

~ One Perfect Rose ~

by Colleen

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A strong wind whistled in and around the loose shingles as it whipped over the roof of the old cabin. The surrounding trees swayed against mother nature's force and those last few stubborn leaves, now wrinkled and gnarled finally gave up the struggle and twirled away to finally join a blanket of brothers far below. The late October day saw very chilled temperatures, but thankfully the threat of snow was weeks away. It was not fun to be stuck up in the mountains for days, sometimes weeks at a time after a winter storm.

A fairly new fire licked up the sides of four, foot long logs inside of the rock faced fireplace. Its dark stained oak mantle held a dozen treasures...reminders to the structure's occupants. A long fingered, female hand slid a black wire grate in front of the growing fire to hold back any defecting embers. Those same fingers then wrapped around the bulb of a long stemmed glass. The tang of the dark liquid skittered along the insides of the woman's jaws before sliding down her throat with great satisfaction. The dark haired woman sat quietly in the crook of a soft, caramel colored sofa. Several thoughts passed across her mind as the glass was raised to her coral hued lips once again. The somber mood of the flickering flames caused her to reflect on her life of late. A set of dark eyes starred into the dancing orange spires, stirring up those memories. It was times like these that really caused one to think about their life. All of the things they had. Things they've lost. But not a single regret. Not for Evan Marlow.

Just one year ago.

Just one year ago today we were celebrating our first anniversary, she thought. A tiny smile shaped her mouth as she thought of that day. I thought we had everything. It was perfect. Funny how things can change so much in just a short amount of time.

* * *

The room was very warm that morning when Evan walked through the door of the bedroom in their new, suburban home. A silly grin plastered itself across her handsome features when she heard the shower running in the adjoining bath. "Perfect," she said as she checked her watch. The tall woman quickly set about transforming the room for a day of romance.

She had woken up early as usual and as usual on a Saturday she let her Rip Van Winkle of a partner sleep on. Evan had turned over the minute her eyes had opened. Pushing aside two or three strands of wayward hair she placed a kiss on the temple of her small lover. The blonde always awoke with what Evan thought was the most adorable case of bed head, but of course Evan had never mentioned that little fact. It was her little secret. Another small kiss and the tall woman slipped from the comfortable bed to set the special day in motion.

Checking her watch once more, Evan took a small, odd shaped item from the pocket of her robe then dropped the garment from her shoulders, stepping briskly across the plush, light blue carpet and into the bathroom.

A small draft brushed across Lisa's wet shoulders as the shower door was opened. The sensation soon returned to one of warmth as a bigger, but very familiar body snuggled up against her back. "I was wondering if you were going to join me," she said.

"Just waiting for the right moment," came the cryptic answer.

Lisa turned in the circle of slippery arms, blinking water from her green eyes. From head to toe she took in the most beautiful expanse of naked skin. Rivulets of water cascaded down the toned body, adding a luminous sheen to the nearly six feet of flawlessness. Lisa's mouth watered. "Oh!" A pinch to her wet bottom abruptly drew her from the intense appraisal. She grinned sheepishly and asked in a softer tone. "Oh...ah...what do you mean perfect moment?"

Evan chuckled deeply, copying her wife's lascivious thoughts. She hesitated just a second before answering, antagonizing her lover just a touch. "Happy anniversary," she finally said.

Lisa patted a wet cheek condescendingly. "Poor baby. You never were any good at math were you? We've only been married six months, honey." She thought for just a second. "Although, day after tomorrow will be a year since we first met, but..."

Evan gave her an indulgent smirk and a nip on the nose for the flippant comment. "It was one year ago to this moment that I first laid eyes on you," she explained. "9:58 AM, October 26, 2000 was the day my life changed forever." Evan saw the puzzled look on Lisa's face as they stepped out of the direct spray of water. "I'll tell you the story just as soon as we get out of here. But first..." She produced a small piece of soap shaped and colored like a hearty rose. "I want to wash every inch of your perfect body. And then I am going to carry you to the bed and make love to every clean inch." The kiss that followed lasted through a few hundred heartbeats, making them both glad they had an extra large water heater in the basement.

When the ritual washing and drying was complete, Evan made good on her promise and carried Lisa into the bedroom. The blonde gasped at the sight of the candle filled room and the bed freshly made with soft, satin sheets. The petite petals of twelve white roses were scattered atop the bedding and one navy corner was pulled back inviting the couple in. Roses had always been Lisa's favorite flower and in the last year she had been presented with ones of every color of the rainbow. She thought it strange because she had never had the opportunity to mention that fact to Evan. The tall woman just started bringing them at every date. It quickly became a treasured tradition.

They sank into the bed and soft lips met even softer skin. Fingers caressed every curve, slope and valley of the other beautiful body and soon both were lost in their little world of ecstasy. On this morning their actions were raw and intense. But loving, always loving.

Later, after both were temporarily sated, Lisa lazily draped herself over the long figure beneath her and feathered tiny kisses across the smooth planes of the full breast near her head. "I believe you have a story to tell me," she said with a teasing lick across a flaccid nipple.

Evan shuddered. "If you keep doing that I'll be much too busy to talk."

The blonde grinned impishly and scooted higher to rest her head on a broad shoulder. "Sorry. I'll be good. For now."

Evan stared deep into the green eyes that peered up at her in rapt attention. Her distracted silence went on for many long seconds before a little poke in the ribs prompted the words to come out. "Oh yeah. I was filling in for my delivery boy that morning. I trudged all the way across town in heavy, early morning traffic. I was cut off once and nearly sandwiched between two trucks. Needless to say I was really boiling by the time I reached that big office building on Parker Avenue. I gathered up the dozen roses, pricking my thumb on a thorn I had missed."

Lisa lifted her partner's hand and kissed the year old injury.

"It was the other thumb."

"Sorry." Lisa immediately remedied her mistake and waited for Evan to continue.

"I guess there was a patch of ice on the sidewalk and I kind of twisted my ankle on the way into the lobby." Evan flashed twinkling eyes. "You don't have to kiss that," she said with a grin.

Lisa stuck out a pouting, little lip. "Okay, but you didn't happen to fall on your butt at any time during this sorted little tale, did you?"

Evan laughed. "That's about the only thing I didn't do. Anyway, by then I was really pissed. I was mad at that kid who didn't show up for work and I was starting to regret my choice of career. I looked down at the name on the tag and I was going to give Miss Lisa Butler the evil eye when I saw her." She paused dramatically seeing the grin out of the corner of her eye. "But then it happened," Evan said. "I stepped into the lobby and heard someone call out that name. I just

wanted to get rid of those flowers and get out of there, but I looked up and saw a vision of perfection walking toward me. I was dumbfounded. I had never seen anything so absolutely beautiful in my entire life. She had a lovely head of honey blonde hair, she was impeccably dressed in a russet, linen suit and she floated like an angel. I just watched rooted to my spot as she passed by me going to the person who had called her. All of my anger dissolved and all I knew was that I had to meet her. But then I looked down at my faded jeans, paint splattered flannel shirt and mud covered boots. I wanted to make a better impression than that. The weight of the flowers in my hand suddenly registered and I found myself feeling jealous of the person who was sending roses to this beauty. I left them with the receptionist and walked out." Evan finally met the eyes below her. "It took me another forty-eight hours of...well stalking you to finally get up the courage to arrange our accidental meeting."

The story, surprising as it was, sent little patters of happiness across Lisa's heart. "I'm so glad you did," she said. Lisa captured her favorite lips and slowly devoured them for the longest span of time. She reluctantly pulled away with a final nip. "In case you are still wondering, my father sent me those flowers for landing a big account."

The dark head nodded. Of course she had wondered, but since there was obviously no other suitor in the picture, she had never asked.

"Why didn't you ever tell me that before?" Lisa asked.

A single shoulder shrugged, jostling the blonde. "It may have been a little egotistical, but after I knew you just a few weeks I knew this day would come and I decided to save it for now. Goofy huh?"

Lisa tossed her small body completely on top of her lover. She kissed Evan on the chin. "I'm glad you waited. It wouldn't have meant nearly as much to me then as it does now. And it's not goofy at all; it is totally charming. You are the sweetest woman in the world. I love you now and forever."

Later that night, Evan gave Lisa a vase full of paper roses, but without an accompanying chorus of the song by the same name. Their love was genuine. They had proclaimed it their first, first anniversary and it had been probably the best day in their short life together.

* * *

A loud pop from the fire snapped Evan from the wonderful memory. She took another healthy swallow of her drink as her mind reached back even further to that first meeting.

* * *

The small cafeteria inside the large office building was nearly empty as two o'clock neared. Alone at a table near a half wall dotted with potted ferns, the well-dressed blonde studied the photos on the table in front of her. Between bites of the large Caesar salad she had ordered, notes were written on a nearby tablet. The pen and fork finally rested as she took a sip of the tall iced

tea beside her plate.

"Excuse me."

The blonde looked up. As her eyes connected with those of the speaker, her expression froze for just a split second before a congenial smile appeared. "Yes."

Evan held out a bouquet of yellow roses. "Would you like these?" The tall woman chuckled a thumb at a non-existent place behind her. "I just tried to deliver them, but got them thrown back in my face." She chuckled. "Guess her boyfriend or husband is still in the dog house. I worked too hard to cultivate these to have them thrown in the trash. I'd rather they be appreciated by someone nice. And you look very nice."

The words momentarily stuck in the blonde's throat. She swallowed. "Thank you." They finally escaped on the second try as she reached for the tissue wrapped flowers. Her fingers brushed against the other woman's and her gaze was again drawn to the blue eyes. "Do you have a minute to sit down?" she asked.

Evan couldn't help but smile widely. "Sure. That's one good thing about being the boss."

"I know what you mean, being the boss's daughter has a few perks too. I'm with Sold by Design, an advertising firm up on the third floor. Would you like something to eat or drink?" She rubbed a soft petal on one of the flowers beside her. "It's the least I could do in return for such a beautiful and unexpected gift."

"No, thank you. The gift of your company is repayment enough. I'm Evan Marlow by the way."

The blonde coyly bit at her lower lip, excited by the simple compliment. She took the offered hand and introduced herself. "Lisa Butler. Again, thank you for the flowers." She released a troubled breath. "It's really brightened my day. My client is being a real bas..." Lisa suddenly grimaced at her unprofessional behavior. "I'm sorry. You don't want to hear my complaints."

Evan smiled slightly. "That's okay. Everybody needs a sounding board once in a while. Strangers aren't often willing to listen, but I am."

The comfort between them flowed almost immediately. They both chatted on about their respective careers and family as nearly sixty minutes slipped away. Lisa learned just a little about Evan's parents and that she had a younger sister, older brother and nieces and nephews that she adored. Lisa spoke quietly about having lost her mother at an early age, but how wonderful her father was and how she had followed in his footsteps.

The ringing of Lisa's cell phone broke the rhythm of their conversation. The business call lasted less than a minute. Evan pretended to look elsewhere to give her new friend some privacy, but from the corner of her eye she saw the cute blonde checking her out in a not so platonic manner. Evan's insides were doing a happy dance. Knowing that the attraction seemed to be mutual lessened the guilt she felt over plotting the little meeting.

"Sorry about that Evan," Lisa said as she slipped the tiny phone back into the pocket of her suit jacket.

"That's okay. Do you have to go?" Evan's voice held just the right amount of disappointment.

The green in Lisa's eyes shimmered. "No. As a matter of fact, my last appointment of the day just canceled. If you still have the time could we move this conversation over to the lounge? We'll be a little more comfortable there. I'm having such a good time talking with you. I don't want it to end just yet."

"I think that sounds wonderful. In fact I can't think of anything else I'd like to do at the moment."

Lisa gathered her photos and notes and placed them in her slim briefcase. She reached for the flowers, sniffing their fragrance and smiling at the tall woman who had moved to pull back the stiff, cafeteria chair.

They walked across the shiny marbled floor of the office building's vast lobby, standing a little closer to one another than perhaps most new acquaintances would. But neither one was about to protest.

The brightly decorated lounge welcomed them with a gurgling, wishing pond. Lisa stopped and fished around in her jacket pocket for the few coins she had left after paying for her lunch. Closing her eyes and tossing them in, they landed with a plop as she explained. "We give the money to a different charity each month. It's a daily ritual for me."

The generous and compassionate, little blonde had just earned more of Evan's admiration. She pulled a handful of change from the pocket of her black, crisply pressed jeans and dropped them, one at a time, into the clear water. She made one wish for each coin, the last one being just a tad selfish.

Each took a seat in one of the two matching, plush chairs that faced a huge, floor to ceiling window. Lisa placed her things on the small table between them and briefly watched some children who were ice-skating on the courtyard rink she and many others in the building had petitioned for the previous year.

The dark head turned to Lisa, but nodded toward the window. "Do you?"

"Skate? Oh yes. It's great fun. You?"

The tall woman's expression deflated. "Uh, no." Her dark brows drew together. "And I'm not really sure why. My parents never asked and neither did I."

Lisa nodded and was silent for just a second. "I...could...well teach you. If you would want to learn."

The blue eyes gazed back at the skaters, but replaced them with a vision of herself holding onto Lisa Butler as they uneasily glided around the icy oval. Her lips curled. "That looks like fun. Yeah."

"Great! How about tomorrow...around four?"

"Perfect."

"Good. I look forward to it Evan."

"Me too."

"You know, Evan is a beautiful name and it really fits you, but it is unusual for a woman. Any story behind that?"

Evan didn't tell many what she was about to tell this adorable person. She leaned forward across the table as if to whisper and her new friend eagerly did the same. "Actually..." The raven hued head turned left, then right and looked behind for eavesdropping ears. Once all was clear, she sighed. "My full name is Evangelique Clarette Simone Marlow." Lisa smiled charmingly as she continued. "My mother is French and very dramatic. She's the only one who gets by calling me that now. But I think I'm luckier than my brother. His name is Paris Francois."

The blonde casually laid a hand on top of Evan's and her emerald eyes popped amusingly. "Your brother's name is Paris France?" she asked.

The dark head nodded. "Basically. Mom was born in France, but her family moved to the states when she was ten. But she still acts like a goodwill ambassador, like it's her personal mission to bring France to the world. I don't know; she's one of a kind. "

The blonde chuckled softly. "What about your sister, what's her name?"

"Well, she got extremely lucky. By the time the third child came, my Dad insisted on choosing the name. Grace Alexandra was thrilled. Even in the crib you could see that gleam in her eye. I just knew she was teasing us." Evan took a breath and just a moment to study the lovely face and captivating smile directed at her. A faint dimple appeared on the left cheek and Evan flexed her fingers to keep them from betraying her and reaching out to caress the adorable, little feature. The pink skin above her button nose crinkled with two tiny creases as the green on either side fairly glowed with pure emotion. It was all very subtle and would probably only be seen by very interested eyes. And Evan was very interested. But the longer she talked to Lisa, she began to realize that it was no longer just a physical attraction. There was a pull that came from somewhere deep inside and like a magnet it sought out the same place in the person before her. Evan really hoped she wasn't being too obvious, but she was powerless to stop. "I love Mom dearly," she finally continued, "but sometimes she is just way over the top. I'm anxious for you to meet her. Just hang on to your head before it goes spinning off at the inquisition. She always quizzes my gir..." Evan suddenly trapped her runaway tongue inside a cage of determined teeth.

Her eyes widened then slipped shut in embarrassment. With a small sigh she peeked through one sapphire orb and saw the most beautiful sight.

Lisa grinned sweetly and winked. She took hold of Evan's hand and placed a chaste, but promising kiss on a slightly ruby cheek. "I would very much like to meet your mother...someday soon," she said. "Maybe after our fifth or sixth date."

The two shared a laugh and a wonderful new beginning.

* * *

Evan giggled mutedly as the memory faded. Her last wish had come true. She released a sigh and tossed her head back against the soft cushion of the sofa. She looked around the large, cabin room decorated in dark colors and heavy fabrics. She had grown up visiting this place that her parents had owned since before she was born. Two weeks in the summer, two in the fall and other weekends here and there. The June visitations saw her swimming in the nearby lake with her siblings and walking the trails with her mother, gathering flowers in the sun. That was where she had developed her love of nature, which had inspired her choice of careers. Times with her father were spent fishing for their dinners. Sitting side by side on the small dock he would tell her family stories. He wasn't a particularly good storyteller, but those simple tales did instill in her a strong pride in her heritage. In autumn, little Evan collected bags of nuts and bunches of colorful leaves.

The grown woman turned her gaze to the kitchen where she would stand beside her mother helping to bake pies and other yummy desserts. Lisa had been truly grateful when she became the beneficiary of those baking lessons, especially for a strawberry, cream tart that Evan had created.

Once learning to drive, Evan had made more frequent trips to the mountain spot by herself. Whenever life took a wrong turn it became her private retreat to escape to, to seek solace against the disappointments, the trials...the heartbreaks. She was safe here.

Evan discarded her empty glass to the small table beside the sofa. She flicked off the lamp, leaving only the illumination of the fire. Crossing her arms, she reveled in the comfort of the soft, loose top and pants she had chosen for the evening. The mental inventory of her garb finished with her lack of foot wear. Cold feet. She raised her long legs and perched the bare appendages on the raised, stone hearth where the nearby flames quickly warmed her soles. And the memories continued to warm her soul.

The blue eyes settled on the planter of succulent greenery and colorful blooms she had brought with her from the city. Evan thought a little cheerfulness would be needed inside since the outside had now completed the transition from the visual beauty of autumn to the decay of pre-winter. The heat of the fire helped to release the fragrance of the floral elements she had chosen. She was quite proud of her green thumb.

Evan had had a pretty successful nursery and floral shop, but once Lisa had come to work for

her, the business tripled. The blonde was an advertising genius, but after ten years she had tired of the cold, impersonal business world. Their teamwork flowed from personal to professional with ease and Evan was soon servicing more hotels and weddings than she had ever imagined possible. They had worked beautifully together up until a month ago when Lisa's replacement had started. Evan sorely missed the blonde beauty's smiling face every time she looked into the office.

The dark head shook away the sudden moroseness. Switching mental gears, Evan returned to the good feelings and good times. She wiggled her toes against the heat, remembering an evening not long after they had moved in together.

* * *

Weekends were hectic at work and on this Sunday in May it had been an absolute bear. They both were in constant motion from morning to six pm closing. They dragged themselves into the house half an hour later. Too tired to cook, they ordered a pizza then slipped into a relaxing, bubble bath. Freshly clean and with appetites satisfied, Evan and Lisa indulged in a little mutual pampering. The couple was sitting on opposite ends of the bed and the taller woman was being treated to a foot massage. Evan began moaning and mumbling incoherently as the ache was quickly being replaced with something just this side of heaven.

Lisa pushed deeply into the sore, right arch as she studied the healthy, pink appendage. "You have the sexiest foot...probably on Earth," she said.

The dark eyes popped open. "What?"

Lisa lifted the subject in question and placed a kiss to the tip of each slender, well-shaped toe. "This is the nicest, sexiest foot in the world."

Evan snorted and grudgingly accepted the compliment. "If you say so." She wiggled the other foot and asked, "What about this one?"

The blonde cradled both extremities, skimming her thumbs across the soft indentions. "Excuse me. You have the sexiest pair of feet I have ever seen."

Evan rose up to her elbows and eyed her partner curiously. "Well that diminishes that, doesn't it?" she said. "I know you have not personally seen every pair of feet in the world. In fact, all things considered, you have probably seen just a minute portion of the world's population of feet. So..."

Lisa suddenly gave her jabbering partner the evil eye...and a few evil fingers.

* * *

Evan giggled and wiggled her warm feet, remembering the tickling sensation and the torture that went on for almost ten minutes. And the snuggling that followed. That was the best part. That

was the very best part of any time. Just to be quietly together wrapped so tightly in each other's arms that the world could not intrude.

A pain suddenly flew across the joints of Evan's right hand. She looked down and flexed the sore fingers. "Ouch. Damn. Well, that's what you get for chopping wood all afternoon." She had forgotten to inform the caretaker that she was coming to the cabin for the weekend and the fireplace provided a good deal of the heat. So the axe fell again and again. She wiggled the long digits once more. "You are almost thirty six. I guess it's all down hill from here."

That triggered a memory of her 34th birthday.

* * *

Lisa had slept on as Evan hopped from the bed. Even after her shower the small woman was still snoozing. She had told Evan that she was taking the day off and of course the birthday girl had sort of anticipated...oh maybe breakfast in bed. But it didn't happen. In fact Lisa hadn't mentioned that this day was going to be any different than any other. Evan was a little disappointed until she remembered that she had only mentioned her date of birth once and that had been not long after they had met. So it made sense that Lisa had forgotten. But she had never asked. Maybe that did hurt a little.

The mid-spring day was sunny and just breezy enough to enhance the nice warm air. Business was good, but it wasn't anything she couldn't leave to her two assistants, so by noon Evan decided to take the rest of the day off. She deserved it. Evan made a side trip on the way home treating herself to a new pair of soft, leather shoes and two new DVDs she had been wanting.

She pulled into the drive of their new house and stopped once again to admire the job they had been doing fixing it up. They had searched for over a month, finding many nice houses, but none that they immediately connected to. One Saturday they came across this three-bedroom, ranch house at the edge of town. The thirty-year-old abode was structurally sound, although drastically in need of updating. But that was just what they had been looking for, someplace they could work on and create together. New paint, wallpaper, carpets and flooring had been installed in the short time they had lived there and every room was coming together thanks to Lisa's great design talents. Evan was really excited about getting the basement finished. The space was large, but stuffed full of moving boxes yet to be unpacked. But the clutter, cold concrete and dust was soon to disappear, making way for a fully equipped recreation room, complete with home theatre system.

The one thing that had really sold them was the three surrounding acres. The property was at the edge of a little woodsy area and Evan had immediately planted trees, shrubs and plants from her own nursery, creating what was growing into their own personal Garden of Eden.

Evan was happy to see her lover's car in the drive, but a little dismayed not to find the blonde pixie anywhere in the house. An expanded search found her partner lounging in their newly landscaped backyard. An evil smile stole across Evan's face as she began to tip toe forward.

With her sun screened face raised to the sky and green eyes hidden under dark glasses, Lisa reached beside her chair for the full glass of lemonade she had placed there just minutes before. Coming up with only air she popped up, searching the table and surrounding ground. "What the?" Suddenly the glass appeared in her vision and with it a yellow rose.

"Looking for this?"

The husky timbre of that voice sent a chill down Lisa's back. She jumped up from the chair and into Evan's arms. "What are you doing home?" she asked enthusiastically.

Evan bent down and kissed the smiling lips. "Didn't wanna work anymore today," she mumbled as she moved to nuzzle the soft neck, the long blonde hair caressing her cheek. "I just wanna be with you."

"That's so sweet," Lisa said. She trailed the sun colored blossom down Evan's tan face as they looked deeply into each other's eyes. Without averting her gaze she took Evan's hand. "Let's take a walk." They journeyed through the growing garden and meandered through a small maze of emerald hedges. Reaching an open space in the middle of the sculptured greenery, Lisa looked up at her tall lover's face waiting for a reaction. The dark eyes landed upon a blanket topped with a picnic basket and a package wrapped in a vivid red and gold. Peeking from the bushes were two large, silver, wheeled carts. Their mystery was intriguing. "Happy birthday sweetheart," Lisa said with a kiss to a stunned jaw.

"I...uh...it's wonderful." Evan's shock finally faded and she smiled at the beauty beside her, silently scolding herself for underestimating her partner. "Thank you honey. It's great and I'm starved." The look in her eye spoke of more than just food, causing Lisa's cheeks to darken.

"Yes, well, lets have the food first then we'll work on your...other appetites." Only then did she relinquish the hold on her partner. "Have a seat," Lisa said as she moved to retrieve their meal from the rented warming cart and portable refrigerator.

Evan's eyes widened as a plate with a two tiered, fully loaded hamburger and a mound of steaming fries was set before her. But the surprise was only half complete as Lisa then retrieved a large, frothy, chocolate milkshake and it joined the burger. Gaze still locked onto the hearty meal, Evan licked her lips in anticipation. "Honey, this is just about my favorite meal...present company excluded." She took a sip of the chocolate shake, sucking hard on the straw to draw the thick drink into her mouth. Figuring she shouldn't have to work that hard on her birthday, she finally pushed the straw aside and gulped it down. "You couldn't have made a better selection or a better setting for this. And I love you for it."

Lisa leaned forward and lingered against the cool, chocolatey lips. "I love you too, now and forever. I know you thought I forgot about your birthday," she said as she started in on her own food.

Evan fiddled with a fry, twirling the tip through a dollop of ketchup. "Well...." She shrugged a shoulder. "It didn't matter." The tall florist never got her feelings hurt. Well she did, she was only

human. But she rarely ever let anyone see that hurt.

But Lisa always knew. "Liar."

Evan's cheeks ruddied and she finally looked up, aggressively snapping off the end of the doused fry. But her eyes smiled gently.

And Lisa always held the key to soothing the hurt, large or small.

She grabbed the clenched hand and slowly chewed down the long, French fry, licking the salt from Evan's fingertips. "Don't worry," she said. "I will never forget anything about the most important person in my life."

The rest of the day had been wonderful, filled with laughter, lovemaking...and life.

* * *

Evan wiggled the fingers on her right hand. No longer concentrating on the ache, now all she noticed was the ring perched on her finger. Her birthday present. The small, bright emerald winked at her, its brilliance more dazzling with the fire's reflection. It may be her birthstone, but she loved it so much more because it matched her little gem's lovely eyes.

Another ring caught her attention.

Evan picked up the petite, gold band that lay on the table beside her. She unconsciously twirled the matching one on her left hand finger. She kissed the ring, which was now threaded on a chain for safekeeping. Evan placed the beloved piece of jewelry back on the tabletop just as a gust of frigid air rattled a loose windowpane.

There had been another very cold night that ranked high in her well of memories.

* * *

Lisa shuffled from the kitchen carrying two steaming mugs. Peaks of whipped cream stood high above the ceramic rims, slowly melting into the chocolate concoction. She handed off one of the oversized cups and settled onto the sofa, scooting in as close to Evan as possible. She sniffed the wonderful aroma, the delicious warmth radiating over her fingers as both hands cradled the mug. That however was the only thing that was warm. She gingerly sipped the hot beverage, humming happily at the sweetness. Lisa swiped away a few wayward droplets of brown liquid from her upper lip. A tiny squeak escaped as another tongue licked at the tip of her nose, removing a fluffy blob of white cream.

"Mmmm. Even more delicious than this," Evan said, holding up her second choice.

They were both dressed from neck to ankle in heavy sweats, one set blue the other white. Four pairs of socks covered two sets of feet as they sat in front of the unroaring sizzle of a small

electric heater.

Evan trembled against the chill. "What a night for the furnace to go out," she said with slightly chattering teeth.

"It must be a conspiracy. That's why the repairman can't get here until tomorrow morning."

Evan wrapped a long arm around Lisa's shoulder, pulling her closer. "Are you sorry we didn't go to my Mom's tonight?"

The blonde head shook. "No." Lisa patted a fleece-covered belly. "This is kinda cozy. We'll be warm enough if we stay just like this. Body heat is a wondrous thing."

They sat quietly, finishing their hot chocolate and listening to just the humming of the heater. Evan finally looked down at the head resting on her shoulder. She smiled and set her empty mug aside. "You know," she said softly, "your lips still look cold. Perhaps I could help you with that."

Lisa matched her grin. "I bet you could. Give it your best shot."

Evan wasted no time doing just that, turning her long body for a full assault.

"Toasty." Lisa managed the whisper before all words faded into their mingled breaths.

The kissing didn't last long. Wonderful as it was, it didn't need to. On this evening, the tame affections were more than enough to satisfy each of them. They survived the night tucked tightly together under a heavy blanket, wrapped in the warmth of their love.

* * *

Evan refilled her wine glass as she was assailed with yet more memories.

The first time they had made love. It was the night they had moved into their new house, almost five months since their first date. Neither one was a virgin, but somehow it just felt right for them to wait until they felt a real sense of permanence in their relationship. The starry night was beautiful and bright. Surrounded by dozens of bouquets of roses, the romance blossomed, leading two bodies to join for the first time...and two souls to merge once again.

Not every one of Evan's recollections was joyous however. There had been more than a few sad times and a few tears in the span of twenty-four months. There was an auto accident and six weeks of recovery, the death of a beloved grandparent and yet another health scare. But the difficult times only served to bring them closer as they had faced it all side by side and hand in hand. They fought through it. They fought each other. But they never forgot. They never forgot the love.

Evan looked at the framed picture of Lisa that sat on the mantle. Her eyes took in the smile and the newly shorn, golden hair that outlined those fabulous features. Evan's lips trembled slightly

before she spoke. "In sickness and in health. Till death do us part." She paused before adding, "But it never will."

It was Lisa's last birthday that had started it all. Another beautiful day in the course of their evolving relationship, where the ever-present roses and other gifts were presented with love. But it was the fateful discussion they had that evening that had led to Evan now sitting alone, deep in contemplation. The decision they had made changed everything.

She rubbed a spot on her neck where it had started to stiffen, probably another side effect from the chopping, she thought. Moving from the sofa she knelt next to the stone hearth and stoked the fire as she recalled the end of their first, first anniversary. They had spent the day in and out of bed...mostly in. A tickling, quiver settled in Evan's belly as she could almost feel the sensations of Lisa's hands on her body and of her own fingers, mouth, tongue...stroking, tasting... "It's been too long," she murmured while scratching the itch, but not quelling the desire. Her mind quickly returned to that evening just one year before.

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As evening had dragged on food finally became a necessity. They briefly dressed to share the cooking duties, had a delicious meal and undressing once again, crawled back beneath the sheets.

In the final afterglow of the day, Lisa had turned to her wife and smiled. "This has been **the most** perfect day," she said. "I love you Evan, now..."

"And forever." In the small cabin in the shadow of the fire, Evan said the words she had spoken on that night and many others since. The dark haired woman grew solemn as her fingertips skimmed the smooth surface of the glass in her hand and a strange sort of a wisp of a smile formed on her face. "Nothing will ever be that perfect again." The statement slipped, almost ghostly from between parted lips.

"I'm sorry."

Evan turned at the sound of the small voice and a terrific grin suddenly ignited her formerly placid features. There she was, the woman who filled her heart and fulfilled all of her dreams. As sweet as Evan's memories were, nothing compared to the sight and the sound of her exquisite partner. "Because from now on it will be even better than perfect," she said, rising instantly to her feet. She approached the blonde, standing in the doorway and wrapped gentle arms around her mate, softly kissing her temple. "There is nothing to be sorry for, sweetheart."

"I kept you waiting," Lisa explained. "But I wanted to look good for you tonight. At least as good as I can right now."

Evan lifted the drooping chin and stared into the uncertain eyes. "Honey, you are beautiful. You always have been and you always will be." She saw the doubt still lingering in the green orbs and made a quick, but easy decision. Evan leaned forward and poured all the love she could manage into a long and passionate kiss.

Lisa finally smiled. "That was very nice. Thank you." Her expression faded again. "I'm also sorry that I have been neglecting you these past few months."

"Sweetie, I haven't felt neglected." Evan reached down and placed her hand upon Lisa's swollen belly, feeling the tumbling baby within. She grinned, as she always did at the touch, the sight, and the thought of their first child. "You've had something a lot more important on your mind," she said. Her other hand moved to sooth the twitching muscles of Lisa's lower back. It had not been an easy pregnancy. Lisa had suffered horrible morning sickness, not relegated to just mornings and lasting far longer than the normal measure of time. And because of an old back injury, suffered when she was a teenager, the extra weight had left her in almost constant pain. Together they had already decided that when it came time to add to their family again, they would adopt. And in her already depressed state that had made Lisa feel all the more inadequate.

Evan nuzzled the blonde's neck, knowing it had always been one of Lisa's favorite forms of affection. Besides small kisses, it was the only intimate action they had enjoyed together for months. Lisa just didn't feel attractive...or attracted to Evan, despite her intense love. The dark haired woman paused, inhaling the perfume that always drove her crazy. But she put a quick leash on her libido. "I realize how hard this pregnancy has been and I admire your strength so much."

Lisa's hand joined the one on her mid-section, hoping to sooth the rambunctious babe. She leaned her head against her wife's shoulder, savoring the moment. "You are my strength." The words were released within a heady breath. Lisa sighed, slowly absorbing the power of their love. "Happy second, first anniversary," she said smiling and initiating another kiss. "I love you."

"Happy second, first anniversary. I love you Lisa." Another kiss followed. "Would you feel better lying down or sitting on the couch?" Evan asked.

Lisa would be the first to tell anyone that Evan had been an extremely supportive partner during the troubling eight and a half months. That was the only thing that had gotten her through. That and the clear image she had of their baby's face. The baby that they had created together, not biologically, but emotionally.

Lisa hesitated, giving it some serious consideration.

"It doesn't matter," Evan assured, "I just want to be with you."

"Lying in bed I think."

Evan nodded, wrapped an arm around Lisa's waist and they took the short trek to the bedroom, where the tall woman settled her pregnant partner against several fluffy pillows. "I'll be right back," she said and quickly disappeared back through the door. She returned just seconds later carrying a long necked bottle and two glasses. Lisa quizzed her with a wrinkled brow. "Sparkling grape juice," Evan explained.

The blonde smiled.

After a silent toast and a few sips, Lisa studied her wife's gorgeous face. She saw their future in those vibrant, dark eyes. It was exactly what she saw the first time she had looked into those electrifying orbs, even if she hadn't realized it right at that moment. And she knew that it would be the last thing she would see as she took her last breath. The love she felt for this woman was beyond intense. It dictated every breath. Brightened every darkness and made her complete.

Evan shifted, reaching behind her and coming back with a single red rose.

Lisa took the bloom and smiled. This one was just as special as the first. "You have given me a flower every day that we've been together and I've never given you even one."

"Oh, but you are." The blue eyes drifted to the bulging belly. "You are giving me our precious, little Emily Rose. This is something I never would have been able to experience without you. Thank you." She paused, rubbing tiny circles across the taught flesh. "In just a few weeks we will have our one perfect rose."

Lisa's overstressed hormones bubbled up and the tears spilled from her otherwise happy eyes. But Evan understood. She just waited for the emotions to calm. Four fingertips soon brushed the side of her face and drew her nearer for a kiss, but an unexpected request temporarily prevented the joining of lips.

"Make love to me."

Evan pulled back slightly, her heart pounding at the sound of the four little words. She searched the green eyes as she heard herself ask, "Are you s...?"

"I'm positive."

Evan kissed the two fingertips resting against her lips and continued on to the palm, the hollow of a sweet smelling wrist and on until she reached her original destination. The passion easily consumed their conscious thoughts, but Evan reached up through the delicious haze and pulled the ties on the sheer fabric that covered the body she desperately wanted to worship. Moving carefully and deliberately over the delicate frame, Evan's praise turned to the lush breasts that would soon nourish their child. Concentrating on her own hunger at the moment, lips and teeth tenderly nibbled on the pebbly summits while her hands caressed the silky skin and lovingly cradled the weight. Lisa threaded her fingers through her lover's midnight strands, telling of her pleasure with breathless words of adulation. She was soaring. No longer cognizant of her heavy body, she floated on the clouds of sensations traveling through her, slowly coalescing, heading toward the pinnacle. Her moans and squeals of absolute delight inspired Evan and the older woman's caresses leisurely drifted south. She peppered kisses across the enlarged belly, dipping her tongue into a ticklish navel as her hand traveled on. With the gentlest, but most impassioned of movements Evan stroked the golden, pulsating center. The liquid warmth slid between her fingers, feeling soft and sweet. Lisa gave a gentle tug on the dark tresses, calling for the very best of Evan's oral attentions. Their lips joined and tongues danced as the exquisite tension neared its breaking point. Time suddenly disappeared and everything was as it had always been. Lisa

couldn't hold back any longer as the physical and emotional crises slipped away, leaving nothing but wondrous joy. She cried over what had long been missed as the orgasm cascaded over her. Evan felt her own pleasure explode as she heard her name called out in ecstasy.

The world revolves around change. And Evan and Lisa's world would be forever changed with the introduction of the baby they both desperately wanted. The changes had already begun. Not all of them pleasant and most of them unexpected, but very well worth the trip. Even Lisa believed that in her most miserable moments. But through every one of those times all she had to do was look beside her and see the one thing that would never change. The devotion was always there. Each for the other in a gaze or a simple touch. Strong and unbreakable

As the passionate tremors subsided, Evan gathered her wife into her arms and kissed her gently.

"Evan, you make me feel so wonderful, so special. I've missed you."

"I've always been right here. And I always will be. You are so beautiful to me Lisa. I love you, now and..."

"Forever."

The end.