

~ Reflections ~  
Erin O'Reilly

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Acknowledgment: Thank you for all your encouragement Julie.

Dedication: This story is for a special courageous lady Teresa.

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Ruth Arnold stood in front of a full length mirror and assessed her nakedness. Her forty-seven year old body wasn't as supple and firm as when she was in her twenties, but all in all, it was in remarkably good shape. Her gaze traveled to the face with the familiar light brown hair framing the jaw line, cheeks, lips, and nose. She frowned when she looked into the dark blue eyes reflecting back at her. She whispered, "Who are you," before she stared into the depths of the vacant, lifeless orbs. In one fluid motion, she turned away then with slow purposeful movements turned back to look again. "Who are you?"

Life was never easy for Ruth. Born to working class parents, she learned to live without the trappings of dress and looks that her classmates seemed to flaunt. Hand-me-downs and off the rack at the Salvation Army was her choice of fashion while growing up. Even when she was old enough to earn her own money, she still shopped frugally since most of her salary went into the family coffer. Food and bills were more important than the latest fashions. At seventeen, she found the upside to being poor was the numerous grants and scholarships available to her in the state university system.

In her senior year of college, she met and married Craig Arnold. A new phase of her life began, as she became what she always dreamed of—the picture perfect wife and mother while her husband worked. She believed that all fairytales came true until on her thirtieth birthday when Craig kissed her goodbye, left for work and never returned. At first, she feared he might have met with foul play or was in some accident with amnesia but his disappearance was far worse—he embezzled six hundred thousand dollars from the company for which he worked.

To Ruth's way of thinking, she would have been better off if Craig had died. She couldn't afford the monthly mortgage payment on their home, make the car payment, or pay the utilities. His being on the run meant there was no life insurance and she couldn't sell the house until the powers that be declared him legally dead. Their depleted savings left her with a meager five thousand dollars to live on—it didn't last. Soon, creditors were calling her at all hours demanding their money—she had none.

The biology degree that Ruth pursued while she waited for Prince Charming, proved worthless ten years later—experience only was the mantra of the two places that agreed to interview her. Soon it became evident that she didn't have training in the essential skills needed to find a job that would support her three children and herself. As a young adult, she worked as a babysitter and McDonald's employee—not a resume that screamed hire me. After the bank foreclosed on the house, she sold what furnishings she could and moved her family to a small two bedroom apartment. She held down two jobs; one during the day at a daycare and while her kids slept, as a waitress at a twenty-four hour diner. Sleep became a luxury that she could not afford since she needed to

spend her non-working hours with her three sons.

Now, at forty-seven, Ruth was isolated and alone. For her, friends were non-existent even at the most basic level and the family she had left was distant and removed. One by one, her boys went off to college and never returned even during their summer break. The dismal life that the boys lead after their father's departure was something that each son shied away from—their mother's lifestyle of poverty. Ruth couldn't blame them for they had moved on to a better life and she was happy for them. In spite of all the hardships they endured as children, each had grown into men that she proudly called sons. After her youngest left her home, Ruth would scrape together enough money to make a long bus trip that took her to each of her son's locations. It was painfully clear to her after her last adventure two years earlier that her kids lived in a world that she did not belong. After that, she retreated to her comfort zone and relied on their weekly phone calls as her only contact with their lives.

As she looked out of a grungy window to the street below she realized that Christmas was fast approaching. People, whom she assumed were revelers, trudged on the sidewalks through the snow and slush loaded with bags that she speculated were the perfect gifts for their loved ones. She said, "Foolish people," in a low voice before she turned away and took in her dreary living room through the open doorway. It was her choice to continue living a life of hand to mouth after the boys left. It was her penance for the shame that Craig's crime caused the family. Her thoughts turned back to the upcoming holiday, which to her was just another day in her dreary existence. There would be no decorations, tree, bright lights, or a festive meal for there would be no one with her on the day. Her sons would offer to pay for a plane ticket so she could join them for the holidays, but she always refused saying, "Save your money for something important." She was determined that her children would never suffer the hardships of poverty again and to her, spending money so she could visit was foolish.

She glanced out the window again, focused on the people laden with packages, and shook her head. "I won't even get a lump of coal." That was an exaggeration for her sons were always generous—too generous—where gifts for her were concerned. When she used to work for the daycare, she would receive gifts from grateful parents but that changed when she had a dispute with the director and quit. Now, the job she laughingly referred to as her independent contractor job—a telemarketer—held no such fringe benefit. The job suited her for it required very little overhead and that meant she didn't have to leave her small apartment. Therefore, there was no need for a car or suitable work clothes. All the loose change and bills that she had at the end of each week went into a can on top of the refrigerator. She called it her mad money for when the time came for her to escape her dismal surroundings—she never did.

It was Friday, and that meant going to the market for her weekly groceries. She

ran her hand across the clothes hanging loosely on the rack that was her closet and wondered what she should wear. Not that it mattered—she didn't need to impress the grocer. Her clothing selection was meager at best, but they were clean and to her way of thinking that counted for something. She settled on a worn pair of jeans and a bulky green pullover. She quickly looked back into the mirror and let her gaze fall on her lifeless eyes again. "How did I let myself get this way? I'm a shut-in that no one in this town cares about." She shrugged and shook her head before slipping into her clothes.

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A booted foot stepped out onto the concrete sidewalk and crunched on salt pellets. Elyse, El to her friends, Baxter surveyed the area before she settled on Winston's Brew House for a late lunch. She only had time for a quick bite before she headed to the airport to catch a flight for a weekend in Bermuda with the three women that she shared an apartment with in college. She arrived in the city of Concord a year earlier after her promotion to vice president in charge of the fraud division of Metropolis Insurance Company. Her promotion, considered as a coup for someone so young, meant she was on the fast track. She knew that if she were to stay in the running, she needed to put in long hours and go on frequent business trips. She took it in stride for outside of work there was nothing waiting for her. Every year she looked forward to December and her get-away with her old friends as her yearly R&R.

Although the quartet drifted apart over the fifteen years since graduation, they all kept the first weekend in December open for the trip to Bermuda. El was the only one of the group not to marry and have children. She had her share of lovers but none that ever lasted. Some of her paramours resented competing with her job, others didn't suit her for the long term, and there were those who she just used for sex—lots of them. For the most part, at thirty-eight, El was satisfied with her life although a small part of her longed for what her friends had—a stable loving relationship.

Caught up in her thoughts, El didn't see the woman before she collided headlong into her. Startled, she looked into the deep blue eyes of the woman she had by the shoulders. "Sorry, my fault I wasn't looking where I was going."

Ruth, trying to steady herself and get out of the woman's grip, took a step backward only to find herself sitting with an unceremonious thud on the cold concrete. When she lifted her eyes, she saw a look of horror on the face of the woman standing over her. The woman reached out a hand and Ruth shook her head. "No, that's ok I can get up myself," she said as she pushed herself off the hard, salty sidewalk.

Her years in insurance made El painfully aware of how a simple run-in could

have the potential for a big payout. “Please let me at least pay to have your coat cleaned,” she said as she assessed the woman for possible injuries. The coat was tattered and thread-bare and El wondered what purpose it served. *Surely, it can't keep her warm.* When she spied the bulky sweater underneath, it occurred to her that the woman was probably homeless. “Are you hurt?” she asked as she let her eyes search the woman’s face.

“No, no I’m fine...just fine. No need to pay for any cleaning, this old thing would probably fall apart with a proper cleaning.”

“Then let me buy you a new coat.” *Always make sure you give back* her father would say and El gave herself a congratulatory pat on the back for her generous gesture.

Ruth eyed the immaculately dressed woman, whose dark hair was dotted with snowflakes, in question before her gaze turned into a glare. “I’m not a charity case. If I want a new coat I’ll buy myself one,” she said as she brushed at the back of her coat in annoyance.

“No, you’ve got it all wrong. I don’t think any such thing,” El protested. “All I’m saying is that it was my fault...I bumped into you and I would like to make it up to you.” El couldn’t believe the words coming out of her mouth. The insurance company’s credo was clear on blame—never freely admit to any wrongdoing. Yet, there she was doing just that. Mentally she smacked her head as she justified her actions as an act of kindness for someone who was obviously down and out.

“You don’t owe me anything. Please, I need to get to the market before it closes.”

Undaunted, El asked, “Which market is that?”

Ruth’s eyes, that were the deep blue of a clear cold day, fixed on the woman. “Fannelli’s.”

“Funny thing, I am going there too,” El said as she turned back in the direction she came from. “Shall we walk there together?”

“Suit yourself,” Ruth said as she started to walk away. A thought occurred to her and she stopped and looked back at the woman. “If you were going there why were you going in the opposite direction?”

“I forgot something and was going back for it.”

“Uh huh.” Ruth was certain that the woman was lying and she suddenly felt oddly exposed. The stranger was clearly in a much different social class than

her and Ruth was certain that she didn't do her shopping in that section of town. She walked faster.

With longer strides, El was able to catch up to the woman before she began to walk in step by her side. *Has she bewitched me?* For some reason her feet keep moving toward the corner market. She covertly looked at the woman again. *No spells, I'm just trying to cover my ass from a lawsuit.* The fallacy of that reasoning escaped her as she stepped inside the market behind the other woman. El immediately inhaled the sweet aroma of just baked cookies.

"Hello Ms. Arnold," Giorgio the proprietor said. His eyes tracked to the women who had come into his store with his long time customer. "Is this a friend of yours?"

"No we just came in together," El offered before the woman could speak. Not that it mattered, for the woman made a beeline for the back of the store. El inwardly chuckled for she wasn't used to getting such a quick brush off. *But then again I'm not interested in her that way.*

The grocer gave El a warm smile and asked, "What can I do for you Miss?"

"Are those fresh cookies I smell?"

"Yes...probably still warm. My wife took them out of the oven a short while ago."

Reaching for her wallet, El took out a twenty. "May I have two dozen?"

The grocer nodded and walked away. El's eyes searched for the woman who the man had called Ms. Arnold. *If they know her by name then my assumption that she is indigent was wrong.* She felt her cheeks sting and knew there was no way to wipe away her slight blush. In her line of work, it was mandatory that she be a good judge of people—she misjudged the woman. After rummaging through her purse, she found her card case and took one out. After she jotted down her private number on the back, she walked toward the woman she mowed down on the sidewalk.

When Ruth saw the woman coming in her direction she sighed. *Why does she keep bothering me?*

El extended her hand holding her business card to the woman. "Here, my private number is on the back. If you get home and find that you're in anyway injured from the fall please call me. I'll be out of town for the weekend but I will be monitoring my messages...please call me if you need anything."

Ruth reluctantly took the card and gave it a cursory glance as she lifted her eyebrows. "I told you I am fine Ms...." she looked at the card, "Baxter. There

will be no need for further communication.” Ruth turned away and walked quickly toward the meat counter.

The woman behind the glass encased counter said, “I’ve saved the ends of the lunch meat for you Ruth. I’ll give you it all for two dollars.”

It was impossible for El not to hear what the woman said and she cocked her head slightly. Maybe her initial judgment was that far off the mark. Just then, the grocer said, “Here are your cookies Miss.”

“Thank you,” El said. When she looked down at the white box with string tied around it, she felt a bubble of happiness well up in her. “I am visiting friends this weekend and I know they’ll like them.”

The grocer smiled and said, “Merry Christmas,” as El left the store.

Once back on the cold, noisy street, El walked quickly to the parking garage. Time had slipped away and with the longer time for check-in, and security at the airport, she didn’t want to be late for her flight. *I’ll grab something there.* As she slipped behind the wheel of her Lexus LX 470, she bit her lip and shook her head. “I hope she doesn’t sue me.” She dismissed the thought and focused on the weekend with her friends instead. When the face of the woman she bowled over floated into her consciousness, El shook her head and snorted. “Back away Baxter...no way will I let that incident ruin my weekend.”

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Ruth climbed the steps that lead to the Good Sheppard Baptist Church knowing she was early for the service. The snow that fell the night before made traversing the slippery sidewalks difficult but Ruth was determined to get there. After the service, members of the church were going to hand out coats, gloves, scarves, and boots for a small donation and she wanted to be first in line. After the incident of two days earlier, Ruth was resolute that she would find a better coat. She lost her pride long ago and taking aid from the church was not a repulsive idea. As she sat quietly in the last row of pews, Ruth’s thoughts turned to the woman who offered to buy her a new coat. She had no problem accepting something from the church and wondered why she refused the woman’s offer. She was certain that the coat the woman would buy would have been much better than what she would find at the church.

As her eyes focused on the stain glassed windows she felt a tap on her shoulder and looked up to see one of the church deacons smiling at her. Ruth whispered, “Yes.”

The man leaned in closer before he said, “Please come with me I have

something special for you.”

“But, the service will start soon.”

The man shook his head. “We have time and I promise this won’t take long.”

Ruth slid out of the pew and followed the man down a flight of stairs to a large auditorium filled with tables of clothes.

He smiled at her and said, “We wanted you to be the first to look over the coats. It's our Christmas present to you.”

With a smile of thanks, Ruth began to sort through and try on coats. After she decided on one, she slipped her hand into the pocket of her old coat and took out a five dollar bill. “This is all I can afford,” she said.

The man gently squeezed her hand shut. “Your money is not needed Ruth. Like I said it is our present to you.”

Ruth felt the tears the filled her eyes and swiped them. “Thank you.”

Just as she turned to leave, she felt a firm hand grasp her shoulder before the man guided her to another table. “You need gloves and a scarf,” he said before he looked down at her feet. “And some boots.” He saw the protest in Ruth’s eyes and added, “Please, take them. God’s hand is at work here for he has sent you to us and blessed us with his love. Please, take them.”

Ruth couldn’t stop the tears that trickled down her cheeks. “I am the one that is blessed,” she said as she slipped on a pair of boots.

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El sat in first class and watched as the ground grew closer until the wheels bumped onto the tarmac. She smiled as she recalled the looks on her friend’s faces when she produced the box of cookies. They all teased her about baking Christmas cookies for them and then laughed as they shared mealtime fiascos. The weekend was definitely fun but as with all trips that she took, she was glad to be home. Home was a relative term for her since it had been a long time since she felt she had a real home. When she brought a girlfriend to her parent's home for Christmas ten years earlier and announced that they would share a bed, the upheaval it caused was monumental. After that it was clear that her family no longer welcomed her in their homes.

On several occasions over the weekend, she checked her voice mail to see if the Arnold woman had left a message that she was at the hospital with an injured back. It was her opinion that most people out for a quick buck from an



insurance company, claimed back or neck injuries—they were the easiest to fake. Although her anticipation of speaking to the woman was ludicrous, El hoped that she would hear her voice. The vacant look of the woman's eyes seemed to haunt her and no matter how hard she tried, she couldn't erase that image.

When the plane began to taxi toward the gate, she eased out of her seat, retrieved her bags from the overhead compartment, and then stood with the rest of the weary travelers for the door to open. After dodging other travelers in the airport she made her way to the parking garage and her vehicle. After she unlocked the Lexus's door and slipped behind the wheel, the haunting blue eyes surfaced again. "This is ridiculous," she said as she guided her car toward Metropolis Insurance. "Why do I keep seeing those damn eyes?"

Standing in the doorway to her office, El noticed that her secretary had cleared away the stack of files she left on Friday. As she looked around her office, she let out a deep sigh—the stark nakedness of her office was suddenly evident. "This could be anyone's office," she said as she tightly pursed her lips. "The only thing that distinguishes it as mine is the name on the door." The letdown that she always experienced when she returned from her December trip seemed to overwhelm her, as it never had before. *Holiday blues that's all it is.* She pulled out her chair and sat down. She knew that it was more than just the holidays getting her down. Her life was like her office—devoid of anything personal.

In Bermuda, El listened as her friends complained about absent husbands and kids that needed driving everywhere and she wanted to scream. *Don't they know how lucky they are?* When they told her how envious they were of her life, she only shook her head and laughed. There was no way she'd let on how lonely she was or how she longed for their lives.

"I wonder if that is why I feel so drawn to that woman," she said to the empty office. "Does the look in her eyes mirror mine?"

In a sign of resignation that reflected her mood, El pushed back from her desk. Her office reminded her of the stark reality of her life and that made her want to run away and hide. She paused for a moment to look out of the window to the street below and the stillness of the night. With a deep sigh, she watched as a snowplow pushed mountains of snow away. *God, I hate winter.* The flashing lights of Wellington's Pub caught her attention and she sighed once more. *Going there will be better than my apartment.* She needed to feel the closeness of another body and knew that she would find it there. Before she closed the office door, she looked back at the barren walls as the sense of despair she always associated with returning from Bermuda filled every molecule of her body.

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Wellington's Pub always reminded El of a place she frequented in New York City when she first began working for Metropolis. In contrast to her empty life, Wellington's was full of loud, happy people eating, drinking, and laughing. She spied the last empty table and let her long stride eat up the distance so she arrived there well before the couple that came in behind her did. The small victory made her smile for no other reason than it felt good to take back some control.

"What can I getcha hon," said a woman chewing gum.

"Sam Adams...no glass."

The woman nodded and asked, "Anything else?"

"A menu."

"The kitchen closes in ten minutes so you need to make an order now."

"Then never mind," she said and looked away. She let her eyes roam the pub as she looked for... "Ah, there." When the pretty, young blonde woman she had her gaze fixed on looked her way she smiled seductively and winked. For fifteen minutes, the distant flirtation continued until the girl relented and came to El's table and took a seat.

"Can I buy you a drink?" El asked as her eyes raked over the girl's body.

"Depends on what you have in mind," the girl said with a smile.

"Oh, I think you already know the answer to that."

The girl's answer was a grin and a wink. For a part of the night at least, El knew she wouldn't be alone.

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Ruth trudged up the stairs with her basket of laundry, balanced the basket her hip, and opened her apartment door. Inside, she placed the basket on the small kitchen table before she sat down to fold her clothes. Her eye drifted to the business card between the salt and pepper shaker and felt her anger bubble up again. She felt it whenever she recalled the woman's offer to buy her a new coat.

"Ha, what would she think if she saw me now in my new warm coat?" She

fumed. “Imagine her thinking I’m some charity case.”

She grabbed the card and looked at the name. She really didn’t need to, for she had read the name at least a hundred times. “Elyse Baxter, Vice President, Metropolis Insurance Company. Well la-de-da Miss High and Mighty.”

As she did every time she read the card, Ruth fingered it before she made a motion to toss it in the trash—she never did. For some unknown reason, she wasn’t able to part with it and that made her angrier. With the card in her hand, she stared at it again then realized that for the first time in a very long time, she felt something that went beyond anger or disappointment—she cared. “No one has made me feel like that in years. Hell, I went out and got a new coat because of her.”

After she folded the last towel, Ruth stood up and began putting everything away. In her bedroom, her eyes drifted to the mirror on the door and she looked at herself. With a pinch, her cheeks grew rosy and she couldn’t believe what she saw. “I used to be pretty. Why have I let myself go?” she said to the reflection. It was as though she were treading water as she waited for a gigantic wave to crash over her and end it all. Ruth let her eyes survey the bedroom before she padded into the other room. It was as if she were seeing her apartment for the first time. “This place is a dump.”

In the kitchen, Ruth reached for the can on top of the refrigerator and grabbed it before placing it on the small counter. With money from the can scattered on the counter, Ruth began to count. The old coffee can held a combination of bills and change that contained the sum total of her mad money for the last four years. “Seven hundred-eighty-two dollars and twenty-two cents,” she said as she placed the last penny in a stack.

With brighter eyes, Ruth looked at the dinghy wall clock and noted it was half past one. She picked the woman’s card off the table and nodded. “Seize the moment Ruth before it’s too late.”

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El had been back from her Bermuda trip for three days and to her it seemed like three years. The ever present loneliness she increasingly felt seemed to have no viable remedy. Anonymous sexual encounters were only a temporary fix. When she took the VP job, she replaced a man that everyone liked and that was her downfall. It didn’t seem to matter that her predecessor retired—he was gone and she wasn’t. Everyone around her treated her with a cool aloofness of dislike. In turn, she responded with her own brand of detachment by remaining on a strictly professional basis with everyone.

As she scanned a report about a new insurance scam, her private line rang. She

didn't recognize the number, and hesitated as she considered whether to answer or not. It was her policy not to answer calls from unknown numbers but something compelled her to pick up. "Baxter," she said in a crisp tone.

"Ms. Baxter, this is Ruth Arnold."

El paused as she tried to recognize the name before her eyes grew wide. "Yes, Ms. Arnold I assumed that since I hadn't heard from you that you were fine. Have you now discovered an injury from my running into you?" El held her breath as she tried to calculate how much the call would cost her. *It was stupid of me to give her my number...I was just inviting a lawsuit.*

Ruth gathered her resolve against the cry welling inside for her to hang up. "As I told you last Friday Ms. Baxter, I am fine."

For a moment, El digested the words then grinned. "I am glad to hear that. Have you decided to take me up on the offer to clean your coat or buy you a new one?"

Ruth felt her face redden and she suddenly didn't know why she was being so foolhardy. *Seize the moment Ruth.* "No, I have a perfectly serviceable one." She paused and sucked in a deep breath. "I wanted to know if you would like to have lunch with me."

Caught off guard by the invitation, El's forehead creased as she considered her answer. A quick glance at an atomic clock told her that it was one thirty. "Today?"

"No...on another day that is convenient for you."

"I'd like to have lunch with you Ms. Arnold, but I'll only join you on one condition," El said.

"And that is?"

"I pay."

Swallowing hard, Ruth considered the condition and fought the urge to say 'no' and forget the invitation all together. "I can afford to buy lunch Ms. Baxter."

"I'm sure you can Ms. Arnold but I would feel better if you allowed me to pay as a way to make up for running into you."

"My name is Ruth," she said. "I understand your need to pay...I guess it'll be ok."

El felt a smile cross her face. “Good. I am going out of town on business first thing in the morning and will be back late Friday. So we can meet for lunch or dinner over the weekend or a day next week...it’s your choice.” El shook her head amazed by her words as she wondered why her stomach was churning.

Ruth didn’t want the woman to know she had a wide open schedule so she paused for a moment. “Um, next Tuesday is good for me.”

“Perfect!” El exclaimed. “Lunch or dinner?”

“Lunch would be best I think,” Ruth said as she once again questioned the wisdom of her call.

“Are you familiar with Wallace’s Grille?”

“Yes, its downtown isn’t it?”

“Yes, that’s the one. I’ll meet you there at one if that is ok with you Ruth,” she said before hastily adding, “Or I can pick you up.”

“No, I’ll meet you there.” Ruth felt her heart pounding as she said, “I’ll see you then, bye Ms. Baxter.”

The call disconnected before El could say, “Call me El.”

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It was hard for El to concentrate for long periods without the prospect of her lunch date with Ruth Arnold scratching its way to the surface. The dark blue eyes that seemed to reflect the woman’s soul constantly fascinated her with the loneliness she was certain she had seen there.

When one o’clock Tuesday finally came around El sat nervously as she watched for Ruth Arnold to enter the restaurant. When the tall stylishly dressed woman, walked toward her, she had to take a second look before she stood up and smiled. “Ms. Arnold it is good to see you again.”

Ruth’s heart hammered in her chest and it seemed to constrict her throat as she nervously sat down. She looked at the woman that ran into her some twelve days earlier and realized for the first time how classically beautiful she was. She cleared her throat and opened her mouth to speak but nothing came out. Again, she tried and finally managed to say, “I think it’ll be ok if you call me Ruth.”

“Only if you call me El.”

Ruth smiled before she nodded her agreement. "That is an interesting name is it short for something?" *What a dumb question to ask...her name is on her business card.*

"Yes, Elyse."

"Elyse is such a lovely name why don't you use it?"

El looked at Ruth and managed a smile. "I guess," she said with a shrug. "That's what my mother always called me and it stuck." The woman across from her looked radiant and to El, that was in stark contrast to how she looked a week and a half earlier. "You look different."

Just then, the server came to the table and their conversation halted as they gave the woman their drink order. Ruth was glad for the interruption for she suddenly felt foolish for spending over sixty dollars on an outfit not to mention the thirty she spent having her hair cut and styled.

As she managed to drag her eyes away from the woman, El said, "They serve a delicious pesto chicken sandwich here. It is my favorite but I can attest that anything you order from the menu is good." El's eyes traveled to the woman and she wondered again if the woman had bewitched her.

The vibrating of her cell phone irritated El long before she gave in and said, "Yes." She listened to the other person before she said, "I am in the middle of an important meeting and will discuss that with you when I get back."

Ruth watched as her lunch partner spoke and tried not to listen but that was impossible. She was out of her element and knew it. The woman named Elyse was classy and seemed profoundly confident. *What would she have in common with anyone like me? She surreptitiously let her gaze take in the woman's face. I bet she's never gone without much of anything.*

"I won't be back for several hours Fred. If it is so important why don't you handle it yourself...after all that is why you are the project manager?"

After she flipped her phone closed, El looked at Ruth and a shy smile crossed her face. "Sorry about that...it won't happen again," she said. "I've turned the darn thing off. I just hate it when someone talks on them in a restaurant don't you."

Ruth regarded the woman carefully before she shrugged and said, "I wouldn't know for this is the first time I've been to a restaurant in...ages."

El noticed the slight red tinge to the woman's cheeks and furrowed her brow in question. "Why is that?" she asked as she wondered why she was allowing

herself to tread on unknown ground.

Her hand grasped the stem of the water glass and Ruth drank thirstily. “It’s a long story that I’m sure would bore someone like you.”

With a frown, El asked, “Like me? How would you describe me?”

The increasing sting on her cheeks told Ruth she was blushing. “I didn’t mean it as ridicule.”

“Ok, what did you mean then?” El said in a cool tone.

With quick swipe of her face, Ruth locked eyes with the woman across from her. “You seem so self-assured and look like...well like you’ve never known what it is like to be left wanting more because you don’t have enough money to make ends meet.”

The warm feeling of concern that filled El for her lunch partner was completely foreign to her. Just as she was about to comment, the waiter arrived with their meals. Once they were alone again, El smiled and held the woman across from her in her gaze. “Is that what your life is like Ruth,” she said. “For the record you are wrong, I do know what it is to go hungry and without the basic needs.”

“You do,” Ruth whispered as she looked away. “To look at you one would never believe it.”

With smile filling her face, El reconnected with Ruth’s eyes. “I’ll tell you my story if you tell me yours.”

“If we do that you might be late for work,” Ruth said with a nervous laugh.

“I’ve got the time.”

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An hour and a half later the two women stood on the slushy sidewalk as the sun tried to make its way through the clouds.

“Thank you Elyse for the wonderful lunch. I don’t know when, if ever, I’ve had such a wonderful time.”

“May I call you?” El asked as she wondered who was speaking.

A full blush covered Ruth’s cheeks and she raised a hand to cover her face. She

fixed her dark blue eyes on the lighter ones of her new friend. "I'm sorry."

"For what," a soft voice asked.

"I'm way out of my league...I'm not sure how to act...it's been so long since...I've had a friend."

El tentatively touched Ruth's hand. "For me too," she said. "I'd like to have lunch with you again or maybe dinner. There's no pressure...it's all up to you."

"I don't know," Ruth said as a sudden sense of panic overtook her.

El sighed and said, "Think on it and I will call you in a few days and we'll go from there."

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For the next two days, every time Ruth closed her eyes to allow sleep to overtake her she saw the face of Elyse Baxter. At their lunch, she was surprised to learn that Elyse grew up much as she did with one big difference—Elyse was able to transcend her merger existence and become successful. Where Ruth thought that marriage and children were the answer out, Elyse used her education with a degree in math to find a job that promised a bright future.

At thirty, Ruth found herself trying to make ends meet just to survive while Elyse climbed the corporate ladder. The one thought that kept invading her mind was that unlike Elyse, she let circumstances keep her down instead of scratching and crawling her way out of her abyss. She'd spent the better part of the last seventeen years atoning for her husband's crime. Although Craig's company refused her offer to pay them on a monthly basis, Ruth put money in a savings account each week. She knew that in her lifetime, she could never accumulate six hundred thousand dollars, but she would save what she could for it was the right thing to do. As sleep finally claimed her, Ruth decided that she would call Elyse and arrange to meet again.

+ + +

Agitated, El sat at her desk unable to concentrate. It was clear to her that Ruth Arnold wanted nothing to do with her. Even though the lunch they shared seemed congenial, the woman hesitated in committing to another meeting. 'I wonder why that is' kept running through her mind ever since they parted company. Ruth's revelation about her life was clearly difficult for her to share but she had and El took that as a step forward. For the first time in a long time, El was eager to see someone for something other than anonymous sex. On numerous occasions, she picked up her phone and began to dial Ruth's number



only to stop as the fear of the rejection loomed. She knew she was being ridiculous for the woman was nothing but a stranger and for her to be concerned meant she cared—she never did that.

+ + +

Ruth had spent Friday morning dialing various numbers hoping to get one person to take the bait on replacement windows. “God how I hate doing this,” she mumbled after the last person she called asked for her supervisor claiming he was on a do not call list—she quickly severed the call. With the latest regulations of calls by telemarketers, there was a dramatic reduction of names on the list of potential buyers.

She found her fingers unconsciously dialing the number she memorized a week before. When she heard the click of someone picking up, she fought the urge to hang up. “Hi Elyse, this is Ruth Arnold.”

El wasn’t prepared for the feeling that hearing Ruth’s voice elicited. “Hello, it’s good to hear your voice Ruth,” she said certain that there was a goofy look on her face.

Ruth hadn’t swallowed her pride for the past seventeen years to hold back now. “Are you free tonight?”

The words were like music to El’s ears. “If it means I’ll see you again then the answer is...I’m free tonight.”

With bravado, she didn’t know she had, Ruth said, “Perfect. My address is sixteen seventy-nine Congress apartment 3 B.”

A warm satisfied feeling entered El’s heart and she didn’t protest. “You’re cooking for me?”

“Yes...unless you want to go somewhere.”

“I can’t think of anything nicer than you cooking for me Ruth,” El said. “What time?”

“What time do you finish at your work?”

El let out a long slow chuckle. “I’m never finished but for you I’ll leave here at five.”

The sound of El’s voice along with the lilting tone in her laugh had Ruth feeling strange. “Good, I’ll see you then.”

“Shall I bring a bottle of wine?”

“No, I’ve got everything,” Ruth said as a smile broke across her face. “I’m looking forward to seeing you again Elyse.”

“Me too,” El said before she whispered, “Goodbye.”

+ + +

Ruth sat looking at her phone with an all out smile. Then, she looked around her small dingy apartment. The walls were in need of a new coat of paint and her furniture was worn, scratched, and frayed. There was no way she could paint the walls before Elyse arrived but the rest of the place was at least clean and that had to count for something. For the most part, the grimy walls were full of pictures of her kids at various stages of their lives. The picture of them that was her favorite sat in a wooden frame sat on top of her small television between the rabbit ears.

She was proud of them and happy that they didn’t let the events of their younger years affect them in a negative way. She knew that on some level they probably resented her for not accepting their offers of help. Her oldest son had offered many times to move her near to him but she stubbornly refused and he finally gave up. She often wondered if they resented her and the life she gave them. *Hell, I resent myself for not doing more with my life.* Her eyes then tracked to the window with a ragged curtain and what she knew was years of dirt on the outer side of the window. She sighed in relief that Elyse would arrive when it was dark so she wouldn’t notice.

“God what was I thinking inviting her here for dinner?” she said as she shoved her arm through her coat sleeve. With fifty dollars of her savings in her pocket, she left for Fannelli’s Market.

+ + +

“Good afternoon Ruth,” Giorgio Fannelli said as he looked at the woman who for years had patronized his store. There was something different about her but he couldn’t quite grasp what it was. “Looks like the snow has let up some.”

“Does it?” Ruth said with a frown. “I hadn’t noticed.” She gave the man her best smile, pulled out a small shopping basket, and began her walk down the aisles.

When she got to the meat counter, Sophia Fannelli smiled at her and said, “I saved the end cuts for you Ruth.”

“Oh, ok, that’s great. Today I’d like get some ground beef...the good kind not

the one loaded with fat.”

Sophia cocked her head as her brow creased. In all the years that Ruth had shopped there, she never bought the good stuff—ever. “Ok, how much?”

Ruth closed her eyes and brought up the recipe for her mother’s meatloaf. “A pound and I’ll need a pound of ground pork too.” Ruth hesitated then said, “Any chance you could double grind them together for me?”

Still reeling from Ruth’s order, Sophia said, “I can do that for you Ruth. Are you having company for dinner?” What the grocer hadn’t expected was the glorious smile that crossed the woman’s face.

“As a matter of fact I am Sophia.”

The smile that continued to brighten her customer’s face, told Sophia all she needed to know. “I’m glad to hear it. I’ll have the meat ready for you in about ten minutes,” she said and watched as Ruth walked to the produce section. When Giorgio joined her, she poked him in the ribs. “Ruth’s got a date tonight and she’s cooking for him.”

“So that’s why she looks so happy.” Giorgio said.

+ + +

Forty-five minutes later Ruth was ready to prepare a meal for someone other than herself. She actually never made dinner for herself opting for sandwiches, cereal, canned soup, or stew. When she pulled a recipe box from a cupboard, her mind flashed to her mother. Just before she got married, Ruth’s mother told her 'good cooking leads to stable long-lasting marriage' as she presented her daughter with a box filled with her recipes. It had been a long time since Ruth used any of her mother’s recipes and the fact that she was using one for her dinner with Elyse made her feel warm and happy.

The thought of her new friend made Ruth feel something that she hadn’t felt in almost thirty years—sexual excitement for a woman. She closed her eyes and fondly recalled the girl she studied with during her first semester of college. Sarah Hutchinson was the first friend she had in college and often Ruth would spend the night in Sarah’s apartment when it was too late for her to take the bus back to her home. In one night of dares, they first shared a kiss and not long after that, they became intimate. Ruth had never felt such joy and happiness as she did when she lay in Sarah’s arms. It was the most magical time of her life. Circumstances, caused by Sarah’s ill grandmother, made her move away with her family at the end of the semester. Ruth longed to feel that connected with someone again but her dream of a white picket fence and a

family won out.

Thoughts of her earlier happy life came back to her and they flooded her mind. She now knew that she had wasted so much of her life by following the foolish notion of a knight in shining armor. Robotically she prepared the meal as a kaleidoscope of memories ran rampant through her mind. With everything ready by four thirty, Ruth took a shower hoping that it would settle her chaotic thoughts. The one image that always fought to the front was that of the dark haired woman with light blue eyes who ran into her and started her on a journey that could change the course of her life.

She closed her eyes as her hands roamed over her body and imagined what it would be like to feel Elyse's fingers stroking her body. Each time she allowed her thoughts to drift in that direction, she would chastise the thought as foolish. *I don't even know if she's interested in women.* When it came down to it, Ruth welcomed Elyse's friendship in whatever form it took. She knew she would be forever grateful that the woman bumped into her life. To her, it was as if she woke up after being asleep for most of her life.

The buzzer for entrance to the building sounded and Ruth felt an excited rush as she pressed the button and waited by the door.

+ + +

El was running late and she didn't want that. She had looked forward to the dinner all afternoon and was determined to be on time. As she looked at the reams of paper still on her desk she knew, she'd be spending her weekend in the office. "I'll just come back here after dinner with Ruth." She stared at the reports that never seemed to end and sighed. "I really need to hire a PA." With a quick glance at her watch, she knew she needed to hurry.

After she heard the buzz that told her the door was unlocked, El opened the door of Ruth's apartment building and smelled the strong scent of what she assumed were various dinners cooking. *I wonder which smell is Ruth's cooking.* She felt a small jolt of excitement as she climbed the narrow stairs as she heard voices over voices coming from every direction. As her feet stopped in front of apartment B3, she wondered about the wisdom of accepting the woman's invitation. When she knocked on the door and Ruth opened it, she knew the answer—Ruth looked radiant.

As she hung onto the door, staring at El, Ruth felt like a school girl. "Hi, you're here," she said in awe.

"Yeah," El said as she sucked in a breath and let it out.

“I’m glad,” Ruth said as her gaze captured El’s eyes.

For some time they stood, one inside, one out both lost in the moment. El was the first to speak. “You going to ask me in or do I have to stay out here to eat that delicious meal I smell.”

Ruth laughed as she felt her face heat up. “Please come in,” she said as she opened the door wider. She unconsciously slid the chain lock into place when she closed the door.

El watched the gold chain slip into the hole and laughed. “Is that to keep me in,” she said with a wink.

Feeling out of her element, Ruth blushed more as she wondered if the woman was reading her mind. “Only if you want to,” she said before she moved quickly to the small kitchen. “I hope you like meatloaf...it’s my mother’s recipe.” The pleasurable feeling that filled her body as El stood close to her caused Ruth to feel breathless.

“Yum, my favorite meal,” El whispered into Ruth’s ear. “I’ve yet to find a restaurant that makes a decent meatloaf.”

Not looking at her guest, Ruth said, “Do you eat out much?”

El took a step back to distance herself from her rising need to take the other woman in her arms. “Yeah most of them...I’m not much of a cook and it sucks to make a meal for one.”

Ruth snorted. “Yeah, I know all about that.” She turned around and El’s gaze immediately captured her. “I hope you’re hungry.”

“Oh, I’m hungry...it sure smells good.” She took the bowl Ruth handed her and placed it on the smallest dinner table El had ever seen. Ruth came up behind her and reached around her to place the meatloaf on the table. The phantom touch of Ruth’s body on hers sent a shiver up El’s spine. The need to run was overwhelming but the need to stay put was greater.

With a small laugh, Ruth said, “Golly, that is a small table...I never noticed that before.”

“Why don’t we do buffet style,” El offered and was pleased to see the smile cross Ruth’s face.

Ruth watched as El finished off her second helping of meatloaf and laughed. “Where did you put all that food? I don’t see an ounce of fat on you.”

Embarrassed, El chuckled. “It’s been a long time since I’ve had such a delicious meal.”

“Well, in that case, I’ll have to cook for you again.”

El, unable to drag her eyes away from woman across from her, smiled. “I’d like that.”

The response made Ruth’s heart skip a beat and, in an uncharacteristic move, reached out and touched El’s hand. “I’d love to cook for you anytime you want,” she whispered as she squeezed the hand before she let go.

The emotional upheaval El felt was overwhelming to her. Part of her wanted to walk away and not look back while a larger part wanted to embrace the emotions and explore them further. She took Ruth’s hand in hers and said, “What are you doing this weekend?”

Ruth shrugged and closed her eyes in an attempt to still her body’s reactions to the hand holding hers. “Nothing,” she ground out as she tried again to calm her body.

“I don’t have a Christmas tree and Christmas is only ten days away. Would you like to come along with me and buy a tree? And the decorations too,” she said with a slight shrug of one shoulder. “I don’t have any of those either.” For the first time, her eyes took in the small room that she assumed was Ruth’s living room. “I see you don’t have a tree either maybe we can get one for you too.”

Ruth whispered. “I really have no need for one.” She looked away. “I have no one to celebrate with.”

“What about your sons... don’t they visit you for Christmas?”

At a loss for what to say, Ruth stammered before she said, “They have their own lives...coming here would only remind them how dismal the holiday was for them growing up.” Her eyes focused on the picture atop the television. “They always ask me to visit them for Christmas but after years of my refusing they’ve stopped asking. Instead, the youngest, Tom, always sends me a scarf, the middle boy, Jack, always sends slippers, and the oldest, Craig sends flowers and a check for a hundred dollars.” She returned her gaze to El. “There isn’t much reason to get a tree and decorate it when it’s only me.”

The words mirrored how El always felt about Christmas—why bother. “Not this year,” El announced. “This year you and I will spend Christmas together.”

With disbelief in her eyes, Ruth said, “Why? You hardly know me.”

A brilliant smile crossed El’s face. “I know enough to know I want to get to know you better. What do you say... tomorrow we’ll go out to buy a tree and ornaments?” It was the first time in years that El felt upbeat about the prospect of Christmas. “The idea of a Christmas tree never crossed my mind...I figured why buy one for there is no one to see it or put presents under it.” She stood up and took Ruth’s hand lead her to the couch. “Until now...come on let’s plan what we will do tomorrow.”

The chagrin Ruth felt at her company sitting on her lumpy couch faded when she looked into the eyes she was sure were mirroring hers. “I’ll go with you to buy a tree,” she said trying not to show her excitement. “Then we will see about spending Christmas together.” Ruth shrugged and let a grin form around her lips. “We might find out after spending a day together it isn’t such a hot idea.”

“Oh I don’t think that will happen,” El said before she wrapped an arm around Ruth’s shoulder. After several minutes passed she let go and looked at her watch. “I need to call a cab.”

“You’re leaving so soon?” Ruth tipped her head to one side.

El laughed. “I left a mountain of paper work on my desk and if we are spending the weekend together I need to get it done.”

Ruth felt her ears perk up. “The weekend?”

With a crooked smile, El said, “Well, yeah...we need presents right? What’s a Christmas tree without a gift or two under it?”

With her eyes darting everywhere but on El, Ruth considered what the woman next to her was saying. She calculated how much she had left in the can on top of the refrigerator after she bought gifts and sent them to her sons, and sighed. *Can I use some of it to buy her a gift and send something to the boys too?* Her eyes finally rested on El’s face. “It’s been a long time since...I take it that Sunday we will be shopping for gifts then.”

“Yep,” El said as she took out her cell phone. “I’d better call that cab.” She gently flicked Ruth’s hand. “I don’t want work interfering with our weekend.”

Ruth frowned. “Why a cab...don’t you have a car?”

“Yes, I have a car but I was running late and it was faster to take a cab then trying to find a parking spot...I figured I’d be really late if I did that. Besides, I

knew I'd have to go back to finish up before I went home."

When they heard the sound of the cab's horn El shrugged. "Guess I'd better go. I'll pick you up at nine sharp so be ready...ok." She smiled when Ruth nodded in agreement. "I know a great little place that makes wonderful omelets...shall we go there first."

Ruth stood at the door speechless for everything seemed to be happening so fast. "Yeah, ok that sounds good. I could make us something here if you'd like."

El smiled. "No, I'd like to take you out for breakfast." The taxi driver honked the horn once again and she said, "Guess I'd better get going." She lingered next to the opening door debating whether to kiss Ruth or not.

"Yeah, it sounds like he is getting impatient." Ruth shrugged and opened the door all the way.

With an impulsive motion that was totally foreign to her, El leaned in and kissed Ruth's lips. When she pulled away, she looked deep into Ruth's eyes and saw what she hoped for—acceptance. "Tomorrow then."

Ruth, unable to take her eyes off El, whispered, "Yes tomorrow," as she watched as the woman disappeared down the staircase. Then she raised her hand to her lips and smiled.

+ + +

At nine o'clock the next morning, Ruth was standing in the atrium of her apartment building. She was certain that she didn't sleep at all the night before. Thoughts and images of El kept scrolling through her mind in a kaleidoscope of possibilities. When she saw the white Lexus pull up to the entrance with El behind the wheel, she felt a charge course through her body that was definitely pleasurable.

Opening the door, she waved to the woman who constantly filled her thoughts. When she pulled open the door, she smiled and said, "Hi, I thought I'd save you from trying to find a parking spot. With all the snow piled up parking is impossible around here."

El was speechless when Ruth opened the door. The woman looked spectacular. "Good morning, thanks this is the third trip I've made around the block." She closed her eyes as she let the pleasure she felt at seeing the woman wash over her body. "Are you ready for a day of new adventures?"

"Yep," Ruth said before she felt her face heat up. "I couldn't sleep last night,"



she whispered.

El reached across the seat and took Ruth's hand. "Neither could I."

Eyes, that longed for a connection to something other than solitude, met and slowly danced to a song as old as time. In that one moment, each knew unconditional acceptance.

+ + +

"Oh Elyse, thank you so much for such a special day," Ruth gushed as they sat drinking a latte at Starbucks.

With merriment filled eyes, El said, "This is only the beginning my dear. The night is still young and we have a tree to decorate."

"Don't be silly... we can't decorate the tree until it drops and that'll take several days." When Ruth saw El's face change from happiness to dismay she said, "But we did get those candles for the windows and the wreath for your door... we can do that at least."

As she let a smile cross her face again, El winked. "Hmm, we can do that too. What do you say we finish up here, take everything back to my apartment and order in a pizza?"

Ruth's mind worked overtime as she tried to digest all that had happened that day and what lay ahead. For so long she hid from the outside world opting for a solitary life that she could have a modicum of control over. Then, Elyse Baxter bumped into her and her world began to change. The prospect of spending the evening with El was as frightening as it was exciting. An internal battle raged as whether to stay or run—stay won.

"That sounds wonderful. We can put the tree up on its stand, put the skirt under it and by Monday it will be ready to decorate."

Pleased with Ruth's decision, El smiled. "Wonderful I really didn't want the day to end just yet." She finished off the rest of her latte and said, "You ready to go?" When Ruth nodded, they both got up and headed for the door and an evening of decorating. As they passed through the door, El said, "You know that means we have a date for Monday night."

"Does it?" Ruth said with a laugh.

+ + +

As the Lexus pulled up in front of an old brownstone located in a modest

neighborhood Ruth's brow creased. It certainly wasn't where she would have expected someone as fastidious as El with a high profile job to live. She looked at the name carved into the brown sandstone above the door—Clifton Arms. “Is this where you live?”

“Yes,” El said as she backed the vehicle into a spot near the front of the building. “The one on the bottom right is mine.” She laughed as she put turned off the ignition. “Bet you thought we'd have to lug all this stuff along with the tree up several flights of stairs.”

“Actually, I was expecting an elevator.” Ruth opened her door and stepped out onto the sidewalk that in spite of the recent snowfall was completely devoid of snow.

El clicked a button and the tailgate opened. She handed Ruth several shopping bags, took the rest for herself and said, “We'll get these inside then I'll come back for the tree.”

Ruth followed El into the building and waited as she opened the door to her apartment. When she entered, she held back the gasp of nervousness that threatened.

“Make yourself at home,” El said. “You can put your boots over there. I'll get the tree and be right back.”

“Why don't I help you?”

“Ruth, the tree is only four feet tall, I think I can handle it,” El said with a grin. “Take a look around and see if you can find a place to put our Christmas tree.” She put her bags down, winked, and went back out the door.

Staying on the marble entry, Ruth moved further inside until she came to a small rug and unzipped her boots and left them there. She ventured even further into the apartment as her eyes took in her surroundings. The apartment was immaculate with beige carpeting and furniture that looked warm and cozy. On one wall were numerous pictures of what she assumed were El's family with the other walls filled with tasteful art and other decorations. When she heard the door open, she turned and saw a tree coming at her. “Let me help with that,” she said as she latched onto the tree.

“Thanks. Can you hold onto it while I get my boots off?”

When El emerged from behind the tree, Ruth saw her face wreathed in the most amazing smile. It simply took her breath away and instead of wanting to run and hide, she embraced the feelings that screamed for acknowledgement. Dark blue eyes locked with lighter ones and in that moment the two women

felt the loneliness that had ruled their lives dissolve.

Regaining her composure, El asked, “Did you find a place to put the tree?”

Still in a daze, Ruth continued to stare as she struggled for words that refused to come. Finally, she said, “No.”

“No problem. I was thinking as I was coming inside that we should place it so it can be seen from the street. That way...” El didn’t finish as she became lost in Ruth’s gaze. Dragging her eyes away she said, “Can you get the tree stand out of the bag and we’ll set up this beauty.”

“Sure.” Ruth rummaged through the shopping bags until she found the stand. She put it together and walked to the window. “Is this where you want it?”

“Yeah.”

Once the tree was in place both women stood in front of it and smiled. “It’s perfect,” Ruth said as she felt El’s arm wrap around her shoulders.

The nearness of Ruth made El close her eyes as a warm contented feeling washed over her. “Yeah, it’s perfect,” she said as she looked at Ruth. “What’s next?”

Ruth, captured by El’s eyes, was once again speechless. The only thought her mind was processing was how good it felt with the woman’s arm around her. “The skirt...for under the tree,” she eked out.

The emotions coursing through her mind that caused her body seethe with desire made El drop her arm and take a step backward. “I’ll get it. Why don’t you find those candles and put them in the windows.” A thought that the candles were a beacon that strangers were welcome made her grin. *Who would have thought I’d allow something like that in my window.*

+ + +

The two women sat close together on a couch admiring their handiwork while munching on a pepperoni pizza and drinking beer. El was the first to speak. “We did a good job.” She smiled at Ruth and winked. “Are you ready for tomorrow and gift shopping?”

What Ruth was feeling was deeper than anything she’d ever experienced and that scared her. Not her marriage or her children’s births could match the overwhelming sense of happiness she was feeling. “That sounds wonderful.” She looked at the pictures on the wall across from the tree and pointed, “Are

those of your family?”

“Yeah,” El said as a wistful expression filled her face. “They don’t want anything to do with me so that is the only reminder I have of them.”

The piece of pizza in Ruth’s hand fell to a plate as she grasped El’s hand. “That must be very sad for you Elyse.”

Moisture filled El’s eyes as she said, “Not as much as it once did...the hardest time is during the holidays and on birthdays...things like that.”

“Have you tried to contact them since...” Ruth realized that all she knew was that El was estranged from her family and not the why. “Maybe things have changed. You know...time heals everything.”

El wiped away a stray tear and said, “You can’t change people’s basic beliefs Ruth. I won’t become someone else to make them happy and they can’t accept who I am.”

“Who are you, Elyse?”

For a moment, El was quiet before she let out a sarcastic laugh. “I’m not who they want as a daughter or sister.” She picked up her beer bottle and took a long draw from it before putting it back on the coffee table. “Let’s talk about something else...please.”

Ruth bumped shoulders with El and said, “I like who you are Elyse.” Then she leaned her head on El’s broad shoulder. “Sometimes,” she said in a whisper. “People are just waiting to hear from you.”

El bent her neck so her head rested on Ruth’s and sighed. “We all have histories that are best forgotten...the important thing is to move forward and not look back.”

The truth of the words was not lost to Ruth. She had spent the better part of her adult life looking back and ultimately living there as penance for something she had no control over. Her eyes traveled to an antique clock ticking away on the mantle and yawned. “I can’t believe it is ten o’clock.” With a grin, she let her gaze rest on El. “I guess I need to go home and get some sleep before our outing tomorrow.” She yawned again. “Sorry. Who knew that buying and setting up Christmas decorations would be so tiring?”

El laughed before she went silent as she tried to gauge the wisdom of what her heart wanted to say. “You know you could spend the night and we could get an early start in the morning,” she said holding her breath.

Embarrassed by the thought that El was reading her mind, Ruth looked away. “I didn’t bring anything with me to do that Elyse. Besides, I need to go home and get a fresh change of clothes and things like that.” She shrugged and when she looked up and saw the disappointment on El’s face she added, “But, I’d like to do that another time.”

“Sorry, of course you need to go home...I don’t know what I was thinking of...”

Ruth reached over and took El’s hand. “I want to spend the night,” she whispered, “Just not tonight Elyse.”

“Well, I’d better get you home so you get a good night’s sleep.” El stood up and went to get their coats.

“Here,” she said as she held Ruth’s coat as she slid her arms into the sleeves. After both put their boots on, El looked up and smiled. “You see what’s up there?”

Ruth looked up and saw a sprig of mistletoe. “Yes,” she said as she felt her body tremble.

El wrapped her arms around the woman who had made the day happy for her and gently kissed Ruth’s warm lips. When she pulled back, she sighed. “I’ve been waiting all day for you to stand under the mistletoe.”

“You’re beautiful,” Ruth said through a smile before she leaned in and kissed El again.

“If we don’t leave now...”

Ruth rested her cheek on El’s shoulder. “Yeah, we’d better go.”

+ + +

The next morning Ruth yawned as she stood in the entryway of her apartment building. Sleep had eluded her the night before. Her body strung tighter every time she thought of sharing kisses with El. When they had arrived at her building, El had insisted on making sure she got to her apartment safely. It was then they shared a kiss so deep that it cried out for more. They lingered in each other’s embrace both fighting the need to take their intimacy to another level. Once El left, Ruth felt such a sense of loss that she fell into her bed and cried. That led to a long night of tossing and turning in anticipation of seeing the woman again.

When the Lexus pulled up, Ruth felt a surge of excitement unlike anything she

had ever known. After she pulled open the door and slid onto the soft leather, she leaned over and kissed El's cheek. "I thought you'd never get here," she gushed as she felt the sting of a blush.

El laughed. "You didn't sleep well either did you?"

"No."

El took Ruth's hand in hers, squeezed it gently, and shrugged. "I don't know about you but I'm famished."

+ + +

After a leisurely breakfast, Ruth and El headed for the mall to mingle with the horde of other shoppers.

El stood her ground as another shopper banged into her without an apology. "God I hate malls," she said to Ruth who was by her side.

"I can't believe this place," Ruth said in wonder. "Do you realize this is the first time I've been here?"

El furrowed her forehead. "Really? Why is that?"

Just then, two kids came careening out around a corner and one smacked into Ruth's shoulder nearly knocking her to the ground. "Shitheads," El grumbled. Her eyes tracked to Ruth who stood ramrod straight as she clung to El's arm. "You ok?"

"Yeah, I just remembered a similar incident when I took my kids shopping years ago. They ran into an elderly man...I made them apologize..." Her voice trailed off before she said, "Guess parents today don't teach their kids how to show respect."

El said, "What do you say we get out of here?"

Ruth looked at El and smiled. "I haven't finished shopping yet."

El looked down at the two full shopping bags Ruth held and said, "What more do you have to get?"

"I have one more but I think it will be best to do that by myself." She eyed El. "What surprise would there be if you knew what was under the tree for you?"

"Point taken," El said with a laugh. "Let's get some dinner and then we'll see

what happens after that.”

+ + +

As they sat across from each other eating supper after a long day of shopping, neither could take her eyes off the other. Nothing else mattered and it seemed as though the restaurant and all the other people faded into the background. When Ruth said, “Thank you,” El looked at her with a creased brow.

“For what?”

“For running into me two weeks ago,” Ruth said as she swallowed hard fighting the tears of happiness that threatened.

“Don’t you know that I’m the one that should be thanking you Ruth,” El said as she reached across the table and took the woman’s hand. “I have been so lonely for so long ...it’s me that should thank you for making me feel happy.”

“Elyse, I’ve been drifting through life allowing the horrific actions of my husband to taint me. For me there seemed to be no way out...until you bumped into me. You made me feel something...granted it was anger but at least it was something.”

“I didn’t mean to make you angry.”

Ruth shook her head and tentatively squeezed El’s hand. “I was mostly angry with myself for letting my life get so bad.” The tears that threatened welled in her eyes. “Until you, I didn’t think anyone cared...especially me.”

El gave a small snort as she shook her head. “I think we both benefited from my distraction and your fall. I’m happy that we’ve gotten to know each other better over the last week.”

Old fears surfaced and Ruth sucked in a breath as she wondered what to say next. The kisses of the night before still seared her body and that fact alone suddenly seemed foolhardy. “This is all so new for me,” she said holding back her tears. “I’m afraid.”

“No more than I am Ruth. I came here for a job that I earned only to have the people I work with treat me like an outsider. You are the only one who has bothered to get to know me...the only one that cares.”

Ruth gazed into the watery light blue eyes and saw her reflection. For the first time in many years she felt her body completely relax. “I want to know you...all of you.”

El closed her eyes for she knew the words mirrored her feelings. “I want that too.”

“The last person I was intimate with left and never came back.” Ruth sighed. “I couldn’t bear it if that happened again.”

“It won’t happen do you know why?”

Ruth shook her head.

“Because we both want more than a one night stand or a brief love affair...we want it all.” El closed her eyes and whispered, “I’m so tired of living, eating, and being alone.”

“I’m tired of that too.” For a moment, Ruth let her eyes drift around restaurant but she saw nothing. “Maybe I can help make your loneliness go away.” Ruth lifted one shoulder before she blinked at her words for they were foreign to her.

Just then the waiter arrived and said, “Can I get you ladies anything else?” before he began clearing the dishes.

El dragged her eyes to the man and looked at him blankly for a moment. “No, we’re good.” When she looked back at Ruth she smiled—the magic was still there. “What next?”

“We wrap presents,” Ruth said with a smile.

“Then let’s go.”

+ + +

They trudged up the staircase of Ruth’s apartment building carrying her purchases. Once inside the apartment, they put down the bags then stood staring at each other.

Ruth made the first move by closing in and wrapping her arms around El. “Thank you so much for today...for the weekend. I can’t remember ever having such a wonderful time with anyone.” In a tentative gesture, she gave El an insistent kiss that soon begged for more.

El encircled Ruth’s body with her arms and allowed her kisses to respond to the passion that was rising in her.

Soon Ruth’s tongue began to dance with El’s and she craved more—much



more. "Please don't stop," she said in a thick voice when the kiss stopped.

Trembling and with a resolve, she didn't know she was capable of, El released Ruth and took a step backward. "No, I can't," she whispered.

"Why not?" Ruth cried as she tried to kiss El again. When rebuffed, she closed her eyes and let the tears that had threatened all day to burst forward.

"No, no don't cry. Please don't cry," El said as she moved closer and held Ruth in her arms. "I have to work tomorrow," she whispered. "I don't want to love you and leave you...I want...no need more than just a night."

Ruth buried her face in El's shoulder. "I'm afraid that the moment will pass me by." She lifted her head and gazed into the eyes she knew reflected tenderness and caring. "It's been so long since I've felt anything," she said as the tears began again.

El couldn't squelch the yearning of her heart to love and to feel love. "If I stay," she whispered. "I may not want to ever leave." She gently caressed Ruth's cheek. "We need to take our time Ruth and get this right."

"Ever since you bumped into me I've felt alive and I like how that feels."

To El, the heartbeats that boomed in the quiet room were indistinguishable. She caressed Ruth's cheek. "I'm scared," she whispered. "Being with you seems so right that I'm starting to think of a future with you in it."

They each took a step backwards and in unison sighed.

Ruth said, "You're right...I don't want to let you go but it is the right thing to do."

El moved forward, took Ruth into her arms, and hugged her close as she inhaled the scent of the woman's perfume. "I'd better go." She pulled away slightly and smiled at Ruth. "Tree decorating tomorrow?"

Ruth snorted and shook her head. "Do you think we need a chaperone?"

The laugh from El that filled the apartment broke the sexual tension. "We just might." She drew Ruth close again. "Want me to pick you up?"

"No, I'll take the bus."

El pulled away and looked at Ruth as she lifted an eyebrow. "No you won't...I'll pick you up."

+ + +

For Ruth it was difficult not to touch El every time the situation allowed but she did succeed occasionally as they trimmed the Christmas tree. When El placed the star on the top of the tree, they stood back and admired their handiwork.

“I think we did a great job,” Ruth said as she let her arm encircle El’s waist as she hugged her close. “It’s getting late and we both have to work tomorrow. I’d better be getting home.”

“I have to go out of town tomorrow,” El said in a matter-of-fact tone. “But I will be home for Christmas.” She laughed and said, “Isn’t that the most depressing Christmas song of all time?”

“Yes, I do believe it is.” She reached into her bag and pulled out a box wrapped in gold foil with a red ribbons attached. “I need to put this under the tree but you have to promise not to try and figure out what it is.”

“I don’t know Ruth it is mighty tempting,” El said as she reached behind a chair and pulled out a wrapped gift of her own. “What do you say we put them under the tree?”

Ruth engulfed El in a hug before she kissed her tempting lips. She pulled away and said, “Thank you...this is the first time in years that I am actually looking forward to Christmas. I have one more present to pick up tomorrow...” she said before she winked at El. “It’s for you,” she whispered.

“Hmm, really?? Care to give me a hint?”

“No.” Ruth laughed and hit El’s shoulder in a playful manner. “I need to go shopping and pick up something for a proper Christmas Day meal.”

“Sounds yummy.” El rested her forehead on Ruth’s and said, “I guess I’d better get you home so I can get packed for my trip. Omaha in the winter makes Concord seem like a tropical climate.”

“Come with me,” Ruth said as she led El to stand under the mistletoe. “It would be a shame to waste this opportunity.”

When they finally pulled apart, both women wanted more. “God, I wish I didn’t have to go out of town,” El growled. “If I could I would chuck work and stay with you.”

“Nice thought but unfortunately that can’t happen. We have time to get to know each other and when the time is right to go farther, we’ll know. I’m

going to call a cab.” Ruth saw the protest in El’s eyes and face.

“You don’t need to go out into the cold. Stay here where it is warm and get your stuff packed.”

“Yeah I guess you’re right. Will you call me when you get home so I don’t worry about you?” El said.

Ruth kissed El’s cheek before she said, “That’s nice.”

“What?”

“That you worry about me.”

Once the call for the taxi finished, El and Ruth stood again under the mistletoe as they kissed in a promise of what was to come. When they heard the toot of the taxi’s horn El accompanied Ruth to the waiting vehicle. El closed the back door, opened the front one, and handed the driver a bill.

“This should cover the meter with a nice tip for you. Make sure she gets there safe,” she said in a commanding voice.

When the driver looked at the bill in his hand and saw it was a fifty he said, “No problem...and Merry Christmas.”

El watched until the taxi’s red taillights turned at the corner then went inside. Ten minutes later, El’s phone rang. “Hi, are all the doors locked?”

“Yes Mom,” Ruth said with a laugh. “Will you do something for me Elyse?”

“Sure.”

“Please be careful on your trip. I’ve seen reports on the news about how much snow they have and how treacherous it is to get around.”

“Now who’s the mom,” El asked.

“It goes both ways. Have a safe journey...will you call me when you get there?”

“That goes without saying. Good night Ruth.”

After saying goodnight, Ruth hung up and wrapped her arms around her midsection. After all the years of feeling downtrodden and alone, Ruth was happy—deliriously happy.

+ + +

It was the best night of sleep that Ruth could remember ever having. When she opened her eyes, she felt a smile cross her face before she hopped out of bed and went to the bathroom to shower. The day before she went downtown and found the perfect gift for El—a music box. The only problem was that it played a Chopin piece and Ruth wanted a different piece of music. The proprietor told her to give him a day to find the right one.

Ruth stepped off the bus and smiled when she saw the sign for the Music Box Collectors. She walked rapidly to the shop, walked in, and the owner immediately greeted her.

“Hello Mrs. Arnold. I have your music box ready for you,” he said as he placed a wooden box on the counter.

“It’s wonderful,” Ruth said as picked up the rosewood box with a flower inlay. She lifted the top and heard the melodious ping of the song she wanted. “Thank you so much this is perfect.” Once the man gift wrapped the music box, Ruth headed out of the store. Her mind was an array of images of El’s face when she opened the gift and heard the music.

When she looked up, she saw the restaurant that she and El had breakfast at on Saturday, she smiled and looked in the window as the memory of the day washed over her. Her face went ashen and she felt a cold chill race through her body when she saw El sitting at a table holding a woman’s hand. For a moment, her brow knitted in disbelief as she looked again. *Surely, that can’t be her.* But, it was and the blow to her heart made her clutch her chest.

She turned and briskly walked blindly down the sidewalk. Her body was numb as her mind raced with one thought—she was a fool. “How could I let myself be dragged in like that? What an idiot I was to let her lead me on...and for what...why did she do this to me?” Her feet seemed to fly down the street and soon she found herself in front of her apartment building.

Her shaking fingers fumbled with the key to the building as she cursed the door, her life, and Elyse Baxter. Once she was inside her apartment, she dropped the wrapped music box before a flood of tears began. The blow she felt when Craig disappeared was nothing compared to the bleak loneliness that invaded her every thought and movement. She slide into her bed and pulled the covers over her head as she closed herself off from the world.

Later that day, she heard her phone ring and was grateful that she didn’t have an answering machine. Over the next several days, her phone rang dozens of times but Ruth was steadfast in her resolve to stay in bed with her head covered. On Saturday morning, she threw the covers off her head and ventured

into the kitchen.

Just as the kettle of water whistled, Ruth heard the buzzer for the front door and froze. Over the last few days, she went through all the scenarios of what she would say to El when she saw her again. Now, she knew that the time had come and she felt her stomach churn as she pressed the button and said, “Who is it?”

“Ruth it’s me...are you ok...I’ve been worried about you.”

“I’m fine Ms Baxter. Please go away and leave me alone.”

The fear El felt as her numerous calls went unanswered abated some as she frowned at Ruth’s words.

“Can’t we talk Ruth?”

“Just go away,” Ruth said as she tried to squelch her tears. The vision of El and the other woman flashed in her mind. No longer did she feel hurt—anger superseded everything else.

“Ruth, I don’t understand what’s happened. Please let me in so we can talk.”

“Talk, why on earth would I want to speak with the likes of you Elyse,” Ruth screamed into the small speaker.

All went silent and Ruth gulped down the fear that El had left. The tears that dried up with her rage fell again. “Good riddance...I’m glad she’s gone.” When she heard a light tap on her door, she undid the locks and pulled the door open. What she hadn’t counted on seeing was Elyse Baxter. “I thought you left! How did you get in the building?” she screamed.

When the neighbor across from her opened her door and asked, “Are you ok Mrs. Arnold?” Ruth nodded and pulled El inside before closing the door with a bang.

“What’s going on Ruth? I called you and called you and you never answered and that worried me so I came here directly from the airport.”

Ruth laughed as she swiped at the tears on her cheek. “Oh yeah you were so worried...I bet you didn’t go out of town at all...you probably spent the time with that blonde woman!”

El cocked her head and frowned. “I was in Omaha...I told you that before I left. What blonde woman?”

“The one I saw you holding hands with Tuesday morning!”

A raucous laugh filled the apartment. “Is that what this is all about? You saw me with someone and didn’t bother to ask me who it was you just assumed it was a lover?” El spit out.

“What else could I think...you were sitting practically on top of each other!”

“Do you have any idea of how worried I’ve been about you?” she whispered. “I guess not since you didn’t bother to answer your phone. Not to worry Ruth, I won’t trouble you again.” El blew out a breath and flicked a tear from her cheek. “I really thought we had something Ruth...I guess I was wrong.”

As El placed her fingers on the doorknob, Ruth said, “Wait, you’re right I should have asked you.” She touched the woman’s shoulder. “Please tell me.”

With a slow turn, El faced Ruth. The tear stains that glistened on her face seemed etched in her makeup. “After you left Monday night I took your advice and called my sister to wish her a Merry Christmas. She was on her way to New York and made a detour through Concord. We met for breakfast.”

Ruth closed her eyes and hung her head. “What a fool I’ve been. Can you ever forgive me?”

A thumb and forefinger cupped Ruth’s chin and lifted her head and two sets of watery blue eyes met. “Already done Ruth.”

They stood wrapped in each other’s arms for several minutes until Ruth pulled back slightly and kissed El’s cheek. She gazed at the tired expression on El’s face as her thumb ran under each eye. “I’m so sorry,” she whispered before she cupped a cheek in a caress.

“I thought you were hurt or in trouble,” El said as she let her face lean into Ruth’s gentle embrace. “When I heard about the snow storm upstate and the power outages I hoped that you weren’t answering your phone because the line was out.” El covered Ruth’s hand with hers. “I realized that other than you, I had isolated myself so much that there was no one I knew that I could call to check on you.”

“How can I make it up to you?” Ruth asked as she let her hand fall before she disengaged from their embrace. She took a step backward and said, “Will you tell me about your visit with your sister.”

El took Ruth’s hand and led her to the lumpy couch. “After you left Monday I decided to give her a call since she was the one who I thought might talk to

me...who wouldn't judge me."

"What happened?"

"She cried," said El as she let her head rest on Ruth's shoulder. "She said that she always tried to keep track of me but hadn't known where I was for over three years."

"What about your folks?" Ruth asked as she felt moisture on her shoulder. When she heard no answer she looked at down and saw that El was asleep. "Hey sleepyhead," she said softly. "Come on, let's get you comfortable." She led the sleepy woman into her bedroom, pulled back the sheets, and gently coaxed her to lie down.

For a long while, Ruth just looked at the sleeping woman until she whispered, "What a fool I am." Bending down she placed a gentle kiss on El's cheek then headed for the bathroom and a shower.

+ + +

El stretched and moved her head back and forth and heard her neck crack. She didn't open her eyes as her fingers ran over the soft sheet below her. *I'm in bed*, she thought before her eyes flew open. Blue orbs flashed around an unfamiliar room before they closed. *Oh god, who did I take to bed*. When her hand rested on her stomach, she realized that she was still dressed. The heady smell of something wafted up her nose and she opened her eyes again. Taking a good look at her surroundings, she thought, *Ruth...this is Ruth's room*.

"Hey there I thought I heard you stirring," Ruth said with a smile.

El looked at the woman's face before her gaze drifted down. "What's that?" she asked.

"I made homemade chicken noodle soup for you," Ruth said as she neared the bed. "Sit up please."

Without thinking, El rose up and rested her back on a pillow jammed up against the headboard. "That sure smells good." As Ruth placed the tray over her legs, El's stomach rumbled. "Guess I'm hungry." She shrugged and picked up a spoon, dipped it into the bowl and carefully brought a spoonful of soup to her mouth. Her mouth was watering as she blew a breath over the steaming broth. Her eyes captured Ruth's after she slurped the contents of the spoon. "That is wonderful...thanks I didn't realize how tired I was."

Ruth felt her face redden and she looked away. "I'm sorry," she said again. "I

should of gone into the restaurant and spoke to you instead of assuming.”

El put her spoon down and moved the tray to the other side of the bed. “Will you sit here?” she asked as she patted the bed. When Ruth didn’t move El said, “Please.”

Refusing to make eye contact, Ruth sat on the edge of the bed. “Ok.”

With shaking fingers, El brushed away Ruth’s tears. “Let’s start again.” She cupped Ruth’s chin and turned her head to face her. “I’ve never in my life worried about anyone the way I did about you. I care about you so much more than I ever thought I could.” When Ruth’s dark blue eyes met hers, she smiled and pulled her closer. “I want you in my life Ruth Arnold.”

Their kiss was soft yet insistent as they melted into each other. Soon their bodies were humming the tune of excitement that begged for satisfaction. El broke away then moved an arm’s length away from Ruth.

“What...what’s the matter,” Ruth asked unable to squelch the hammering of her heart. “Have I don’t something wrong?”

“No, never,” El said. “Christmas Eve is two days away and if we continue I won’t leave and that would be bad.”

Ruth’s forehead creased as her eyebrows lifted. “Why, I don’t understand.”

“I have been gone most of the week and I have a mountain of work that needs to be done before I can take time off.” El saw the disappointed confusion cross Ruth’s face and moved closer before she gently caressed her face. “If we are going to start a new Christmas tradition, I need to have everything done at the office so I can leave it behind and enjoy our time together.”

“Hmm El, won’t it still be there after Christmas?”

“Yeah, along with a ton more...insurance fraud doesn’t take a holiday. In fact, this time of the year we find the most proof of deception. I need to do this Ruth...can you understand that?”

Closing her eyes in resignation Ruth sighed. “I don’t like it but yeah, I understand.

El smiled. “Thank you. I will pick you up Monday morning and we can go to the market, get all the food we’ll need for our celebration, and then go back to my place to begin our holiday.”

Ruth smiled in frustration but understood El’s motives—their first time together



should have no distractions.

“Sounds good to me,” Ruth said before she stole another kiss. “I’ll give my kids a call, that way they won’t worry when I don’t answer on Christmas Eve.”

With one more kiss, El sealed the bargain.

+ + +

True to her word, El arrived in front of Ruth’s apartment building early Christmas Eve morning. When she saw Ruth exit the building, she couldn’t squash the fond feelings that bubbled around her heart. She laughed as she remembered the numerous calls they shared in the two days since she arrived on Ruth’s doorstep. *I should have just brought her with me.* When the door flung open and Ruth stepped inside, El sighed. “You look wonderful.”

“Bet you say that to all your girls,” Ruth said with a laugh as she tossed a bag with her special gift for El in the backseat.

“Nope only one special girl,” El said unable to keep her eyes off Ruth. “What’s in the bag?”

“You’ll just have to wait until tomorrow to find out.”

“Tease,” El said as she shifted into drive. “I thought we’d go to Fannelli’s for the groceries.”

“Good idea... oh I don’t have anything to give them. I’ve been so caught up... I forgot to get them anything. I always bring them something for Christmas.” Ruth looked over and the happy smile on El’s face was undeniable. “What? Why are you smiling like that?”

“Because I am one step ahead of you... I have a bottle of wine for them.”

“Oh Elyse, you’re wonderful,” Ruth gushed.

El guided the Lexus into a parking slot right in front of Fannelli’s Market. “Must be our lucky day Ruth,” El said with a laugh as she reached the bottle of wine on the backseat. “Here you go. I will join you in a minute I need to call my sister and find out the best time to call my folks tomorrow.”

Ruth walked into the market and the proprietor Giorgio Fannelli instantly greeted her. “Merry Christmas Ruth,” he said as he pulled a bag out from under the counter. “I have something for you,” he said with a bright smile.

“Thank you, Mr. Fannelli,” Ruth said as her face turned red. “And, I have

something for you.” She handed the gift bag and watched as he pulled out a bottle of wine encased in what looked like a Christmas sweater for the bottle. Ruth giggled as she thought of how unlike El the present was but at the same time, it was so appropriate.

Sophia joined her husband. “This is so thoughtful Ruth. Did you knit the bottle cover yourself?”

Again, Ruth blushed. “No, I didn’t.” She looked at the floor and studied her boots as she tried to get her emotions under control.

“You are welcome to spend Christmas with us Ruth.” The grocers made the same invitation each year but Ruth always declined. “You don’t have to spend the day alone.”

“Oh, I won’t be alone Sophia.”

The older woman’s face brightened. “Are you spending it with the same person you made dinner for?”

“As a matter of fact I am.”

The smile that crossed Sophia’s face seemed never ending. “I hope we get to meet your special someone.”

Sophia’s smile paled in comparison to the one crossing Ruth’s face as El walked in the door. She couldn’t take her eyes off the woman who had bumped into her and changed her life. “Here she is now,” Ruth said as El walked toward her. “Giorgio and Sophia this is my good friend Elyse Baxter.”

For her part, El didn’t take her eyes off Ruth when she said, “It’s nice to meet you.”

If the husband and wife said anything neither Ruth nor El noticed—they were lost in each other’s gaze. When the bell above the door rang, Ruth broke the contact and said, “We’d better get shopping,” before they both walked away.

Giorgio looked at his wife who looked confused. “She’s happy Mama.”

With a grin Sophia said, “Yes, it is the miracle of Christmas.”

+ + +

Ruth and El set a shopping record as they raced through the grocery store, paid for their purchase, put them in El’s vehicle, and drove away. Neither spoke as they carried all the bags into El’s apartment and put everything away. As Ruth

walked toward the kitchen after placing her special gift under the tree, she saw El standing under the mistletoe. “Are you standing there for a reason,” she teased.

“I’m waiting for you,” El said in a sultry tone.

Ruth flew to El’s side and embraced her. Kisses that she could no longer deny lingered as they each gloried in their closeness. Tongues sought each other as they circled and sucked. They only stopped long enough to catch a breath. When they finally broke apart neither spoke as they moved into El’s bedroom. Trembling fingers fumbled with buttons and zippers until both Ruth and El stood facing each other naked.

“You’re so beautiful,” Ruth whispered as she hesitantly ran a finger along the valley between El’s breasts. With shaking fingers, she circled a plump nipple as her gaze held steadfast on El’s eyes. “I want to make love with you Elyse.”

El took Ruth’s hand and kissed it before she encircled the woman with her arms. The feeling of skin on skin made her heart ricochet in her chest as she kissed waiting lips before she pulled back the sheets and waited for Ruth to crawl under them.

Hungry bodies that were on fire tensed as they tried to devour the other with want and need. When their bodies reached a pinnacle, all sense of time and space were lost—they soared secure in the knowledge of unconditional acceptance. Lying together, Ruth and El spoke words of love and happiness as their bodies relaxed only to fly once more as passion once again reigned.

+ + +

Early Christmas morning Ruth woke to find a gift on the pillow next to her. Her eyes tracked to El who was looking at her expectantly. “Good morning,” she said with a blush as she remembered the night before.

“Merry Christmas sleepyhead,” El said with a wink.

Ruth looked at the package then back at her lover. “Is that for me?”

“Yes, I want you to open it first.”

Pulling back the covers, Ruth got out of the bed. “I have a special one for you too. Let me get it and then we can open them together.”

El let her eyes rake over Ruth’s naked body and felt a stirring that had nothing to do with sex and everything to do with her lover. The only word for the night before was magical for she had never experienced the intense emotions that

Ruth evoked in her. As a sly smile curved around her lips, she slipped out of her robe.

When Ruth walked back into the bedroom, she stopped dead in her tracks when she saw El lounging naked on the bed. “If that is your present for me you should know it is exactly what I want. She let her eyes feast on El’s body as she crawled cat-like toward her new lover. As she slid along the body that brought her joy and satisfaction, she growled.

With her hands cupping Ruth’s face, El said, “Let’s open our gifts first.” She thought she must feel like a child does on their first Christmas. She couldn’t wait to see the look on Ruth’s face as she opened her gift.

“Mine first,” Ruth said as she handed El the wrapped gift.”

“Hmm, I have a better idea...let’s open them at the same time.”

Ruth tore the Christmas paper off her small box and saw a red jeweler’s box. She looked at El who was painstakingly taking the paper off the gift and laughed. “We can buy more paper Elyse,” she said jokingly until she saw the look of censure.

“Do you know how long it has been since I had a present to open?” When she saw Ruth nod, she said, “More years than I care to remember. I want to savor every moment.” Once she finished with the paper, she looked at Ruth who waited to open her gift all the way. “On the count of three,” El said and watched as Ruth flipped the box open and gasped.

“Oh Elyse...I don’t know what to say?” Dangling from a gold chain was a gold key that was the size of a house key.

El smiled. “It is the key to the apartment but more importantly it is the key to my heart. In case you didn’t know you stole my heart the day we met.”

Tears made tracks down Ruth’s cheeks as she sobbed, “Open it,” as she pointed to the square box El was holding.

As El pulled back the flaps of the green box, she kept her eyes on Ruth. When she pulled out wooden box, she smiled.

“Open it,” Ruth implored.

“Ok,” El whispered as her shaking fingers lifted the top. What she heard was the melodic sound she smiled. “It’s beautiful...what’s the tune...I can’t seem to place it.”

Ruth rested her head on El's shoulder and began to sing softly, "I'll be loving you always, with a love that's true always. Not for just an hour, not for just a day, not for just a year but always."

El's eyes held Ruth's gaze and they both saw their reflection shining back at them. No longer would they have to conceal their true feelings by pretending to be someone other than who they were. They opened their lonely hearts and the reflection they saw was love.

The End

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Happy Holidays

Constructive comments are always welcome Thank you. [Erin](#)

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