

~ Fire and Ice ~

by Kim Baldwin © 2004

This is a sequel to "[Blown Away](#)", so I suggest you read that first!
Dedicated to the Queen of the Double Standard.

Sweat poured off Gable McCoy as she labored to widen the firebreak, turning over dirt at a furious pace. Her back ached and her hands were blistered despite her gloves, but it looked like they might just succeed in containing the fire if the wind held off just a little while longer.

It was a cool November day and the 12 volunteer firefighters on Crew 23 had gravity on their side. They were below the fire on a steep hill in the Manistee National Forest. Although it was a densely wooded area, the trees were mostly virgin white pines, tall and straight. With no wind to blow it up into the high branches, the fire was confined to the forest floor and it advanced at a walk, feasting on pine needles and dry bracken ferns.

But the weather service was predicting that brisk winds would move in off Lake Michigan, so the firefighters kept a close watch on the treetops as they moved up the hill, cutting a five foot breach with shovels, pickaxes and chainsaws.

Gable also kept one eye on Erin Richards, positioned 20 feet to her right. The redhead had proven to be a very capable firefighter in the weeks since her training, despite her diminutive figure, but today was pushing the limits of all of them. Gable could see that Erin was just as bone-tired as she was, but also as equally determined to continue on.

The fire had already consumed nearly 260 acres, and crews were working on all sides to bring it under control. Crew 23 was the only thing standing between the blaze and a half-dozen homes.

They were cutting a firebreak from the creek at the bottom of the hill to the rocky ridge at the top, and they were more than three quarters of the way up when the wind began to rise. It wasn't much at first. The crew kept working.

The intermittent breeze quickly became a steady 20-mile-an-hour blow, with gusts strong enough to send sparks and embers across the breach. The firefighters had their hands full trying to douse the spot fires springing up all around them. Their upward momentum ground to a halt.

Gable felt the heat of the fire increase as the wind sent the flames swirling up into the higher tree branches. She glanced to her right. A back draft sent a plume of smoke over Erin, momentarily obscuring her. Gable held her breath and gripped her shovel more tightly until the redhead reappeared.

Their emergency radios crackled to life. The voice, a shout, was Carl Buckman's, who was

working at the tail of the line, further down the hill. "23 get off the hill! Move! We've got another fire below us!"

Gable spun around. 300 feet below her, thick smoke was rising in a column from the forest. They were in deep trouble, trapped between two fires.

She hesitated only until Erin reached her. They were already breathing hard as they sprinted diagonally up the hill toward safety.

The fire below them was everything the one above them was not. It sprang to life with a burst of hot energy, fanned by the wind into a blast furnace train that howled toward them with a frightening acceleration.

"Drop your tools!" Carl yelled, and as Gable tossed her shovel she heard the clatter of several others directly behind her. She didn't turn around; she had to watch every step as they raced upward over the rocky, uneven terrain. Erin kept pace beside her, but was clearly struggling to match Gable's long strides.

No one spoke. The world turned red around her, reflecting the firestorm. Everything shimmered in the heat, mirage-like. It was difficult to breathe.

They were running for their lives, the heat so intense the grass beneath their feet burst into flames. Erin stumbled, and in the scant few seconds Gable paused to help her, several of the others in the crew passed them by. All but Carl, who grabbed Erin's right arm as Gable grabbed her left. They hauled her to her feet together and sprinted onward.

The two fires came together behind them, joining up into a wall of flame that extended from the forest floor to the top of the trees. It was a blowout--every firefighter's worst nightmare.

The crackling roar of the inferno was deafening and embers rained down all around them, pelting their hard hats. The stench of burning hair assaulted Gable's nostrils as the trio finally reached the crest of the hill and crossed into the sanctuary of a wide rocky ridge where the fire could not follow.

Like the others ahead of them, Gable and Erin collapsed once they were safely out of harm's way on the other side.

Erin lie on her back, her face a grimace of pain, her chest rising and falling in exaggerated gasps for air.

Gable was likewise panting, on her hands and knees, struggling to calm the pounding of her heart. "Are you all right?" she rasped.

Erin nodded, unable to speak.

They had made it, all of them, but with only feet to spare. Erin and Gable looked at each other

with the shared realization of their narrow escape. Gable crawled the few feet that separated them and they embraced, both shaking in the rush of fear and adrenalin.

"Too close, that one," Gable whispered, stroking Erin's hair. Her arms and legs felt leaden.

"You both O.K.?" came Carl's voice from above them. They pulled reluctantly apart, heads nodding in unison.

"Yeah, Carl, we're all right," Gable answered for them both, glancing up at her poker buddy. "Everyone else?"

He nodded, his face almost unrecognizable under a thick layer of dirt and soot and sweat. "That was one I don't want to repeat," he said. "We'd better get moving, as soon as we can."

They made it down the other side of the hill and were relieved by firefighters from a neighboring county. The fire would claim seven homes before it was finally contained, but no one was injured.

"Stay with me tonight?" Erin said as they were dropped off at the township fire department.

Gable nodded. "I'd like that."

They cuddled together under Erin's down comforter after quick showers and were asleep in moments. The next morning, both were so sore they could hardly move. They did not discuss their brush with death, but Gable thought about it a lot over the next couple of days.

They had been very lucky-or very blessed-- to have escaped both the tornado and the fire on the hillside. And Gable knew there would likely be more close calls, as long as they continued as volunteer firefighters.

Although she had never really committed herself to another person before, Gable knew in her heart that Erin was 'the one' and she wanted to make their relationship a more formally permanent one. And soon.

The following Sunday, Gable sat on her couch with her feet up, sipping coffee and staring out of the large picture window that dominated one wall of her home. A variety of birds darted back and forth from the trees to the feeders positioned beneath the long overhang of eaves. A dozen squirrels and a lone chipmunk scurried about the yard, busily gathering acorns. The first real snows of winter would be upon them any day.

Gable ran her hand through her hair, still unaccustomed to the length. It had been cut to just above her collar for the first time in many years, to even out the damage from the brushfire. A falling ember had burned away a section of hair that had escaped her hard hat.

"Mind if I join you?" Erin yawned loudly from the bedroom doorway.

Gable glanced around. Her heart melted at the sight of her lover.

Erin's coppery hair was sleep-tousled, and she looked even more delicately petite than usual, swallowed whole by Gable's plush fleecy bathrobe. Earl Gray was perched on one shoulder.

When he spotted a new furry mouse Gable had given him the night before, he jumped down and set off on a hunting expedition. He pounced on the toy and batted it high into the air, purring loudly as it rattled.

The kitten came along with Erin on her once or twice a week overnight stays at Gable's house. He had litter boxes and toys and a hammock bed in both homes now, and diplomatically split his attention between them when both his mistress and his rescuer were around.

Gable smiled and patted the couch beside her. "You're up early."

Erin settled next to Gable and kissed her on the cheek. "Very funny."

"Well, 9:30 is pretty early for you," Gable teased. "Want some coffee?"

"Oh bless you. Yes, please."

Gable went to the kitchen and poured herself another cup-black, and doctored a second mug for Erin with a dash of half-and-half and a single package of Equal. She'd never routinely bought either before she met the redhead, but now was sure to always have ample supplies of both on hand.

"What time did you get up?" Erin asked as she gratefully accepted the steaming mug.

"Oh, a while ago."

"That means a couple of hours at least, I bet. I'll never understand why you get up at the crack of dawn when you don't have to." Erin yawned again, and stretched like a contented cat.

"I'm just a morning person, I guess," Gable replied. "I love this time, when everything is just waking up. Seeing what critters are out and about. Going over in my head what I'm going to do that day."

"I prefer to remain in bed every single solitary second I can." Erin leaned her head on Gable's shoulder. "Although it would be eminently more fun if you lingered there with me." She sighed a long, dramatic sigh, which got her a poke in the ribs from Gable.

"I know what happens when I linger in bed with you. We never leave the bedroom all day."

"And you're complaining about that?" Erin asked. She pulled back to look at Gable with mock horror.

Gable laughed. "Never." She put her arm around Erin and leaned over to nuzzle the redhead's neck. "Although sometimes I need a little recovery time, like after last night. By the way, have I told you lately how incredible you are in bed?"

"Same back atcha, Hot Stuff," Erin said. She closed her eyes and arched her neck to encourage Gable's gentle kisses.

Gable took advantage of the invitation, and kissed, licked and nipped her way from Erin's earlobe, down her neck, along her collarbone, to the valley between her breasts.

"Mmmm, that feels soooo nice," Erin cooed, running her hand through Gable's hair. "Are you sure you don't want to linger a while in that big ol' comfy bed of yours?"

Gable worked her way back up to Erin's neck, and then her cheek, and finally, kissed her softly on the lips. "As appealing as that is, you know we have to leave for Jimmy's wedding by eleven."

Gable felt Erin stiffen. She pulled back slightly to look at the redhead, but Erin wouldn't meet her eyes.

"I've been meaning to talk to you about that, Gable. I'm not going."

"Not going? Why not?"

"I'm just not," Erin said. She shrugged. "I'm not into weddings."

"But it's not going to be a long service," Gable said. "Or a big one," she added. "They just invited their families, a few friends and the poker circle."

"You can go, Gable," Erin said, still not looking at the brunette. "Just tell them I didn't feel well."

"I don't really want to lie to them, Erin," Gable said. "Why didn't you tell them...and *me*, earlier, that you didn't want to go? It doesn't sound like this is something you just decided this morning."

"I just don't want to go, Gable. It's not that big a deal," Erin said, a hint of annoyance in her voice. She got to her feet. "I'm going to take a shower and get dressed. I've got some errands to run today."

"Erin, wait..." Gable started to protest, mystified by the sudden chill in the air. *What just happened?* But Erin was gone, back into the bedroom without a look back.

The atmosphere thawed only slightly when Erin re-emerged fifteen minutes later, dressed in jeans and a T-shirt. She found Gable in the kitchen, stacking pancakes on a plate. The table was set for two.

"Got time for breakfast?" Gable asked gently. She hoped she could get Erin to talk about what was going on, why she was suddenly acting so distant.

Erin paused in the doorway as if considering her answer. After a long moment, she came up to Gable and gave her a hug and a half-hearted smile. "That's very sweet of you, but I better run. Have fun. I'll call you later." She leaned up to give Gable a peck on the cheek and left the room. Gable followed as far as the doorway.

"C'mon, Earl. Time to hit the road," Erin called to the cat, who was sprawled on his hammock.

Earl Grey remained where he was, staring at Erin to make sure she knew he had heard her just fine, and preferred to stay where he was. Erin marched over to him and picked him up.

"Erin?" Gable leaned against the doorframe and crossed her arms. Something told her she was playing with fire, but she couldn't stop herself. "Did I say something to make you angry?"

Erin took a deep breath before she answered. "No, Gable. I'm not mad. Let's just drop it, O.K.?"

"Does all this have something to do with your marriage?" Gable took a stab in the dark. Erin had volunteered only that she'd made a bad mistake when she had married. She'd never told Gable any more than that, although the two women had shared most all the other noteworthy parts of their lives.

Erin left with Earl Grey without answering.

Gable wasn't at that moment certain she would be back.

The bride and groom did not make a big deal of Erin's absence, although Jimmy did tell Gable he was sorry to see she couldn't make it. The two women had made no real public acknowledgement that they were seeing each other, but the guys around the poker table had caught on to the looks they gave each other. They'd been the subject of much good-natured ribbing after that, but the boys had turned out to be much cooler about everything than Gable had expected them to be. Even Carl, who'd admitted to Gable after one too many beers one night that he'd been trying to work up the nerve to ask Erin out when one of the other boys told him the score.

In fact, Gable thought to herself as Jimmy and Janice exchanged their vows, every single person at this wedding has been nothing but great about it. So why was Erin so dead set on not attending? It was obviously more than the typical abhorrence of attending long formal social affairs. This was personal. What happened to you, Erin? Gable wondered. Her heart sank. Will you ever be able to commit to me?

When she pulled into her driveway after the reception, Gable spotted Erin's pickup. She felt some of the tension that had been building between her shoulder blades dissipate when she realized Erin had used her spare key and let herself in.

The redhead met Gable at the door and hugged her fiercely. "I'm sorry I was such a brat," she apologized.

"Not necessary," Gable sighed, hugging her back.

"Yes it is," Erin insisted, not loosening her embrace. "I have some...some issues on the subject of marriage," she explained vaguely. "But I shouldn't have taken it out on you. I'm sorry." She looked up at Gable with moist eyes. "Forgive me?"

Gable kissed the top of her head. "Nothing to forgive. I didn't mean to bring up bad memories, or pry. I really didn't. I just want you to know that if you ever want to talk about it, I'm here for you."

Erin hugged her tighter. "I know that," she said in a soft voice.

Things between them resumed pretty much as before, at least to all outward appearances. Gable spent one or two nights a week at Erin's, and Erin spent a night or two a week at her place, and they were no less passionate with each other than they'd been before talk of weddings had placed a niggling seed of doubt in Gable's mind. She wanted to commit herself, body and soul, to Erin. But she was increasingly fearful that for whatever reason, Erin could not return the favor.

She tried to be grateful for what she had, and as content with their arrangement as Erin seemed to be, and most of the time she was. But on the nights she spent alone, she admitted to herself she wanted more.

In a moment of hopeless romantic optimism, three days before Christmas, Gable bought Erin a ring.

And on Christmas Eve, as they sat in front of a cheery fire at her house, Gable decided the moment had come. If Erin turned her down, she would accept it and go on as before, thankful for the relationship as it was. For she had to admit, that even without a formal commitment, the sweet-hearted music teacher made her happier than she had ever been. And with or without vows, Gable knew she could never give herself more completely to another than she already had to Erin.

She was so uncertain about the outcome of her proposal that she thought it best to avoid any elaborate fanfare about it. There would be no champagne and poetry and roses. Just an offer spoken from her heart.

"Erin, I want to give you something," Gable began.

"I thought we were doing gifts tomorrow," the redhead said, snuggled up against Gable's side.

"Well, this really isn't your Christmas present." The tremble in her voice betrayed Gable's nervousness. Her palms felt suddenly clammy. She wiped her right hand on the lap robe that covered their legs before she withdrew a velvet-covered ring box from the end table.

When she turned back toward Erin, she knew immediately she'd made a mistake.

Erin stared at the ring box with wide eyes, her face ashen.

Gable never got a chance to say a word.

"Don't, Gable. Oh please, don't." Erin whispered. "Can't we keep things as they are?" She looked at Gable with fearful eyes, close to tears.

Gable put the box back in the drawer without a word, and embraced Erin with a deep sigh.

They didn't move for a very long moment.

"All right," Gable said finally, her voice choked with emotion. "We'll leave things as they are. I won't bring it up again."

Although she didn't get everything she'd hoped for, Gable could not help but be happy with what she had. Erin was a giving, loving, exciting partner, whose daily demeanor gave no indication she was any less devoted to Gable than Gable was to her.

Erin told Gable often that she loved her, and Gable felt the truth of that in her heart.

But even though she was content with her life, every morning, she started the day with a prayer that someday Erin would change her mind.

On a bitter cold morning in late January, Gable found it more difficult than usual to extricate herself from Erin's warm body to drive to the pharmacy. There had been an ice storm overnight, and on top of the ice was three inches of new snow. Erin's school was closed, and the redhead had done her best to convince Gable to call in sick and stay in bed with her.

She nearly succeeded. She did manage to delay Gable, and it was a good thing she did.

The roads were treacherous. The snowplows and salt trucks had not made out that far yet. In fact, there were no other cars on the road at all, and just a solitary set of tire tracks on the road ahead of her leading into the village.

The tracks fishtailed badly in several places-sliding off the edge of the road, or into the lane of oncoming traffic.

So Gable drove at a crawl, especially as she approached the wide bridge across the Au Sauble river, two miles from Erin's cabin.

Her heart leapt into her throat when she saw the broken guardrail halfway across. The tracks she'd been following swerved right to it.

Horrified, she pumped the brakes and slid to a stop at the edge of the road.

Even before Gable shut off the engine, she heard him screaming.

She ran to the edge of the bridge and looked over. 20 feet below her, a teenage boy struggled to pull himself from a large hole in the ice, right in the middle of the river.

But the ice was too thin to support his weight. "Help! Please God!" the boy screamed.

"Hang on!" Gable shouted.

The boy's head swiveled around and up at her. "Oh God! Help me! Hurry! Please hurry!"

Gable raced back to the Jeep and switched on her emergency radio. "Dispatch, this is Gable McCoy. A car went off Peterson Bridge on Highway 37. Driver is in the river. Send an ambulance and water rescue. I'm going to try to throw him a line."

She heard the dispatcher acknowledge her as she ran to the back to retrieve a length of nylon rope. She also stuck a couple of screwdrivers from her tool kit into the back pocket of her jeans.

She skidded down the steep bank to the water's edge. The teenager had stopped trying to pull himself from the ice. Now he was fighting just to keep his head above water. His ragged gasps for air sounded loud in the still morning.

"Try to grab this rope," Gable shouted. She coiled the line and anchored one end beneath her foot.

"I can't!" the boy screamed. He started to cry.

She threw the rope, and it fell across the hole in the ice. The boy made no move toward it. His head slipped under, then popped up again. He began hyperventilating, and his arms and legs flailed about in clumsy, jerky movements.

Almost before Gable knew she was doing it, she had tied her end of the rope around the nearest sturdy tree and was on the ice, crawling on her belly toward the teenager.

30 feet away. Then 20, half way between the boy and shore. When she was 15 feet away, she heard the ice crack beneath her, and her heart began beating double time.

The boy's wide eyes beseeched her to hurry.

She held tightly to the rope and continued inching toward him. "Keep your head up! Hang on, I'm almost to you!"

Another sharp report as the ice cracked again. This time she could clearly see the thin fissure of separation, directly under the right side of her body. She froze, trying to keep her weight evenly distributed.

"Hurry!" the boy managed, just before his head slipped under again.

The moment she actually fell through seemed to take forever. One crack became two, then 6, then 40—a spider web of fractures beneath her.

She watched in horrified fascination as the bottom dropped out and she was plunged into the icy water, still a body length from the boy.

The frigid immersion was such a shock to her system that it squeezed the air from her lungs, inducing a moment of panic she fought to control. It was a numbing cold, relentless. It soaked through her clothing. *Damn*. She focused on the boy, and on not letting go of the rope.

She took great gulps of air as she fought through the broken ice to reach him.

Though he had seemed to be all done in, the teenager came to life when Gable reached him. With a final burst of energy he grabbed at her, desperately trying to use her to keep himself afloat. Gable went under.

The boy tried to wrap his arms around her. His hands were frozen, useless. They struggled, locked together, until Gable was able to turn him so his back was to her. She grabbed him over his shoulder in a lifesaving hold as she popped back to the surface.

"Don't fight me!" she barked at him. "Let me help you!"

He went limp; whether in compliance or exhaustion she didn't know or care. She managed to get the rope wrapped around him, but she'd lost the dexterity to tie the right kind of knot. Her hands obstinately refused to obey her.

She finally got the rope looped around in a couple of half-hitches and let the boy's own body weight tighten it. She hoped it was secure enough.

Gable's legs began protesting the lengthy struggle against the current. She felt as though twenty pound weights were attached to her ankles, pulling her down and away from the teenager. She concentrated all her energy on getting the boy up and onto the ice.

"Try to help me," she gasped, but the teenager was barely conscious. She got under him and tried to boost him up, but the ice cracked away under his weight.

She took up the slack of the rope and tried again, and then again. The ice kept breaking, and she weakened with each effort, but every attempt brought them a foot or two closer to shore, and onto thicker and thicker ice.

Finally, on the fifth try, the ice supported the upper half of his body, and Gable quickly got his legs up as well.

She knew better than to try to haul herself up next to him. The ice would never support them both.

She was beginning to have trouble keeping herself afloat. She managed to kick her way to the opposite side of the hole. *Get out. Get out right now.*

She got one elbow propped up on the ice and kicked hard against the current to hold herself there. She reached for the screwdrivers she had stuck in her back pocket.

One was gone, apparently lost when the teenager grabbed her. She could feel the handle of the other one-but her hands were both too frozen to grip it. She realized with a sick certainty that without the screwdriver she would not be able to pull herself out.

She clawed at the ice, but could not get purchase on it.

Oh Shit.

She could no longer feel her fingers, or her feet. She looked down and was almost surprised to see her legs still kicking away, albeit in the same jerky, uneven way the boy's had, just before his strength failed. She was losing control of her body. And she was finding it more and more difficult to focus. Her survival now was purely instinctual. She recognized the mental haziness of hypothermia but was unable to stop it.

"Gable!" Erin's voice. *Did I dream it?*

Without her consent, the muscles in her arm relaxed and her elbow slipped off the ice. She went back under water again briefly. She was exhausted. She couldn't keep her eyes open.

"Gable!" Erin's voice again, a scream.

This really isn't such a bad way to die. Too young, but I've certainly had a full and happy life with Erin.

"Gable! I'm coming!"

Her head slipped under again. She thought that was it, but then she was hauled back to the surface.

"Breathe Gable!" Erin shouted, from very close. "Don't leave me!"

You're here. How are you here? Gable was confused. Somehow she managed to open her eyes and there was Erin, sweet Erin.

"That's it! Stay with me!"

How? Gable wondered. Her eyes took in the redhead, spread-eagled on the ice. One hand had a firm grasp of Gable's coat, and was holding her head out of the water.

I love you, Erin, Gable thought as her eyes fought her and closed again.

"NO!" Erin screamed, and the hand that held onto Gable shook her hard.

She could hear the sound of a siren, getting louder.

"Don't leave me! Come on Gable, you're not a quitter!"

She could hear Erin, but it was as if in a dream, muted and faraway.

"You can't do this! Fight! I need you!"

I don't want to leave you, Gable thought. She couldn't feel her body. She felt peaceful, serene. But she had to sleep.

"Hurry! I'm losing her!" she heard Erin shout. Then men's voices. *Carl?*
It was the last thing she would remember.

She came to, briefly, in the ambulance, long enough to register that she had made it, and that Erin and Carl were both hovering over her, one on each side, staring at her with anxious faces.

The next time she opened her eyes the scene was much the same, but her two friends had switched sides and Erin had acquired a large cup of coffee.

"Hey, you're awake!" Carl said.

Gable looked around. She was in a hospital room, hooked up to some machine that was making a steady beeping sound. An IV fed the contents of a clear plastic bag into a needle in her left arm.

Erin turned toward her at Carl's pronouncement and her face lit up. "You *are* awake! How do you feel?"

"Mmm, tired," Gable answered. "But O.K., I think. How long was I out?"

Erin glanced at her watch. "Almost three hours. You were making me a little crazy here, honey."

"And me," Carl chimed in.

"The boy?" Gable asked.

"Mike Ester. He's going to be fine," Carl answered.

"Yeah, he woke up right after he got here. His parents want to thank you, when you feel up to it," Erin said.

"You saved me," Gable remembered. "Thank you."

Erin grinned at her. "Happy to return the favor." Her face grew serious. "But I hope to never have to do that again!"

Gable nodded. "Once is enough for me, too."

"The rest of the guys are out in the waiting room, Gable," Carl said as he stood. "I'll go tell them you're awake." He leaned over and kissed her on the forehead. "Glad you're okay. That was a pretty heroic thing you did out there." He looked at Erin. "Both of you."

"Tell them thanks, will you?" Gable said. "And send them home, tell them I'll see them later."

"You got it," Carl said. "I'll drop by tomorrow before you get out of here."

"Tomorrow?" Gable said. "I'm not staying here. I want to go home."

"No you don't," Erin said. "The doctor wants to keep you overnight for observation and you're not going to fight her."

Gable sighed. Erin had a stubborn streak, and Gable knew better than to try to fight her on this. "Well, O.K." Gable tried to suppress a yawn but was unsuccessful.

"You need to get some sleep."

"Stay with me?"

"You just try to get rid of me." Erin reached over to take Gable's hand in hers.

"Wouldn't think of it," Gable replied. "Come up here beside me?"

"We shouldn't."

"Don't care. If you really want me to get some sleep..."

Erin relented and climbed onto the narrow hospital bed next to Gable. She settled into her familiar position, lying on her left side with her head tucked into the crook of Gable's shoulder.

"Thanks," Gable mumbled drowsily. She was nearly asleep when Erin whispered her name.

"Gable? You still awake?"

She answered but didn't open her eyes. "Mmm hmmm."

"All my life, I always dreamed I'd only get married once. Just once."

Gable struggled to rouse herself. *Why does she always wait until I'm half conscious in a hospital*

bed to tell me important things?

She wanted to encourage Erin to continue, but she didn't want to interrupt. Her right hand began tracing a gentle path through her lover's hair, her fingertips caressing the outline of Erin's ear.

There was a pause before the redhead continued.

"My parents were married for 52 years. Devoted to each other until Dad died. And I was raised Catholic-parochial school, church every Sunday, the whole bit. No one we knew ever got divorced. It just didn't happen. That's the mentality I grew up with." Erin paused for another long moment. Gable continued her caresses.

"I guess I just always believed in the fairy tale that you find the person you're destined to be with, and you live happily ever after." There was another long pause. "But it didn't happen that way for me." Erin took a long, deep breath and let it out.

"I was in my junior year of college when I met Bill. I hadn't dated much. I was a band geek, 30 pounds heavier and with a mouth full of braces. He was tall, charming, and a year older than I was, and I had no idea what he saw in me when he asked me out." Gable could feel Erin tremble a bit at the recollection.

"I didn't have any self-confidence at all, you understand, back then. I was just a kid, really. I was flattered by the attention, and I wanted so much to fall in love that I got swept up in the relationship. We got married less than two months after we met." Erin trembled again. Took another long, deep breath.

"Things went downhill almost immediately. Bill was a very jealous guy. He hated to have me out of his sight at all, and if any guy dared talked to me... Well, he'd accuse me of all sorts of things for hours afterward. I didn't know it right away, but I found out later he followed me when I wasn't with him, spying on me to see if I was cheating on him. He even listened in on my phone calls."

There was another long pause.

"What started out as gentle lovemaking became constant demands for sex. Rough sex. Whether I was up for it at that moment or not."

Gable was wide-awake now; her anger rising at the thought of what Erin had suffered.

"He told me from the beginning that he didn't believe in divorce." Erin laughed, but it was a laugh without humor. "I thought that was a good thing, at the time."

Another deep breath. Erin's voice, when she resumed, had the soft, fearful quality of a child's voice, relating a nightmare. "He started hitting me about six months into the marriage."

It was Gable now who took a deep breath, to try to calm her rage.

"He broke my arm the first time. He cried and cried and promised it would never happen again. The second time he blackened both my eyes and gave me a concussion. That's when I left him."

Erin shifted her weight and hugged Gable tighter. "He refused to give me a divorce. He went to the school where I worked and made all sorts of crazy accusations, until finally they had to let me go. I don't blame them, they were worried about the kids and he was clearly out of control."

She sighed. "And he'd show up at the apartment where I moved. I wouldn't answer the door, and he'd pound on it and make all the neighbors crazy." Another pause. "One night he hid in the laundry room down the hall until I came home and pushed his way in behind me."

Erin was shaking again. "That was an awful night. And next day." A tear fell from Erin's eye and landed on Gable's chest. "I called the cops and got a restraining order and a lawyer after that. Bill was facing a lot of serious charges, but the prosecutor wasn't optimistic the jury would convince him. I was still married to him, after all." Another long pause.

"My lawyer worked a deal. Bill granted me a divorce and I agreed not to press charges. I got the hell out of the state and never looked back." Erin sighed; a long exhale of air, relief at finishing the story.

"So now you know," she concluded. "I don't let myself think about those times very much. Too depressing."

"I'm so sorry, Erin, that you had to endure so much," Gable whispered.

Erin shifted so that she could meet Gable's eyes for the first time since she'd started her story. "I'm sorry I've been living in the past. I've let it haunt me much too long."

She kissed Gable; a kiss that began soft and sweet. But the wall of uncertainty that had stood between them had crumbled, and there was too much emotion between them at this moment.

Their passion for each other bloomed in the kiss, until their tongues were stroking each other and their breathing became ragged.

"Ahem!" the duty nurse interrupted from the doorway.

They broke apart, both turning deep red in embarrassment, but the nurse just chuckled. She had a small plastic cup with two tablets in it for Gable, and once Gable had taken them, she turned to go. "Since you two are the talk of the hospital today, I'll pretend not to notice that visiting hours ended a while ago. Call if you need anything, Miss McCoy," she said from the doorway. She glanced at Erin. "Although I would say you seem pretty content at the moment." She winked at them and pulled the door closed.

"I should let you get some sleep," Erin said, settling back against Gable's side.

"Thank you for telling me," Gable whispered as she hugged Erin close.

"I trust you, Gable," Erin said. "In a way I've never been able to trust anyone before."

"That's the way I feel about you, too," Gable said.

"I know that, honey. You've been very patient with me, and I appreciate it. I know that you'd never do anything to hurt me." Erin began caressing Gable's stomach with her hand.

It was lulling. Gable's eyes closed.

"And I know I couldn't imagine life without you," Erin said.

"I'm glad to hear that," Gable replied drowsily.

"Still got that ring?"

Gable was instantly awake again. *Did I hear what I just thought I heard?* "Yes," she replied. She held her breath.

"I'm ready to talk about that now. Well not NOW, necessarily, maybe we should wait until we have a little more privacy and all, and you've had a chance to think about whether you still want to. I mean, if you don't still want to, I'll understand..." she rambled on, uncertain.

"Oh, I want to, love. I want that more than anything," Gable said, her voice breaking as she embraced Erin tightly.

THE END (?)

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