heavenly to feel your supple lips on my skin that my eyes fluttered closed at the sensation. "Thank you for tonight, Duke. Your very presence made the evening for me," softly you said.

"I enjoyed it tremendously," I managed to whisper as my eyes found yours. You were still so close to me. All I had to do was reach out and take hold of you if I wanted. I even saw the question in your eyes of whether or not I was going to make such a move, but I refrained. I wasn't completely sure you were ready for the next step, so I played it safe. Instead I smiled and bid you good night. "I'll see you tomorrow, Virginia. Sleep well."

The next day my mind raced with the possibilities of our gathering. You had been giving me all sorts of signals of availability that had never been there before, so I wondered what the day would hold. I hoped that the same openness you had shown the previous night was still going to be present when you arrived. However, by three that afternoon when you had not made an appearance, I figured you had changed your mind about meeting me. Dejectedly I made my way upstairs to my loft, leaving the gallery in the capable hands of my employees. I plopped down in front of my art table and just stared at unfinished pieces as well as the commission of the library which I had completed earlier that morning.

Mentally I chastised myself for allowing myself to feel for you again. I had resolved not to let my emotions for you surface, but when Leonard had declared your love for me, it broke down the barrier I had created as a safeguard for my heart. It was exposed again, and I was feeling the ache of the solace. Trying to push it away, I forced myself to draw even though my heart was not in it.

Around four that afternoon there was a knock on my door. Curiously I wondered who it could be, because I hadn't been expecting company. Nevertheless I made my way to my door and opened it. There you stood concern burning in your eyes. Coolly I greeted you.

"Sorry I am late. Leonard and Carl wanted me to join them for lunch to recap the entire night, and I lost track of the time. I came by the gallery, and they said you had left ill. I asked if they knew where I could find you, and they said you would probably be here. Are you all right?"

"I'm fine. Just tired I suppose. I worked late last night finishing your drawing. Would you like to see it?" I inquired feeling the gloom fade in your presence.

"Of course I would. I can hardly wait."

"Come in then."

Both of us went over to the drawing table. "Wow, Duke. This is even better than I hoped it would be. You are wonderful," you praised.

"I am glad you like it. I just need to get it framed for you, and then it is all yours."

Smiling at me you asked, "Are you still up for a stroll, or would you prefer to stay inside?"

"A walk would be nice I think. The fresh air would do me well. Shall we?"

Heading outside we started our walk in the direction of the closest coffee shop. Quietly we went into the establishment. I went to the counter to buy two cups of coffee while you found us a table. Once I had come to the table with our beverages and taken a seat, you inquired, "Are you all right today, Duke? Something seems to be troubling you."

I shrugged. "It is not that important."

"Come now. Tell me," you insisted.

I hesitated before nodded. "All right. I was not certain you would come today, and when you were late, I thought my suspicions to be true. It upset me, but you are here now, so the point is moot I suppose."

You nodded. "I understand. My past behavior has not left the best of impressions in regards to my punctuality or attendance for that matter. I apologize. I will make more of an effort. We are friends after all. I would hate to cause you grief with my inconsiderateness. Forgive me?"

"Of course. I feel childish for letting my feelings bother me. It is not as if you are required to be responsible with regard to our engagements."

"But I should be all the same," you conceded.

The rest of the afternoon and evening passed without incident. We spent our time walking the streets enjoying the views and each other's company. After dinner I took you home. As it was the night previous, neither of us seemed to want to part from the other. However, I finally managed to pry myself away from your company around midnight with a promise to spend Friday evening together.

Throughout the entire week I was pleasantly surprised that even though we did not see each other, you called me daily for chat. I found comfort in our talks that seemed to last for hours. Together we would be a part of each other's evenings, dining together, watching the same TV programs, and even simply listening to music. Even more on Thursday night we even went to bed together via the phone. As I laid there in the darkness of my bedroom, feeling the light weight of the sheet and blanket as I spoke to you softly, I imagined what it would be like to have you with me in reality. I knew I wanted to be that close to you. I wanted to feel the heat of your skin pressed into mine as we lay spooned together in the dark. I wanted your distinctive floral-scented shampoo to invade my senses as I nuzzled into your hair, and I wondered if that dream would ever be real. Moreover, I pondered if you ever thought of such things. I was still learning to read you, so I was never truly sure. However, as we said our good night finally in the early hours of Friday morning, I made a promise to myself that I would watch for signs from you that you wanted our relationship to progress further.

Friday night I went to pick you up for our adventure. I had decided that we would do something different for a change and had asked you to dress stylishly casual for the places we would visit. When I pulled up to the curb in front of your building, I saw you standing there talking to someone. You looked beautiful in your khaki-colored linen pants and blue blouse that perfectly accentuated your eyes. When you noticed my BMW, you smiled and waved at me before bidding farewell to your acquaintance. I took the opportunity to get out of the car and walk over to your door in order to open it.

"Hello, Virginia. You look lovely this evening," I complimented.

"Thank you, Duke. You look nice as well," you replied with the slight flush to your cheeks that was becoming a standard feature to your face.

Getting back into the driver's seat, I took us to the first stop on the agenda, a late dinner at a restaurant you had suggested. Sitting across the table from you, I noticed that you looked decidedly nervous, which puzzled me greatly. Having been out together many times before, I wondered what was on your mind. After our wine had been brought to the table, I asked quizzically, "Are you all right this evening, Virginia? Have I done something to offend you?"

"No, not at all. Why would you think that?"

"You just seem preoccupied. Is there something on your mind you wish to discuss?"

Shaking your head you took a sip of your wine. "It is nothing of consequence."

"Oh, please. Your face clearly says that it is," I countered.

"Very well. I was just thinking about summer. I was contemplating a trip to Europe."

"That sounds fantastic. What is the problem?"

"I no longer wish for the solitude I once had, Duke. Now a trip to Europe only seems meaningful if I can share it with someone."

"I see. Well, what about your sister or brother? What about Leonard? I am certain he would love to go."

You paused a moment. I could see on your face that you were gathering courage. "What about you?" you finally asked.

"Me? You are suggesting that I go with you to Europe?"

An unsure nod answered my question. I could tell it had taken a great deal of fortitude on your part to even propose such a thing. It made my mind race with unanswered questions about the two of us. I wasn't sure I would be able to continue our course of only friendship if we traveled

together. Deciding on a safe uncommitted answer, I responded, "I most definitely would like to go, Virginia, but we would have to see if it fits into my schedule."

"I understand. I simply thought you might like to go," you stated. I could see a falter in your confidence.

"Virginia, I would truly enjoy such a chance. I just have to see if I can make the schedules for the companies mesh with the dates. We will look at it together. All right?" I asked reaching across the table for your hand. You allowed me to take yours. For long moments we sat in silence letting our physical connection ground us.

The rest of the meal passed with quiet conversation. When the bill arrived, I dismissed your offers to split it. Instead I merely handed our server my credit card without even a glance at the charges. You thanked me graciously as a sign of surrender.

Going back out to the car, we made our way to our next destination. Given the popularity of the place, we had to park several blocks away and walk during which I took the opportunity to put my arm around your shoulders. Your only response was to step closer to me as we hiked through the city streets. However when we arrived at the door to the place I wanted to go, you halted your steps. People were in a line to get in, and music blared through the open door.

Looking at me you said, "We are not going in here, are we?"

"Yes, actually we are. Let's get in line."

"I cannot go in here," you protested as I tugged you along to the end of the short line.

"Why not?"

"I am too old."

"Age is only a number. You need this experience. You need to know what it is like to be with your peers regardless of their age. I promise once you get inside your nerves will fade. If they do not, we do not have to stay. Just try for me."

You conceded with a nod. "Very well, Duke. For you I will attempt this. It is just that everyone around us is so young."

I gave a nod in agreement. "I know, but I am not concerned with anyone but you. You are the only one that matters to me right now." A few minutes later after the bouncer had made both of us produce our identification, I paid for our entrance.

The music was overwhelming at first and the swirl of colored lights took some acclimation. However, by the time we made it over to the bar for drinks, the sound of the bass had already taken hold of me, and the need to dance encompassed my being. Turning to look at you, I was pleased to see that you were swaying gently to the music as we waited for our turn to place a

drink order.

Since it was virtually impossible to talk in the crowded loud club, we just stood closely together sipping our beverages and letting our bodies communicate for us. When my glass was empty, I gestured toward the floor. You gave a nod. Setting our cups down on the nearest table, I took your hand and led you through the sea of hot young bodies. No one even looked our way, but I didn't care, because the only person I wanted to impress was you.

The beat was faster than I had wanted, but I did my best to get into rhythm. You seemed shy at first but followed suit. It wasn't long before we were dancing closer together with each passing song as the population of the floor grew. It wasn't too long before there were only inches between us. Experimentally I reached to touch you, my hand landing on your hip. You responded in kind.

I had no idea how much time had passed as we continued our dancing. However, as our eyes continued to speak for us, it became clear to me suddenly that the grinding of our bodies was affecting you. Your blue eyes had taken on a tint I had never seen before. They were dark and mysterious, making me wonder about your thoughts. You were not the Virginia I knew in that moment, which intrigued me greatly.

The dance continued with us embracing lightly, but then the music began to slow. People disbursed to other areas of the club during the lull except for a select few couples too involved with each other to note the change of pace. I expected to us to be one of the mass, but you appeared to have other plans. Instead of leaving the floor, you slipped both your arms around my back. I responded by pulling you closer. As our bodies came together my libido came alive.

Your smaller frame felt good against mine. We hadn't been this close since that night on the sailboat, but this time there were fewer clothes separating us, allowing me to feel the curves of your body as they pushed into mine. Going with my feelings I leaned down to your cheek. I pressed mine against yours and took in the scent of your hair. Even with the thick smoke surrounding us, I could smell your perfume along your neck. Feeling your hands clutch tighter to my shirt, I knew you felt the power of the moment as well.

All too soon though the beat began to pick up again, and with it came the flood of club patrons migrating back to the floor. However, I was reluctant to release you. You seemed to have no objection to that as our dancing continued at the slower pace. Finally when it seemed impossible to keep the connection with all the people around us, you looked up at me and pointed to your watch. I looked at my own. Since it was after midnight, I gestured toward the door in suggestion to which you nodded.

Heading out into the street, I gathered my courage and reached for your hand. You let me take it as we walked to my car several blocks away. Neither of us said anything. I wasn't sure what I could say in order to move the evening in a more intimate direction, because you had already given me more than you ever had. I knew I should have been satisfied with the progress, but our sensual dance had left me with a need for more. Risking a glance in your direction, I was unable to read your face at the moment.

We drove quietly back to your condominium. Without a word you handed me the key for the garage, which meant you expected me to take you up to your place. Graciously I accepted the unspoken invitation. That night though as we made our way to your condo, we did so with linked hands. Reaching your door you unlocked it and proceeded inside as if you expected me to follow. Of course I did so without hesitation.

I stood in the middle of the living room watching you. You silently went to your stereo system and turned on something soft and romantic. Then without a word to me you went into the kitchen. I heard you in there making coffee. I could tell in your body language that you were nervous again, although about what I wasn't sure, so I waited on your return. Making myself comfortable on the sofa, I pondered the twists and turns of the night. To me it seemed you had started to open yourself to our developing relationship, but I was afraid of misjudging you. I knew this was a first for you and decided that you truly needed to set the pace for success.

When you came back to me, you were carrying two cups of coffee. Handing me mine without a word, you took a seat. Your eyes focused mainly on your cup, but occasionally I saw your eyes casting shy glances my way. I played along, wondering what you were thinking but not asking you to express your feelings. Beverages were consumed in stillness, but once the empty cups had been discarded on the coffee table, you turned to me. Uncertainty filled those lovely blue eyes, but you smiled anyway.

"Will you dance with me, Duke?" softly you requested, putting your delicate hand into mine.

Not wanting to deny you anything, I smiled in return and pulled you from the couch. Moving us to the small open space in front of the entertainment center, I wrapped you in my arms, and we began to move to the slow seductive rhythm of the music you had selected. I had no idea what your intentions were, but I figured I should just enjoy the moment of being able to hold you so closely.

The whole CD passed without a word between us, but none were needed. I could tell by the way you held me that your heart had finally overcome your mind when it came to me. My own felt swollen with the indescribable joy at the revelation of your true feelings. Finally though I knew our night had to end. Once the last chord of music came to an end, I pulled back and smiled. "It is late, Virginia. Perhaps I should go," I suggested turning to pick my car keys up from the table. Looking back at you, I continued, "This had been a wonderful evening. Thank you for your company, Virginia." Even though I wanted to kiss you, I chose not to do so. Instead I slowly began to back away toward the door.

Just as I was about to reach it, you said, "Duke, wait." I paused with my hand on the knob, wondering exactly what you wanted to say. I could see uncertainty in your gentle countenance as your eyes avoided mine. However, then those eyes that I had come to love settled onto my own, and in them I saw a conviction that had never been there before now. "What if you did not go?" you questioned.

Being caught completely off guard at the posed question, I replied, "Excuse me?"

"What if you did not leave, Duke? What if you stayed here?"

Intrigued by the sudden development I stepped back toward you. Reaching to cup your cheek, I questioned, "Virginia, do you know what you are asking?"

You nodded. "I am asking you to stay the night with me," you whispered, touching my face with your right hand. Your fingers trailed along my jaw.

Taking a deep breath in an effort to abate the sudden surge of desires in my body, I gave another reassuring smile. You had just taken a leap in protocol, but as even as my carnal wishes didn't mind, I wanted to refrain for your sake. "Virginia, you have taken me by utter surprise, and I certainly am flattered at the invitation to spend the rest of this night with you, but perhaps your judgment has been influenced by our activities. There are some religious conservatives that attest that dancing weakens one's resolve. I think it might be possible in this case to have had such an effect."

You shook your head at me adamantly. "You are correct in as much as it had influenced me, but to the contrary it has made me strong. It has given me the vigor to express what I thought was a mutual want."

Hearing you quote me from the winter that night at my loft stirred something in me. I did want to stay, but I was still unsure it was the best course of action for you. Allowing the doubt to lead me, I once again stepped back from you. "Virginia, are you sure in your request of me?"

You broke our gaze a moment and looked to the floor. "I never thought you would be this difficult," you confessed, wrapping your arms around your own torso. I stood there a moment waiting to see what you might say, since it was obvious you were collecting your thoughts by your manner of standing. When your blue eyes came to mine again, I saw their love for me. It almost made me breathless. "Elora," you called, reaching for me again. Your arms embraced me and pulled me to you. "As your name implies, you are light, my light. From the moment you entered my life you have illuminated what has always been a dark meaningless existence. You have shed radiance over the shadows of my heart. I have never been touched with warmth the way your presence has brought it to me. I have been alone my entire life, because I have been scared of love. I have been petrified of finding it in the wrong place, but now I am terrified of something greater. I am more frightened of living without you than immersing myself in the sea of emotions that threatens to consume me whenever you are close. I want to know you in every way, Elora. I want to feel your heart beating in sync with mine the way I feel it now," you murmured, dropping our gaze as you moved one of your hands to the slope of my breast. I could feel my own heart beat faster at your touch. "I yearn to feel your flesh against mine in the heat of the night," you continued. I swallowed hard at that admission, for it was what I wanted for so long as well. You managed to look at me again. "That day you kissed me in the snow forever changed the way I looked at life. Your love touched me. I want to be touched like that again, but this time I crave for you to kiss me in all the places I yearned to have attended my whole life. Kiss me again, Elora Duke. Touch me with your love."

Desperately trying to calm my ragged breathing, I mumbled, "You certainly do have a way with words, don't you, Virginia? You have had my heart from the first moment I ever saw you." Reaching for your lips, I traced them with my thumb before finally surrendering to my feelings. Slowly I leaned down to capture your mouth with my own. Both of us moaned at the tenderness of the moment. Cupping the back of your head, I let your hair free. It tumbled down your back through my fingers. You pulled me impossibly closer as our tongues met shyly. Finally when air became paramount, we mutually pulled away a little. "I love you, Virginia Wolf."

"And I love you, my Elora." Taking my hands you pulled me toward your bedroom. "Come to bed with me, Duke. Let us make this night the first in a new beginning."

I didn't answer the petition. Instead I gave you a simple smile and allowed you to lead me through your bedroom door and into a great unknown adventure that I hoped would last a lifetime.

[The Athenaeum's Scroll Archive](#)