

~ Blown Away ~

by Kim Baldwin © 2004

Dedicated to the Queen of the Double Standard.

The emergency radio was crowded with voices, overlapping each other and fighting to be heard above the relentless tirade of static. Many of the voices were harried and anxious-reflecting the unusual strain on the emergency dispatchers, firemen and police. Even the veterans in those positions had never experienced a storm like this.

It was some freak convergence of hot and cold fronts and a change in the jet stream, that's all Gable knew. An unusually muggy April morning had spawned a violent afternoon. Tornadoes were touching down all over Michigan. Two had already been spotted in her county and three more in the surrounding ones.

A wind gust tried to wrench the steering wheel from her hands. Branches littered the roadway. She saw no other cars.

She'd come through torrential rain, and a brief burst of walnut-sized hail she thought might crack the Jeep's windshield. It was doing neither at the moment, but that in itself was somehow more unsettling, as if the storm was gathering its strength to launch an all-out assault.

Above her, the sky was a color she'd never seen before, a sickly greenish yellow. Directly ahead was a low wall of clouds, dark and foreboding.

This was only Gable McCoy's seventh call-out since she joined her township's volunteer fire department two months earlier. So far the calls had all been for small fires, mostly brush fires started by discarded cigarettes or careless campers. This was her first real test as a member of the local disaster management team.

During her search and rescue training, she'd been assigned a 5 square mile zone along with a veteran sheriff's deputy. But the man was out of town so she was on her own tonight.

She'd been patrolling for two hours, methodically checking houses. Her zone was mostly state forest, and many of the homes were summer cottages, still locked up and vacant. Power was out in a few of the year-round homes she'd stopped at, and wind had caused minor damage to roofs, but no one had been injured.

Gable slowed to turn onto Highway 55. She rolled down the window and braked to a stop. Something was very wrong.

There was suddenly no wind, where a moment ago it was buffeting the Jeep.

She got out. It was eerily quiet. A kind of quiet she didn't think she'd ever heard in the forest.
Where are the birds?

The hair on the back of her neck stood up. The air seemed charged by electricity. The ozone crackled around her.

That's when she heard it. Just like it was always described. A roaring, like an oncoming train.

There was forest in every direction. The trees blocked her view except where the road cut through. She couldn't see the twister.

She glanced around. There was a lone, boarded up convenience store on the corner where she'd stopped. A simple wood framed building, locked up tight. The wind began to pick up again. The roaring got louder.

Gable ran to the opposite corner of the intersection, where the edge of the road sloped away. There was a drainage ditch, and beneath the roadway, a drainpipe that looked about three feet across. A tight squeeze, but there were no better alternatives. She scrambled down the bank.

Sticks and dirt and leaves whirled around her. The wind tried to blow her off her feet, and the roar of the tornado was deafening. She glanced up and saw the twister cut out of the woods and onto the Highway 100 feet away, heading straight for her. She dove into the pipe.

Then it was upon her.

The tornado tried to suck her out of the pipe, tugging at her with a fierce determination. She fought back, trying to brace herself against the sides, but they were slippery with algae.

She found it incredibly hard to breathe.

She was losing ground, slipping by inches, her fingers clawing at the slick surface. Her feet protruded from the pipe, then her legs. Debris, dirt and stones pelted her like hail.

It lasted no more than 30 seconds, but it seemed like several minutes.

When it grew calm again, Gable wriggled back out of the drainpipe. She gasped for air. Her heart was pounding in her chest. The adrenalin rush was so intense she thought she might faint. She was trembling all over.

She was also soaked to the skin, and it suddenly registered that she'd lost one of her tennis shoes. It had been ripped from her foot and was nowhere in sight. But she was otherwise uninjured.

She climbed back onto the roadway and surveyed the area around her as the rain started anew.

Where the convenience store had stood, there was now only concrete foundation, wood, plaster, and assorted debris-canned goods, pieces of shelving, bits of paper. The store's large metal dumpster was lodged in a tree, 20 feet off the ground.

Her Jeep was still right-side up, but the front windshield had been shattered and the vehicle was sitting half-on and half-off the road, a dozen yards from where she'd parked it.

Her hands were shaking as she reached for her radio and headed to the Jeep. "McCoy here. A tornado just missed me, Highway 55 at Wolf Run Road. Headed east-northeast. Over." She tried to keep her voice even, but she could not completely disguise how much the twister had scared her.

The voice that answered her was not the dispatcher, but the local 911 Director, Carl Buckman. Carl was a poker buddy.

"You all right, Gable?"

"Yeah, Carl. I'm O.K. I'm going to try to follow the path it took."

"Roger. Be careful."

She had thrown a pair of knee-high 'Wellies' in the back of the Jeep in case she hit some flooding. She pulled the boots on and set off down the road, grateful for the Jeep's four-wheel drive.

The pavement was gone where the tornado had crossed over it, and branches and downed trees were scattered all over the Highway. She had to get out several times to haul some obstruction out of her way so she could proceed.

The road curved up and over a hill. At the top, she braked to a stop and sat gawking at the destruction below her. The twister had carved out a path through the woods a quarter-mile long. Trees along the route had been snapped like matchsticks, jagged edges uniformly cut 10 feet off the ground. There were two homes within the area. Both had been flattened.

Gable headed toward the nearest one. She keyed her radio. "This is McCoy. Two homes leveled on Highway 55. Stand by."

She thought she heard the 911 Director acknowledge her, but his response was cut short by a woman's voice, shrill with alarm. "A tornado hit the Emerald Creek Inn! We need help out here! There are a lot of people trapped and injured!"

There was another flurry of voices as the dispatcher rerouted emergency personnel to the scene. Gable knew the Inn. It was a popular spot with an attached restaurant on the other side of the county.

She turned in to the driveway of the first of the flattened homes. Just off the road, the way was blocked by a gate. It was padlocked. *Thank God*. Most probably this was another seasonal place still closed from winter. She got out and jogged up the long curving drive until she came to the remnants of the house.

The roof and walls had been blown to pieces. Debris was scattered over a wide area. There were bits of furniture, broken dishes, articles of clothing, a shoe, scraps of paper. A torn photograph of a boy with a string of fish.

There were no cars about.

"Hello?" she hollered. She turned her radio off. "Is anyone here?" She listened for a long moment, but heard only the rain, and the wind in the trees. Far off thunder. She tried once more. "Hello?"

Nothing.

She jogged back to the car and headed toward the other house.

This driveway was open. And despite the rain, she could tell from the tire impressions in the dirt 2-track that it had been recently used. *Shit*. She gripped the steering wheel harder and headed up the drive to the house, which was set well off the road in a small clearing cut into the forest.

The first thing she came to was a red pickup truck lying on its side, partially blocking the driveway. She was able to squeeze the Jeep around it, but a little further on, the home's 500 gallon propane tank prevented further progress.

She could smell gas.

Her heart pounding, she cut off the engine and eased out of the Jeep. The tank was intact but lying on its side, gas hissing from a broken pipe that stuck out of the top. She turned the valve and the hissing stopped.

She went the rest of the way to the house on foot, hurrying as fast as she could through the wreckage.

This house had also taken a direct hit, but a portion of one wall still stood: the area around the fieldstone fireplace. A massive section of the roof was propped against it, forming a 9-foot high lean-to. An intact bookcase rested beneath it, empty of all its books.

The rest of the house was littered with debris in piles taller than she was. It was a treacherous obstacle course to try to negotiate through it. Jagged pieces of glass and metal were everywhere, the footing uncertain. She stayed on the perimeter.

"Hello? Is anyone here?" She listened for a response, but could hear nothing but the howl of the wind and the drumming of the rain. She picked her way around the foundation. She tried again on the other side of the house. "Hello?"

This time she thought she might have heard a response. *Or was it just the wind, playing with my imagination?*

"Hello!" she yelled as loud as she could.

This time it was unmistakable. Through the pounding rain, she could hear a muffled female voice. "Down here! In the basement!"

"I hear you!" Gable shouted. "I'm with search and rescue! Keep talking! Are you alright?"

"I'm not hurt, but I'm trapped! Get me out of here!" The voice had a panicky sound to it.

"Hang on! I'm coming! How do I get to you?"

"Storm door. Just outside the house in back," the voice shouted.

Gable was already behind the house. Finding the door beneath the rubble around her would be a daunting task.

"I'm calling for more help. Sit tight and try to relax," she hollered

"Hurry! Please hurry!" the voice shouted back.

Gable reached for her radio and turned it back on. The chaos of voices was even worse than before. She started picking through the debris as she waited for a lull in the chatter. As soon as she got one, she keyed her mike.

"McCoy to base. Got a woman trapped in her home. 4010 Highway 55. Over."

"Roger, McCoy." It was the dispatcher. "What's the situation?"

"House is in ruins. She's in the basement, but is O.K. I can't get to her."

They were interrupted by a man's voice. "We need more help and at least four more ambulances at the Inn."

"Stand by, McCoy," the dispatcher said, diverting to attend to the request.

Gable pulled a pair of thick leather work gloves from her back pocket and put them on. She began moving debris, searching for the door, while she waited for the dispatcher to get back to her. She lowered the volume of the radio.

"How are you doing? Can you move around?" she hollered to the homeowner.

"I'm in the basement shower," the voice answered. "Part of the ceiling came down. I can move around but I can't get out of here."

"Base to McCoy," the radio interrupted. It was Buckman's voice.

"McCoy here."

"Gable, is the woman in immediate danger?"

"Hard to say," Gable answered. "The debris above her doesn't seem to be shifting, but the place is in ruins, so anything's possible."

"... no help at present. Everyone's ...the Inn. Do what you can. ...get there when we're able." The static on the radio kept cutting in and out, but she got the gist.

"Roger. McCoy out." She was on her own. And it was going to be dark very soon. She had to make the most of what daylight was left.

"I'm Gable McCoy, a volunteer firefighter," she shouted to the woman in the basement. "What's your name?"

"Erin. Erin Richards," came the muted reply. "Have you seen Earl Grey? My cat? He's a little charcoal kitten with a white moustache."

Gable looked around. "Here, kitty kitty," she called out. "C'mere Earl Grey. Kitty, kitty." She was not at all optimistic anything would answer her. The devastation around her was so complete she had trouble imagining anything as small and defenseless as a kitten living through it.

"I'm sorry Erin. I don't see him," Gable hollered.

"Please. Try again," the woman begged. "Maybe he made it. Maybe he's hurt and just can't answer."

Gable wanted to get the woman out of there. The situation was too unstable. It was against her better judgment to spend any more time looking for the cat, but there was something about Erin's desperate plea that touched her deeply. So she called out some more for the kitten, and poked around through the rubble around the house for a couple more minutes.

There was no response to her calls and no movement in the wreckage.

"I'm sorry, Erin. I don't see him. We need to concentrate on getting you out, then we can both look for him, O.K.?"

"All right. I understand."

"It will help me if you can direct me to exactly where the door is," Gable shouted. "It's covered up."

"It's outside the bathroom window," the woman shouted back.

Gable frowned. "That doesn't help. I'm sorry, Erin, but your house is pretty much gone. There are

no windows and no bathroom.

There was a lengthy silence.

"Erin? You still with me?"

"Everything's gone? Everything?"

"Yes. I'm very sorry," Gable answered. "But try not to think about that now. Help me find you."

After another brief silence the woman hollered back. "The door is just a couple of feet outside the house. About a third of the way down from the corner nearest the driveway."

"All right, that's great Erin. Hang in there." The area the woman described was covered by a large pile of wreckage, topped off by the stove. Gable cleared away what she could, then put her back to the appliance to shove it out of the way.

"Is more help coming?" the woman shouted.

"As soon as they can," Gable grunted. She gave the stove another push, putting her long legs into it. A jagged edge tore her jeans, cutting into the flesh of her thigh. It wasn't deep. She ignored it.

The stove toppled off to one side. Gable dug through the rubble beneath it. She spotted the edge of the storm door and cleared a space around it. It was dented in and wouldn't budge, despite her best efforts. She ran back to the Jeep and got her tire wrench and used it to pry open the door.

Several steps led downward, out of the rain. She followed them and found herself in a small concrete basement. One wall was lined with shelves containing home-canned goods: peaches and pears and tomatoes in jars, undisturbed. Boxes were stacked high along the opposite wall, each one carefully labeled "Old dishes" or "Winter clothes" or "Photographs" or the like.

Two-thirds of the room was untouched by the tornado. But further in, much of the ceiling had given way, toppling onto a desk and file cabinet. It caved in right over the only door. It had to be the bathroom.

Gable knew there was no way she could move the enormous beam that blocked her way, and even if she could, doing so might bring the rest of the house down on top of them. It would take more than human hands to get the woman out of there.

She picked her way through the rubble and got as close to it the door as she could. There were creaks and groans from over her head as though the remaining wreckage would collapse upon her at any moment.

It was a scary, precarious situation. Her mouth was dry. "Can you hear me, Erin?" she yelled.

The woman's voice answered from the other side of the wall. "Thank God! I'm here! In here!"

"How are you doing?" Gable said, glancing upward. She could see a bit of sky through a 3-foot-wide hole above her, and she felt a mist of rain against her face.

"All right I guess. I just want to get out of here."

"I'm sorry but it will be a while longer." Gable answered. "The door is blocked on this side. It'll take heavy equipment to move it out of the way safely, and everyone is tied up elsewhere right now."

There was another long silence.

"Erin? Keep talking to me. How you holding up?"

"How much longer do you think it will be?" the woman asked.

Gable had turned her radio way down, but she'd heard no letup in the cacophony of voices and static. She unclipped it from her belt and increased the volume to listen to what was happening.

Another tornado had touched down. Three homes were destroyed and six people were injured. Additional ambulances were en route from a neighboring county. All local emergency resources were still tied up at the Inn.

When there was a break in the voices, she radioed in with an update. Buckman told her it would likely be morning before the required manpower and equipment could be spared to help her.

"Erin? You're going to have to be patient. We probably aren't going to be able to get to you until morning."

"Morning?" shrieked the voice from the other side of the wall. "You gotta get me out of here! I can't wait until morning!" There was desperation to the voice now.

"Look, I know you're scared," Gable said. "You've been through a terrible ordeal. But you have to stay calm. Try to relax and take deep breaths."

"You don't understand," the woman said. "I have claustrophobia. Really *bad* claustrophobia, know what I mean?"

Oh Shit. What do I do now? Gable thought for a moment. Oddly enough, having Erin's discomfort to focus on dispelled her own uneasiness at their situation.

"Well then, we'll just have to try to take your mind off what's happening," Gable said. "Do you have enough room to lie down?"

"More or less."

"All right. Get as comfortable as you can. Do you have a towel or something you can use as a pillow?"

"Yeah."

"Good. Now shut your eyes and try to relax," Gable said. "Concentrate on your breathing. In and out. Nice, deep breaths. Try to visualize that you're somewhere pleasant. Someplace you've visited, maybe, and would like to return to."

Gable found a spot near the door where she could sit comfortably, out of the rain. She'd rather have been in the undamaged portion of the basement. But the rain was really coming down again, and it was making a heck of a racket as it pounded against the wreckage above them. She and Erin would have to shout to hear each other if she moved much further away.

"All right, I've got it," Erin said.

"O.K. Now I want you to describe where you are to me. Really *be* there. What do you see? Smell? Hear?" Gable cleared a path in the debris so she could stretch out her legs. Amid the pieces of wood and flooring she found a framed photograph, the glass shattered.

It was an 8 by 10 of a bride and groom, circa early 1940s, she guessed, by the man's WW II army uniform. The bride was recognizable as such only by her veil; she was otherwise clad in a nice, but everyday dress. And she was carrying what appeared to be a checkerboard. *That's a little odd.*

"Hmm, let's see... I'm lying on a beach in Oahu. And that isn't rain I'm hearing, it's...the sound of the surf. The air smells like salt."

"Very good. Now who's with you? Pick anyone you like, someone whose company you really enjoy."

"My mother, then. She's a pip. 80 going on 20. I can't keep up with her."

"I found a picture out here, a wedding couple. Is this her?" Gable asked.

"Yup, that's them. Dad passed away a couple years ago."

"Can I ask why she's carrying a checkerboard?"

Gable heard the sound of laughter through the wall. It made her smile.

"That's her purse. It was the height of style then, she keeps insisting. But we-my brothers and I--we kidded her and Dad for years about how exciting their honeymoon must have been."

That got Gable laughing too. There was a loud CREAK from directly overhead that startled them both into silence.

Gable recovered first. "O.K. So you're in Hawaii and your Mom is here too. You haven't seen her in a very long while, so why don't you catch her up on what you've been up to? Go for the good things and skip the tornado. You'll deal with all that tomorrow."

"All right," Erin agreed. "Well, Ma...let' see." She paused to think. "I know. I got a couple of new students this week."

"Why that's splendid, daughter, just splendid," Gable provided, in a chipper British voice much higher than her own deep alto.

Erin laughed so hard it came out as a cackle, which was quickly suppressed. "Not my mother at all," she said. "But you did sound an awful lot like John Cleese from Monty Python."

"I love Monty Python!" Gable said.

"No you don't, *Mother*," Erin said. "You like Jay Leno."

"Oh, right," Gable said. "Sorry, dearie, must be off my meds," she added in her Monty Python falsetto.

That got Erin chuckling again. "You're doing a good job keeping me distracted, Gable."

"No problem. I'm glad to help."

"You've got your work cut out for you, I think. There's something I haven't told you," Erin admitted.

"What's that?"

"I'm also afraid of the dark."

Oh Crap. "You're not kidding me, are you?" Gable stood and leaned over until she could see through the hole above her. It was already early twilight. It would be dark in less than half an hour.

"Nope. 'Fraid not, if you'll excuse the pun."

"So you still have some light to see by over there? Can you see the sky?" Gable asked.

"There's a hole about the size of my fist in the corner of the shower. It's been letting light in," Erin said.

Gable tried to picture where they were in the house in relation to the wreckage above. "Do you have anything you can stick up through the hole? Something rigid, like a towel bar or piece of wood or anything?"

Gable could hear sounds coming from the other side of the wall as Erin shifted things around.

All at once, there was a loud groan as a piece of ceiling gave way above the bathroom and a jarring crash as it fell. Erin cried out.

"Erin? Are you all right?" Gable was on her feet, her ear to the wall between them.

"Damn! I pulled on the wrong piece of wood and the ceiling caved in. Well, a part of it did, anyway. I have even less room to move around now, and I cut my arm."

"How bad is it?" Gable asked. "Do you have first aid supplies in there?"

"It's a deep cut," Erin said. "It's not very long, but it's bleeding pretty good. I have a towel wrapped around it. I can't get to my medicine cabinet."

"I'm going upstairs. See if you can find something to stick up through the hole to help me find you," Gable said.

"I've got a piece of wood that will reach," Erin said.

"Good, hang on." Gable went out through the storm door. The wind had picked up considerably, but the rain had diminished. The sky was getting darker by the second.

She opened the back of the Jeep and reached for the small daypack the county had issued her for her search and rescue missions. She emptied it out and sorted through the contents. She selected a flashlight and extra batteries, candle and matches, bottle of water and two power bars and stuffed them back into the pack along with several items from her first aid kit: antibiotic ointment gauze, tape and an ace bandage.

Next she took a 25 foot length of thin nylon rope and tied one end to the pack. She returned with it to the house. "O.K. Erin, show me where you are," she hollered.

Gable scanned the wreckage, and near the middle of the house she saw it—a long strip of wood waving back and forth. The hole it came out of was about the size of a basketball hoop. She saw she could not get nearer than ten or fifteen feet away. There was too much debris, and the flooring around the hole was too uncertain. She didn't want to bring more of it down on Erin's head.

Gable got as close as she dared. She put the loose end of the rope under one foot to anchor it and held the coil of it loosely in her left hand, the daypack in her right. "All right, Erin, I'm going to throw a line with a pack on it to you. Back away from the hole if you can."

"O.K. I'm ready," Erin shouted from below.

Gable took careful aim and tossed the bag toward the hole. It fell a foot to the right. She tugged it

back toward herself, trying not to snag it on the myriad of obstacles between her and the hole.

She got it back in her hand and coiled it for another try. She took a deep breath and let it fly.

It landed dead-on this time, disappearing into the hole.

"Got it!" Erin called out. Then, a minute later, "A flashlight! And a candle! This is great, Gable. Thank you."

"Good. I'm going to head back downstairs," Gable answered.

She returned to the basement. As she passed through the area untouched by the tornado, she glanced again at the neatly printed labels on the row of plastic storage bins.

Winter clothes. Although the day had started warm and muggy, the storm front and nightfall had brought much cooler temperatures. She was feeling a bit chilled in her soaked clothing. She imagined Erin was too.

Gable returned to the wall that separated them. "Erin? Are you warm enough? It's going to get colder."

"Well, my shirt got pretty wet when the ceiling gave way," Erin said. "I am a little cold."

"There's a bin over here that says 'Winter clothes'?"

"Yes! That's got sweats and fleecy stuff in it."

"I'll get you a change of clothes and toss it to you in the backpack." Gable grabbed a pair of sweatpants and a fleece pullover and repeated the process with the backpack. She hit the hole on the third try, with just enough light left to manage it.

It was still raining and the wind was blowing steadily, and temperatures dropped another ten degrees when the sun set.

"Erin? How you doing?"

"Better, thanks. Warmer. Got the candle going and I took care of my arm."

"That's good. Hey, do you mind if I borrow a pair of sweats? I got soaked through, and I'm getting a little chilly too."

"Oh, of course! Please, help yourself."

"Great, thanks."

Gable found a lone large sweatshirt amid the preponderance of mediums, and managed to get on

a pair of Erin's sweatpants. They were tight and a several inches too short, but she felt worlds better.

While she changed, she listened to the chatter on her emergency radio. Another tornado had been sighted but it had not touched down. Crews were still going through the Inn. Two bodies had been pulled from the wreckage, and 15 people had been rescued alive.

Gable settled in to her familiar spot against the wall. "I'm back. Thanks for the clothes."

"You're welcome. I'll never be able to thank you enough for everything you're doing. Especially for staying with me."

"I'm just sorry you're stuck in there until morning."

"Forgive me if you've told me this already-are you a cop?" Erin asked.

"I'm a volunteer firefighter," Gable said. "Still a rookie. I've never experienced anything like this before."

"Me either." Erin answered. "Have you fought a lot of fires?"

"Just a few. Brush fires, mostly. I only moved here a few months ago." Gable said.

"Where from?" Erin asked.

"Why are we talking about me?" Gable said. But she was smiling. She could tell from Erin's tone of voice that the woman was much more relaxed now that she was warm and had a light to dispel the darkness.

Gable kept her own flashlight off, conserving the battery. She could see a dim glow of light above her, and through a tiny crack in the wall that separated her from Erin.

"We're talking about you because it's keeping me distracted," Erin said.

"Well that's all right, then. I moved here from Chattanooga."

"Were you a firefighter there, too?"

"No, this is a first for me. My real job is as a pharmacist. But I always like to devote some time volunteering somewhere. In Chattanooga I helped out at the humane society." Gable said.

"Did you get that from your parents?" Erin asked.

"Not really," Gable said. "They were both fine, generous people. But they both worked long hours; my Dad often had two jobs. I'd have to say it was Camp Fire that got me volunteering."

"Camp Fire? You mean, like in Camp Fire Girls?"

"Yup. I was involved in it for a long time. I'm sure you've heard of the Boy Scout oath?"

"Sure. Do your duty, be honest, and all that?"

"Exactly. Well, we had the Camp Fire Law. And even as adult, I always thought it was a pretty good creed to live by. One of the 'laws' is 'Give Service'. You know-do what you can to make the world a better place."

"Well I admire that," Erin said. "I can't say I've done my share. I'd like to argue I never seem to have the time, but I guess that's just an excuse. Other people make the time."

"It's never too late," Gable said.

"That's true," Erin agreed. "So what are the other Camp Fire laws?"

Gable sang her answer, in a clear lilting alto. "Worship God. Seek beauty. Give service and knowledge pursue. Be trustworthy ever in all that you do. Hold fast onto health and your work glorify, and you will be happy, in the law of Camp Fire."

"You have a lovely singing voice," Erin said. "And I see what you mean. That is a pretty good guide to life."

"It keeps things in perspective for me," Gable said. "So how about you? Why don't you tell me about yourself?"

"O.K. Well, I'm a music teacher," Erin said. "I work at the elementary school. And I give private piano lessons. Or at least I did. Any sign of my piano?"

"No, I'm sorry," Gable answered. "Erin, I don't mean to get too personal. You can not answer this and I'll understand. But... are you insured? Are you going to be O.K.?"

"I'll be fine," Erin said. "I do have insurance. Probably not as much as I should. But I should be able to rebuild. I love it up here, with all the trees and animals. I just wish I had found Earl Grey before the twister hit. He was hiding somewhere."

"I'm sorry about your kitten," Gable said. She herself had never had a cat, believing them to be generally unsociable creatures who clawed the furniture. But Erin's voice betrayed how much the woman would deeply miss her pet, so Gable was genuinely sorry that Earl Grey apparently hadn't made it.

"He's a little sweetheart," Erin said. "He sleeps..." She cleared her throat. Her voice was husky with emotion. "He slept tucked up against my neck every night."

Gable didn't know what to say. There was a long silence.

"Do you have a place to stay?" Gable asked. She hadn't hardly even really met Erin, but she felt close to her in a way she didn't understand. And very concerned about her welfare. *Is it because we're surviving this together? Because we've had this shared, life-altering experience?*

"I think I'm going to stay at that little motel outside town-- for a few days, anyway. While I deal with the insurance company and figure out what I'm going to do."

"The Red Cross should be sending people in. They might be able to help you," Gable said.

"I appreciate your concern, Gable," Erin said. "I look forward to meeting you, when I get out of here."

"Me too," Gable said. "I admire the way you're keeping your chin up through this."

"Well, I'm lucky to be alive. That's the important thing, they always say. And you know what? They're right. I'm gonna really miss Earl Grey. And I know I lost some photos and things that are irreplaceable. But I'm a firm believer of 'count your blessings.' So I'm just going to concentrate on the good things right now. I've got my health. A job I like. And a great family and lots of close friends."

"That's the spirit," Gable said.

The two women talked on through the night, swapping stories of their lives. They found they had much in common: their taste in food, in music, books, TV and movies. Both had a fondness for Thai food, old MGM musicals and true adventure stories, classical music, kayaking.

And even more than that, they had similar outlooks on life. A passion for the out of doors and a shared concern for the environment. Decidedly Democratic politics. A sense of moral responsibility. A love for small-town life. A deep appreciation for the blessings they'd been given throughout their lives.

Gable found Erin easier to talk to than anyone she'd ever met. As they got to know each other, she gained a growing respect for the woman and her unflagging optimism. Around the time the first hint of dawn appeared, Gable realized with a start that Erin embodied everything she had ever wanted in a lover and partner.

She had not a clue though, about Erin's sexual orientation. Their love lives had not come up in their conversation, although Gable had concluded that Erin lived alone. She had no idea what Erin looked like, or how old she was. *But you're powerfully attracted to her, all the same, aren't you?* The revelation was a shock.

"Erin? How old are you?" Gable asked.

"46. You?"

"38."

Once the back-and-forth descriptions started, there was a flood of them. It seemed as though both women were anxious to paint a picture to go along with the voice they'd come to know.

"Hair?" Erin asked.

"Light brown. Long and straight, down to my shoulders," Gable answered. "You?"

"For some reason, I pictured you with black hair," Erin said. "I'm a redhead. It's cut very short."

"I'm five-eight," Gable volunteered. "And I wear glasses."

"Me, too! The glasses, I mean. I'm five-two."

How to I find out what I most want to know? Gable wondered. "Any kids?" she asked.

"Nope. Just cats. Earl Grey was number eight. My first was Mamma Cat," Erin said.

"Mamma Cat?" Gable said.

"Yeah, I know, real original. My mother's choice--I was seven at the time. This cat showed up at our door during a snowstorm and gave birth a few days later."

"Hence the name, I get it," Gable supplied. "And after Mamma Cat?"

"After Mamma Cat came Sylvester. Then...let's see...Cookie and Crumb--they were brother and sister. Then Freeway, and Jake. And Festus. He was a Siamese, and passed away just six months ago. That's when I got Earl Grey."

"Wow. That's a lot of cats."

"I usually had two at a time. Strays just seemed to find me. I never actually went out looking for one," Erin said. "Do you have any pets?"

"Nope," Gable said. "We had a golden retriever when I was growing up. Her name was Sally. But nothing after that."

"Oh that's a shame. I love having pets to come home to," Erin said. "What about you? Do you have any kids? Are you married?"

"Nope, no kids. Never married," Gable answered. "You?"

"I was married once," Erin said. "For a year, when I was 21. Bad mistake."

Gable felt her heart sink. "That's a shame." *They're always straight. Why am I always attracted*

to straight women?

The radio at Gable's side came alive. "McCoy? You there?" It was Carl Buckman. She had checked in with him a couple of times during the night. The rescue operation at the Inn had been wrapping up the last time they'd spoken, about 4 a.m. It was now 7.

"McCoy here," she answered back.

"Gable, we just got a call from your brother in Kalamazoo. His house was hit and your niece is in the hospital."

"Hannah? Oh no! Did he say how she is?" Gable asked.

"He said she's going to be in the hospital for a few days and he'd like you to come down and help them as soon as you can."

Gable was close to her brother Stewart, and godmother to Hannah. She could be in Kalamazoo in three hours if she left right away. But she had promised Erin she wouldn't leave her.

"We've got a crew headed your way," Buckman's voice cut into her thoughts. "They're loading the equipment now, and should be there momentarily."

The decision, it seemed, had been made for her. "O.K. Carl, I'll wait for them then head for Kalamazoo, if that's all right. Did you get someone to cover the rest of my zone?"

"Yeah, I'm doing that myself, as we speak," Buckman radioed back. "Things are finally quieting down. The final count, by the way, was eight tornados here, 57 statewide."

"Unbelievable. Thanks, Carl. I'll check in with you when I get back."

"Take care, Gable. Hope your niece is O.K."

Gable turned her attention back to Erin. She wasn't sure how much of the conversation the woman had been able to hear. "Erin? Help is almost here. Just a few more minutes."

"I heard," Erin said. "And you have to leave right? Something about your niece?"

"My brother's house in Kalamazoo got hit, and she's in the hospital. I'm going to leave when the rescue crew gets here. Wish I could stick around, but..."

Erin interrupted. "Please. Go now. I'll be fine for a few minutes. You needn't wait."

"I told you I wouldn't leave," Gable said.

"And I appreciate that you're a woman of your word, but I release you from that. You really saved me last night, Gable. I'll never be able to tell you how much you did."

"I didn't do much," Gable protested. "It was nice getting to know you, Erin, despite the circumstances. Let's have dinner when I get back, O.K.? Really meet properly?"

"I'd love that," Erin said. "You have to let me treat, to say thanks."

Gable heard the sound of heavy equipment rumbling up the driveway. She needed to move the Jeep. "The crews are here, Erin. Hang in there. It won't be long now."

"Thanks for everything Gable. I'll see you when you get back."

"Bye, Erin."

She got back to the Jeep and pulled it off to the side just as the crew arrived. She filled them in as they moved the propane tank out of the way, then she set off for Kalamazoo.

She hadn't expected to be gone long, but it was two weeks before she returned home. Her brother's roof had been blown off, and Hannah was in the hospital for 10 days for internal injuries and two broken legs. The tornado that hit their house touched down without warning. Hannah had been caught outside and was thrown 50 feet like a rag doll.

Although she was constantly occupied, Gable's mind wandered to Erin several times a day.

She missed her.

It was weird missing her, without having a face to put the voice to. She hoped that when she finally did meet Erin face-to-face, that she'd be able to get past this...this crush she seemed to have developed.

When she finally got home from Kalamazoo, she was single-minded. She had to find Erin. She showered and changed, trying on several combinations of shirts and pants. She settled on jeans, a white shirt, and her motorcycle jacket.

She was so nervous her palms were sweating. She brushed her hair until it shone. She felt as though she was on a very important first date, though she knew that wasn't the truth.

Erin had said she would be staying at the little motel just outside of town. That could only be the Blue Moose. Gable pulled into the lot and wiped her palms on her pant legs before she went into the office.

"Hi, I'm here to see Erin Richards," she said to the bespectacled older gentleman behind the counter. "Can I have her room number or can you ring her for me?"

"Erin Richards, you say?" the man asked, leaning forward to type the name into his computer. He typed with two fingers, as though he was terrified of what the computer might do if he hit the wrong key. He would look at the keyboard, searching for the letter. Strike it. Then he would look

at the monitor, peering over his reading glasses, to make sure it was there. Gable bit her tongue to keep from telling him to hurry. Finally, he announced, "I'm sorry, we have no one here by that name."

Gable stopped breathing for a moment. "Not here?" she repeated. "*Was* she here? Can you tell me that?"

He looked back at the computer screen. Then he called back over his shoulder. "Martha! Can you come out here a minute?" There was an open door behind him that led into an inner office. After a moment a diminutive woman with grey hair and a ready smile emerged.

"Hi," she greeted Gable with a nod of the head. "What's up?" she asked the man behind the desk.

"This woman is looking for someone named Erin Richards. Does that ring a bell with you?"

The woman nodded. "Yeah, that's the teacher that was in 14 for a couple of days. Lost her house in the tornado?" She directed the last sentence to Gable, who nodded.

"She was only here a couple of days?" Gable asked. "Did she say where she was going?"

The woman shook her head. "Don't think so. I remember her because her pickup was all caved in on one side, and I asked her about it. She told me what happened. Hey!" Her face lit up with recognition. "I bet you're Gable, aren't you?"

Gable couldn't help the faint flush of embarrassment that warmed her cheeks. *She talked about me!* The realization made her a little giddy with happiness. She'd apparently made an impression on Erin too.

"Yes, I'm Gable," she admitted.

"She told me how you sat up all night keeping her sane," the woman said. She held out her hand. "Bonnie Edwards. Nice to meet you, Gable." They shook. "She'll be sorry she missed you."

"I'm sorry too," Gable admitted. "Thanks. It's been nice meeting you."

She sat in her Jeep for a moment, drumming her hands on the steering wheel. She didn't want to go home. She was too keyed up. She decided to drop in on Carl Buckman, who ran a bait and tackle shop when there were no emergencies demanding his attention.

"Hey Carl," she greeted him.

"Gable! You're back!" He waved at her. "Missed a good game last night. I won twenty bucks off 'ol Don Baum."

She chuckled. "And did he pay up?"

"He promised to bring it in today."

She laughed harder. "Keep dreaming. You'll be lucky to get a free haircut out of him."

Carl shrugged. "Say-I know what I was supposed to tell you. You know that woman you sat with that night?"

Her heartbeat picked up. "Erin Richards?" she asked.

"Yeah! That's her. You asked the crew that rescued her to keep an eye out for her kitten?"

"Earl Grey?"

Carl nodded. "Well one of the guys was having breakfast the other day at the café in town, and he overheard some woman talking about how her son had found a half-starved kitten in the woods a couple of days after the tornado. He asked what it looked like, and sure enough! It was a gray kitten with a white moustache! But he didn't know how to get in touch with the Richards woman. Do you?"

She shook her head. "No, but there may be a way to find her. She said she was hoping to rebuild." *I should take a drive out to her place. See if anything is happening.* "Where's the cat now?"

Carl pulled a slip of paper out of his wallet. "Here's the number of the people who found it. The woman told Joe she'd give it back when we found the owner."

The cat gave Gable an extra incentive to find Erin. She called the family and arranged to pick up Earl Grey. She'd take care of the kitten while she searched for Erin, she decided. She didn't want the boy who'd found him to get too attached to the cat.

She stopped at the grocery store first and got a bag of dried food and several cans of moist, along with a litter pan and litter and a variety of toys.

The kitten viewed her with suspicion at the start, and hid under the car seat all the way home. She lured him out with a handful of treats, and he clung her shoulder crying pitiful little mewling sounds when she carried him inside.

Within a week, he had charmed her in a way she thought impossible, sleeping curled beside her every night and wailing loudly how much he missed her when she returned home from work.

She did every thing she could think of to find Erin. The elementary school where Erin taught was no help. She had taken off the last month of school with the principal's blessing, and had said only that she'd be back in touch once she got things settled.

Then Gable had driven out to Erin's place. The lot had been cleared and leveled, but no construction was underway. Her hope of finding the redhead began to fade. But she couldn't stop

thinking about her.

She drove by the place again about a week later. Her heart skipped a beat when she spotted the "Oakleaf Log Homes" truck parked in the driveway. A crew of workers was busy putting up log walls. She came by nearly every day after that to check the progress. *Must be one of those pre-fab kits*, she surmised. *Sure is going up fast*. She was hoping for a glimpse of Erin, but was disappointed each time.

In just under three months, the house looked done from the outside. After that, she'd see the occasional electrical company truck or plumber's van in the driveway, but still no Erin. Sometimes she brought Earl Gray with her. He'd lie in her lap most of the trip, but when she pulled to a stop he'd get up and stretch and try to peer out over the steering wheel.

More than four months after the tornados had hit, Gable had a meeting of the volunteer fire department. Carl greeted her as she stepped into the township fire department garage.

"Hey girl, you playing with us later? Going to have a game over at Jimmy's."

"Maybe," Gable replied. "Let's see how late this goes."

"You hear the news? Chief says we have a new volunteer. You won't be the rookie any more."

"Oh it hasn't been so bad," Gable said. "You guys have been pretty easy on me."

"I'd know that voice anywhere," came a familiar voice from behind her.

Erin! Gable whipped around.

Her stomach turned cartwheels and her breath caught in her throat. The sweet and caring music teacher she'd gotten to know just happened to be a damn fine looking woman, with a killer smile and hair the color of burnished copper. *Uh oh. I'm a goner.*

They stared at each other a very long moment, both wearing big grins.

Then Erin threw herself at Gable. She wrapped her arms around Gable's neck, and embraced her tightly. "Thank you," she whispered into Gable's shoulder, in a way that sent shivers up and down the taller woman's spine.

Gable could feel Erin's warm, moist breath on the skin at the base of her neck, a particularly sensitive spot. She swallowed hard.

"You're welcome," she managed, her throat tight. Her body was acutely aware of Erin's, pressed up against her, thigh to thigh, breast to breast.

Erin broke the embrace. "I'm sorry I haven't been in touch sooner. My mother came and abducted me from the motel," she explained. "She made me stay with her while my place was being

rebuilt. Have you been out there?"

Gable blushed. She couldn't admit she'd been there every day. "Yeah, it looks great," she said. Her smile got broader. "And I have just the perfect housewarming gift!"

Erin smiled back. "Lemme guess. A fire extinguisher?"

"A good choice, but mine's better," Gable teased.

"Do I get a hint?" Erin asked.

"Do I get an introduction?" Carl interjected.

Gable had completely forgotten he was there. "Sorry, Carl. This is Erin Richards. The woman I sat with."

"I gathered that. Pleased to meet you, Erin," he said, extending a hand.

"Carl Buckman here is our 9-1-1 Director, and my closest rival in our Saturday night poker games."

"Do all rookies get to play?" Erin asked. "I'm a force to be reckoned with when it comes to 5-card stud."

"You're the new recruit?" Gable asked, her eyebrows shooting up into her forehead.

Erin nodded. "Yeah, I'm trying to emulate a very generous-spirited Camp Fire Girl I know." She winked at Gable, and Gable's heart fluttered in her chest.

Oh, this is so not going to be easy, Gable thought. But what sweet torture.

The other firefighters were arriving, and in a few minutes the Chief announced the meeting was about to start. Gable and Erin sat together on folding chairs near the back. Gable had to fight hard not to stare at Erin. Once or twice, she caught Erin staring at her.

As the meeting finally wound to a close, Carl poked his head between them. "Cards, ladies?"

"Can't tonight," Erin apologized. She glanced at her watch. "I just back in town tonight. I'd like to hit the grocery store before it closes."

"I think I'll pass, too," Gable said. "I have an important errand to run."

"Aw, can't it wait?" Carl whined, waving a deck of cards at her.

"Nope, sorry Carl," Gable replied.

"If you change your mind, we'll be at Jimmy's." He scanned the room for other possibilities. "Good to meet you, Erin," he said, moving away.

"You too Carl." Erin got to her feet and turned to Gable. "I wish we had more time to catch up, but I'd better run. My cupboard is truly bare and I at least need to pick up coffee and cream or I'll never survive tomorrow morning."

Gable fell into step beside her as they joined the departing volunteer firefighters. "Do you mind if I stop by for a minute after you get home?"

Erin looked at her curiously. "Tonight?"

Gable nodded.

"Sure, all right," Erin said. "Give me a half hour?"

"See you then."

Earl Grey greeted Gable at the door with his raspy mewl; the cry he made to remind her that his stomach was indeed empty and would she please remedy that straightaway?

She picked him up and set to work scratching the spot under his chin that always made him lean into her touch. He began purring immediately; a tiny engine on low idle. She carried him to the kitchen for a snack.

When he finished she carried him into the living room and set him on her lap, petting him and talking to him until it was nearly time to go. She cleaned out his litter box and packed it up, along with a half-full bag of litter. Then she put the cat food she had left into a shopping bag, along with the toys and treats she'd bought. "Guess that's everything," she announced to the cat, who had followed her from room to room intent on her every move.

She glanced at her watch. It was after nine. Erin would be home by now. *I really should get going.* But she found it much harder than she thought it would be to say goodbye to Earl. She never dreamed she could get so attached to an animal. She leaned down to pet him.

"Are all kitties as sweet as you?" she asked.

He purred his response, then stood up on his hind legs, his front paws propped against her pant leg. He looked up at her and mewed loudly, demanding to be picked up, and she complied, hugging him and kissing him behind the ears and trying very hard not to cry.

"C'mon, you. Time to get you back home to your mother. Bet she'll be tickled to see you."

He rode on her lap all the way but didn't sleep, as if he could sense her nervousness and the pending change in the status quo.

Erin's new cabin was ablaze with light, a welcoming beacon in the darkness. But Gable walked

slowly up to the front door, savoring her last bit of time with the kitten.

She hid him under her jacket when she got to the house, a maneuver only partially successful. It hid his identity but she could not disguise the fact that something very *alive* was protesting its confinement against her chest.

Erin's smile when she opened the door and spotted Gable turned to a look of bewilderment when her eyes focused in on the squirming bundle of energy beneath her coat.

"Your housewarming present," Gable explained. "Anxious to be opened, as you can see." She smiled mischievously.

Erin stepped aside. "Well, do come in," she invited.

The kitten let out a loud *rowl* just as Gable stepped over the threshold. She hadn't heard this particular cry before, but she thought it sounded clearly like *Get me the hell out of here right now!*

"A cat?" Erin guessed. She had a big grin on her face. "You brought me a cat?"

"Not just any cat," Gable said as she unzipped her jacket.

"Earl! Oh my GOD! Little Earl Grey!" Erin scooped him up from Gable's outstretched hands and held him close against her. She was overcome with emotion, laughing and crying at the same time.

Earl was momentarily startled by the abrupt change but when he recognized the familiar scent of his mother he mewed a soft, sweet sigh and rubbed his chin and whiskers against her cheek.

Gable thought it one of the nicest reunions she'd ever witnessed, and said a prayer of thanks for the family that had found Earl and taken him in. Sad as she was to lose him, she was nonetheless gratified by Erin's joy at getting her cat back.

"Where...How?" A tear streamed down Erin's face as she reached over to embrace Gable with one arm, the other cradling the kitten "Oh thank you, Gable. Thank you so much."

Gable was near enough to inhale Erin's cologne, a subtle aroma she found very appealing. The proximity of their bodies unnerved and excited her. Her heartbeat accelerated. She reached out to scratch Earl under the chin, and he leaned into it as usual, his eyes closed and his purr kicking into high volume.

"He's really taken to you," Erin observed. "He's usually pretty stand-offish. How long have you had him? How did you find him?"

"Well, I'd asked a few of the firefighters to keep an eye out for him. A family found him, and word got around. I've had him about three or four months, I guess," Gable said.

"I just can't believe you found him," Erin repeated, shaking her head. "I'd given up all hope."

"I thought you were the eternal optimist!" Gable chided.

"Well, I am now!" Erin said, and they both laughed.

"Seriously, though, I won't ever be able to repay you for all you've done for me," Erin said.

"Not a problem, really," Gable said. A faint blush colored her cheeks. "I was happy to do it. Oh, I've got a bunch of stuff for Earl in the car-litter box, food, toys. Let me get it."

She retrieved the bags and handed them to Erin. Earl Grey was off scouting out his new surroundings, and Gable couldn't resist a glance around herself. "Wow this is really nice."

They were in the cabin's great room. Though it was still nearly empty it had a homey feel, with pine paneling and log beams, wood floors and a stone fireplace. The only furniture thus far was a brand new dining table and chairs, set up near the corner kitchen, and a sofa and TV. The TV was resting on a large wooden crate.

"Still have a lot of shopping to do, as you can see," Erin apologized. "But I like it. It's set up very much like the old place, but the porch is bigger, and I've replaced my tiny shower with a brand new Jacuzzi tub!"

No matter how much she tried, Gable was having an impossibly difficult time keeping her eyes off Erin. She wanted to drink in every detail of the woman. During those long weeks when she'd imagined what the music teacher looked like, she had never dreamed Erin had such tiny, delicate hands, soft lips, and lustrous, silky hair. Hair that begged to be touched.

Now she has to tell me she has a Jacuzzi. Gable groaned inwardly. She tried to stop her mind from picturing Erin in that Jacuzzi, but it refused to obey her. She licked her lips as her eyes strayed. She swore she could see the faintest hint of Erin's erect nipples beneath her thin sweater.

Stop staring. Stop it. Stop it. Stop it. She pried her eyes away. "Well, I'd better get going," Gable said. "It's getting late."

"Can I treat you to dinner tomorrow to say thanks?" Erin said. "I'd cook for you, but I'm afraid I don't have pots and pans and dishes yet."

"Tell you what," Gable said. "Tomorrow's my day off. Why don't we do a shopping expedition together? I can help lug packages and we can grab dinner while we're out. I'll let you pay - as long as it's nothing too extravagant. A burger's fine with me."

"That would be wonderful!" Erin said. "Not about the burger," she amended with a grin. "I mean, about shopping together. I'd love the company. I'm actually kind of looking forward to picking things out for the place."

That shopping trip was only the first of many they would take together to replace the bits and pieces of life's necessities that Erin had lost in the fire. She'd bought very little while she was staying with her mother-- only clothing and toiletries, a boombox and CDs, and a new laptop computer.

Every day she would have a new list of things she realized she'd have to replace. It was always an eclectic list.

In the beginning, the items were obvious, everyone's *gotta-have-this* goods: Furniture, lamps, bandages and bedding, flashlight and batteries. A cookbook. A ladder. Smoke detectors.

Later on there were the more obscure items that only made the list when Erin realized she needed one: Screwdriver, Potato peeler, garlic press. Clothespins. Garden hose.

So they went shopping together at least three times a week for the first few weeks after Erin moved in, always fitting in a meal somewhere during the excursion, and once or twice a movie as well.

On other days, Gable helped Erin with new-home chores: assembling shelves and bookcases, seeding a new lawn, stocking the pantry.

And during Erin's firefighter training, Gable was always close by, encouraging her and ready to help in any way she could. She had to admit that she relished the opportunity to watch Erin in action on the training course, pulling hose and climbing ladders. For a petite little thing, the redhead had good upper body strength and did well in all the physical challenges.

They grew closer and closer as the days passed, spending hours every day together. But Gable never spoke of her attraction to Erin, convinced it was just a crush that would pass in time. She hated to think about how she would cope with it if it did not.

It didn't help her efforts that at times, she could swear Erin was flirting with her. Like the day she helped the redhead hang new blinds in her dining room.

Erin was on a ladder, Gable below her handing her the blinds. Erin reached too far over and the ladder started to tip. Gable caught her as she fell, wrapping one arm around her waist.

She should have let go of Erin right away. But for some reason her body insisted that she hang on for a just few seconds more than she probably should have.

"You can let go any time now, Gable. I'm fine," Erin said, amusement in her voice.

Gable could feel the rush of heat to her face.

"You're cute when you blush, you know," Erin had said, smiling up at her with a twinkle in her grey-green eyes. But then she climbed the ladder and resumed their task without further ado.

Was she flirting with me? Nah. Wishful thinking, Gable decided.

It was a house fire that was the impetus for the change in their relationship.

It had been nearly six months since the night of the tornados. It was a mild Indian summer day in mid-October, and the trees were ablaze with color: yellow and orange, red and burgundy. Gable and Erin sat drinking tea on Erin's porch, watching hummingbirds fight over the many feeders the redhead had hung just outside the screen.

All at once, both of their emergency radios crackled to life.

"All personnel report to base or scene. House fire. 47 Saddleback Trail, 2 miles north of Gladwin," the dispatcher radioed.

"That's not far. Grab your gear." Gable said. They ran out to the Jeep. Gable's firefighting coat, pants, gloves, helmet and boots were already in it. Erin tossed hers in beside them and they sped toward the scene.

They were first to arrive. The top floor of the two-story home was nearly fully involved. As they screeched to a stop, a middle-aged woman came running out from behind the house. The turquoise robe she was wearing was half burned off her, and much of her frizzy blonde hair was gone on one side, the charred ends black.

"Peter! Peter!" she screamed. "My son's in there! He never got out! Help him!" She ran up to Gable as she got out of the Jeep and pulled at her arm. "Help him! He's only seven!"

"Where is he? Where did you last see him?" Gable asked the woman as she and Erin scrambled into their gear. She cursed the fact they did not have their masks and oxygen, or any tools. Those stayed with the trucks.

"He's in his bedroom. That room there." The woman pointed at the only corner of the second floor that was not engulfed in flames. "The stairway was on fire. I couldn't get to him." The room had two small windows.

"Do you have a ladder?" Gable asked.

"Behind the house!" the woman cried.

Gable and Erin raced around the house and retrieved the aluminum ladder. "I'm going up for the boy," Gable announced as they set it up by one of the windows. "You wait for the pumper truck and tell them where I am." She shouted the last part as she raced up the rungs.

"Be careful!" Erin shouted from below as she steadied the ladder.

Gable said a prayer of thanks the window wasn't locked. She took a big deep breath and held it

before she crawled inside and dropped to the floor. The smoke was so thick she couldn't see a thing. She kept one hand on the wall to orient herself.

"Peter!" she hollered. She inhaled a lungful of thick acrid smoke and immediately began coughing.

"Peter! Where are you?" she managed between coughs. The smoke stung her eyes, causing them to water profusely. "Peter! Answer me if you can!"

She thought she heard a sound straight in front of her. She'd have to leave the safety of the wall to investigate, but she didn't hesitate. She groped her way toward it along the floor. There it was again, but to her left.

She sucked in more smoke. *Taking too long*, her mind thought fuzzily and she went into another coughing spasm. *Get out*, her instincts warned.

But then she heard that noise again, very near, and finally her outstretched hand found a warm arm, then the boy. She grabbed him and scooted back the way she came.

At least she thought it was back the way she came. But she should be back at the wall, and her arms found only empty space.

She gasped for air, desperate to breathe, but only inhaled more of the acrid smoke. She couldn't think. *You're going to die in here.*

"Gable! Answer me, damn it! Gable!"

Erin's voice led her to the window.

Gable handed the boy over the sill to the redhead, and blindly groped her way down the ladder after them. She collapsed at the bottom, struggling to breathe. The first pumper truck, loaded with volunteers, was just pulling up. A minute later the first ambulance arrived.

Peter had been overcome by smoke but was otherwise uninjured. He was kept in the hospital overnight for observation.

The chief insisted that Gable get in an ambulance too, but she refused, until Erin begged her to. She couldn't refuse Erin anything.

An hour later, Gable was ensconced in a semi-private room, the other bed empty at the moment. She wasn't feeling too bad, all things considering, but her throat was raw and sore so she had been given a sedative to help her sleep.

She thought she had successfully convinced Erin to go home, after much argument on the subject. But just as she was about to drift off, she heard a faint noise and opened her eyes. Erin was back. She was sitting the chair by the bed, sipping coffee from a paper cup.

"Thought I told you to go home," Gable said drowsily.

"Nowhere I'd rather be," Erin replied.

Gable yawned. "You sure are stubborn."

That brought a smile to Erin's face. "That makes two of us."

"I'm not going to sleep until you leave," Gable vowed.

"Wanna bet?" Erin said. She was smiling as she said it, but then her expression grew serious. She looked at her hands, folded in her lap. "You scared me today, Gable." Her voice had a slight tremor to it.

"I'm fine," Gable insisted. She fought to keep her eyes open.

Erin nodded, and said, almost to herself: "This time." She took a deep breath. "I've seen the way you look at me, you know."

Oh Shit. "What do you mean?" Gable's voice was raspy from the smoke. Her eyes shut of their own accord.

"You wear your heart on your sleeve, Gable. I've seen you watching me. Looking at me like...like I imagine I look at you."

Gable was so stunned by this admission she was actually able to force her eyes open again.

"Were you ever going to say anything?" Erin asked in a whisper, watching Gable for a reaction.

"I...I didn't know," Gable managed. "I thought you were straight."

"I said I was married," Erin said. "I didn't say I was straight. You couldn't tell I've been lusting after you for weeks?"

Lusting after me? Gable repeated fuzzily to herself. Her eyes shut again. *Open up, damn it! Don't fail me now. We're just getting to the good part!*

"We'll talk about this some more tomorrow," Erin's voice cut through the thick fog that was closing in on Gable. Then she swore she felt Erin kiss her; a soft sweet kiss that lingered long enough to make clear the intent for more, another time.

When she awoke the next morning, Gable wondered whether she dreamed it. *It had to be real. Well, I'm pretty sure about the conversation. Not so sure about the kiss.*

She touched her fingertips to her lips. *Oh. My. God. Erin wants me.* She wanted so much to

believe it. She felt almost giddy with happiness. *Can you just one day wake up and find all your dreams have come true? That you've finally found the real thing?*

Erin chose just that moment to enter the room. She was wearing the same clothes as she had on the night before, and her hair was disheveled. And the shyly hopeful expression on her smiling face completely reassured Gable that it had indeed been no dream. Neither had the kiss.

Thank you, Lord. "Hiya." Gable felt incredibly shy all of a sudden.

"Hiya back," Erin said. "You were pretty out of it. I wasn't sure you'd remember."

"I remember."

They grinned at each other like idiots for a very long moment.

Then Erin stepped slowly to the bed, leaned over, and kissed Gable on the lips. This one lasted much longer than the first, and Gable could not have been more awake.

When Erin deepened the kiss, her tongue caressing Gable's lips, seeking entry, Gable felt a flush of heat throughout her body. She had never felt more alive, each of her senses heightened to fully appreciate the moment.

After several long moments, they broke apart. Erin's cheeks were flushed.

Gable's heart was pounding in her ears.

"How soon do you get out of here, good lookin'?" Erin said.

"Not soon enough!"

Gable was released that afternoon. But with strict instructions to rest at home for the rest of the day. No exerting herself.

Erin drove her home.

"Straight to bed with you," Erin said once they were alone in the car.

"I like the sound of that," Gable said in the most suggestive tone she could muster. It wasn't hard since her raspy voice made her sound like Lauren Bacall.

"Down, Tiger," Erin said. She had a most attractive flush to her cheeks.

They came to a stop sign and Erin glanced over to find Gable staring at her hungrily. The redhead proceeded through the intersection with a big smile on her face. "Stop looking at me like that!"

"Like what?" Gable asked, suddenly the picture of innocence.

"We're waiting until you're better," Erin said firmly.

"Aw, You don't mean that. You said you'd been lusting after me for weeks."
Gable put on her best pout.

Erin glanced over at her and started laughing. "That's not going to work. I'm going to make you some soup, and tuck you in, and then I'm going to go home so you can sleep."

At this, Gable began making little whiny noises like puppies do when they want their mother. "Stop that!" Erin said. "I don't care how cute and charming you are, I am not sleeping with you tonight. It's for your own good!"

The whining increased in volume.

"If you're good, I'll kiss you."

"All right," Gable acquiesced. "I guess I can cool my jets for another day or two." They pulled up at her house. "It's not easy, though."

"Well you're not suffering alone," Erin said. "It's torture for me. Somehow, now that I know for sure you feel the same...it makes it so much harder not to be able to touch you."

"I know what you mean," Gable agreed.

"The doctor did say you could resume normal activities tomorrow, if you felt up to it, right?"

Gable nodded. "And I can guarantee you I'll feel up to it. I feel up to it right now, if you know what I mean." She wiggled her eyebrows suggestively, and evoked the laugh she hoped she'd get from Erin.

All too soon, Gable was fed and tucked into bed. They had flirted with each other shamelessly the rest of the evening, until the air was thick with sexual tension and it was time for Gable to collect on her goodnight kiss.

Erin sat on the edge of the bed. "So...tomorrow?" She reached out to take Gable's hand in hers.

Gable nodded. "How early can you get here?"

Erin laughed. "You're incorrigible."

"No, just anxious," Gable said. "What time, then?"

"Six. I'll bring Chinese takeout." Erin said.

"Noon," Gable countered. "I'll order a pizza."

"Three-thirty. Final offer," Erin announced. "And we better get both the pizza and the Chinese." She leaned over Gable as if to kiss her, but paused when she was a foot away. "I betcha we work up an appetite."

Gable grinned and reached up to cup the back of Erin's head. She pulled their faces together and kissed Erin soundly.

Erin moaned and responded in kind, her tongue stroking Gable's until her breathing became ragged.

Finally, she pushed herself away. Her pupils were huge, her lips swollen. "It's going to be a very long..." she glanced at her watch. "...17 hours. I have *got* to go." She leaned down for a very quick kiss. "While I'm still able."

"Aw, don't leave." Gable whined like a puppy again, and reached out for Erin.

"NO!" Erin said, slapping her hand away playfully. "Behave!" She backed away to the door and paused at the threshold. "I'll let myself out. See you tomorrow."

"Can't wait." Gable said, smiling up at her.

Erin nodded. "Me too. Sweet dreams." She blew Gable a kiss and turned on her heel and was gone.

Gable felt loads better when she woke up the next morning, but she was so excited she couldn't sleep past seven. So she got up and made coffee, checked her e-mail, showered and dressed. Then dressed again.

Then was horrified to discover it was not even 8 yet.

She did every mindless chore she could think of to pass the time, but the clock mocked her efforts and slowed to a crawl.

By noon she was pacing, impatient as hell, unable to distract herself further from any thought but of Erin.

She broke down and called Erin's house at one to beg her to come early.

There was no answer.

She frowned as she put the phone back in its cradle. She'd have to wait.

The doorbell rang.

Gable couldn't get there fast enough. She flung the door open and it crashed against the wall behind it.

"I couldn't wait any longer," Erin confessed.

"Thank God," Gable said. "I just tried to call you to beg you to come over. I'm about to explode."

Erin laughed. "Me too. Inches away from spontaneous combustion."

"Get in here, then."

Erin flew into her arms, and they kissed long and hard, pressing their bodies together.

They stumbled toward the bedroom, removing clothes as they went, heated kisses punctuating every other step.

By the time they reached the bed, only undergarments remained, and these were quickly stripped off too, any shyness gone.

The room was cool and they slipped quickly under the covers and came together again. Gable, on her back, pulled Erin atop her. Her hands caressed Erin's waist, back, firm ass. She pulled Erin tightly to her. "I can't get close enough to you," she whispered in the redhead's ear.

"I like the sound of that. Touch me, Gable," Erin begged.

Gable groaned and insinuated one of her legs between Erin's, creating a delicious friction for the both of them. "Erin, I want you so much," she said, her voice husky with emotion. Her tongue nipped at Erin's ear, and tasted the soft delicate skin of her neck.

Erin's hand made its way between their bodies, sliding up Gable's thigh, straying teasingly toward the heat between her legs, then diverting to Gable's right breast. The nipple was already erect, and hypersensitive.

When Erin's fingers pinched it firmly, Gable gasped aloud and arched upwards, seeking more.

Gable sought out Erin's breast for equal treatment, and when her hand cupped the firm, supple flesh and found the puckered nipple, she sighed a long and breathy moan of pleasure.

"Oh God, Gable. Please. I ache for your touch," Erin pleaded.

Gable reversed their positions until she was lying atop Erin. "I have to taste you," she whispered, and Erin trembled beneath her in response.

Gable's mouth and tongue worked their way slowly down Erin's body, kissing her neck. Licking a slow, sensual trail down between her breasts to her stomach. Then along the curve of her breast, closing in hungrily on the nipple.

Erin cried out her name, and bucked against her. "Oh God, Gable. That feels soooo good." Gable gave the same attention to the other breast, as Erin's moans of pleasure increased. The sound increased her own arousal until she could feel the dampness between her legs.

Gable could wait no longer. She slid further down Erin's body, kissing, tasting, licking the salty skin, until she grew close enough to Erin's center that she could smell the musky scent of her arousal, and it drove her the final distance.

Erin opened her legs in invitation, and her hands caressed Gable's head, urging her on.

Gable's tongue found Erin's silky folds and began exploring, circling, teasing. The redhead cried out and squirmed beneath her. "Mmmm. Oh God. Don't stop!"

The blood was pounding in Gable's head as she tasted Erin and pleased her with her lips and tongue, stroking and sucking, with a maddeningly light touch at first, driving the redhead wild.

"Please Gable! Please! I'm so close!"

Gable smiled as she deepened the contact, finally pushing Erin over the edge with rapid firm strokes of her tongue.

Erin cried out and her hips rose up off the bed as she climaxed, but Gable clung to her, her tongue relentless, until the redhead begged for mercy.

"Stop! Please! You're killing me!"

"I can't get enough of you," Gable said in a voice she hardly recognized. She could not believe how turned on she was. She was so wet she had nearly come herself when Erin had.

"Save some for later," Erin said, panting hard. "Come up here and kiss me."

Gable kissed her way back up Erin's body slowly, languidly, giving the redhead time to catch her breath.

Erin apparently had other ideas.

She captured Gable's mouth in a fiery kiss, devouring her, and suddenly Gable was on her back, and Erin was tracing her own passionate trail of oral caresses down the brunette's body.

Gable was lost in sensual haze of pleasure. Every nerve ending was on fire. When Erin's teeth and lips closed around her nipple, nipping and tugging, she felt it between her legs as a hot rush of sensation.

Erin moved to her other breast.

"Please, Erin. I need your mouth on me," Gable managed, her body tensed in anticipation.

Erin needed no further encouragement. She slid down Gable's body, licking and sucking as she went, in no rush, driving Gable higher. Previews of coming attractions.

By the time she reached Gable's heated center, it really took very little. Gable exploded under Erin's skillful manipulations, and the redhead returned her earlier favor and refused to let up until Gable had been pleased to the point of collapse.

Still trembling from the aftershocks, Gable pulled Erin into a tight embrace and kissed her. They did not speak for a long while.

"We wasted a lot of time not telling each other how we feel," Gable said.

"Mmm hmm," Erin agreed. "Life's too short."

"I know I was a bonehead and shouldn't have assumed you were straight," Gable said. "But if you could see how I felt, why didn't you say something earlier?"

"Just afraid, I guess," Erin said. "Afraid to take a chance again after I'd gotten burned so badly."

Gable hugged her tighter. "I'm glad you found the courage to tell me."

"Me too!" Erin kissed Gable's neck. "When you didn't come out of that burning house right away... I was so scared. I couldn't stand the thought of something happening to you, and I'd not have told you how I felt." She shifted so she could look at Gable. "I am *so* hopelessly in love with you. You know that, right?"

"Well, I hope so, because I'm so head-over-heels for you I can't see straight," Gable answered, smiling from ear to ear.

Erin lay back down with her head nestled in the crook of Gable's shoulder.

"Say, where's the Chinese food you promised me?" Gable asked.

"I did buy it!" Erin said. "But it's still in the car," she admitted sheepishly. "Guess I was a little anxious."

"That's so cute," Gable said, kissing her again. "Well I did work up an appetite so I'm going out to get the food. I'll zap it in the microwave and be right back."

"Don't be long," Erin said.

Gable threw on a robe and was back with the food on a lap tray in only a few minutes. There were also two glasses of wine. She set the tray down and kissed Erin again. "I missed you."

Erin sighed. "Ain't it wonderful?"

"Yes it is," Gable said, shedding her robe and crawling back under the covers.

They reached for their forks, but neither got to take a bite.

The blare of their emergency radios startled them both so much that the wine ended up all over Gable's bedspread.

"You'd think this volunteering thing could show a little consideration," Erin said as they threw on their clothes.

THE END

Gable and Erin return in [Fire and Ice](#).

Thanks for reading. Feedback welcome. E-mail me at woodsbard@yahoo.com .
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