

# Tango

Peyton Andrews

Book I of The Dance Series



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# *Tango*

The Dance Series [1]

Peyton Andrews

(2011)

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# ~Tango~

By Peyton Andrews

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Disclaimer: I have been conjuring stories since I was in junior high school, mainly as a way to keep my sanity, which some have doubts as to my success in this arena. Writing was always a passion for me, until a few years ago, when my muse left me, along with a dead-end relationship. I think the ex packed her in the suitcase and took her to new digs when she moved, either that, or she lured her away with better cookies. I digress...this missive is the first creative writing I've done in years, and hope you enjoy it. These characters are original and all mine, and I'm very protective of them. Beware, there will be detailed sex of the girl on girl variety. If this isn't your kind of thing or, if for some strange reason, illegal in your area, please move along. That said, I welcome constructive comments and feed back, and you can reach me at [peyton.andrews@comcast.net](mailto:peyton.andrews@comcast.net)

Dedication: To my good friends who have been supportive of my creative revival and have offered encouragement every step of the way. A very special and heartfelt thank you to my friend, SD, who, during a few brain storming sessions, inspired me to find my muse again. Thanks bud, this is a better story because of your suggestions and the time you took to help me. I would get smacked down, every which way to Sunday, if I left out Jo and Cheri for their tireless efforts to beta read this little ditty to ensure you, the reader, don't go running for the Xanax.

Teaser: A chaste blonde beauty relocates to New England and finds herself with a new job and an interesting group of friends. One gorgeous fall day, she serendipitously meets a mysterious jogger, who sparks her curiosity. When they meet again, by accident, at an All Hallow's Eve celebration, will it bring out the playful spirit in her or will she be possessed by dark, hungry longing?

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Julia's stomach growled, forcing her eyes away from the report she was preparing, to eye the computer clock in the top right-hand corner of her monitor. She sighed, it was only 10 o'clock, much too early for lunch and way too late for anything substantial. She turned her attention to the empty coffee cup to the right of her mouse and contemplated assuaging her hunger by tricking her stomach with liquid. Sometimes the ruse worked, other times it didn't, either way, she was looking forward to lunch and her reheated gumbo. The thought of gumbo started another round of audible discontent from her stomach so, without any further delay, she chose more coffee. With quick keystrokes she saved her work in progress, stood, and was about to pick up her mug when she was startled by the sound of something heavy being dropped in the next cubicle. Julia rolled her eyes and chuckled, knowing that her neighbor was again having to deal with a harmless and not so secret, unwanted admirer. She moved closer to the sound of the action and waited for the ruckus that usually followed.

"Ouch! Jesus, Donna!" Todd rubbed his forearm vigorously trying to get the sting from the rubber band to dissipate.

"Listen Turd..." Donna started her rant only to be cutoff.

"It's Todd." He gave her his best wounded pride look.

"Yeah, well, whatever. I'm sick to death of you slamming the mail on my desk. Why the hell can't you just set it down?" Donna stood up from her chair and moved to stand in front of Todd. She put one hand on her hip and the other she used to punctuate her words by poking the air in front of him wishing, just once, sexual harassment laws would allow her to tap out her disfavor, in

Morse code, on his chest. "Please just do it again. I'm begging you, because when you do, I'm going to take each envelope and mailer and individually ram them so far up your..."

Julia knew the time had come for a little levity, so she stood on her tiptoes to peer over the wall and intrude on their moment. "Hey, you two play nice."

Startled, they both turned to look at a little blonde with her face hovering over the top of the cubicle. Donna immediately covered her mouth with her hand to avoid bursting with laughter. The sight of Julia's eyes, nose and two hands hanging from the top of the divider reminded her of Kilroy. Julia, seeing Donna's dilemma, just winked at her and turned her attention to Todd.

"Todd." Julia cleared her throat, "I don't really think getting Donna angry was the reaction you were going for, was it?" He shook his head. "You've got all the finesse of a ten-year old." She paused when she saw the puzzled look on his face. "There are much better ways of getting a woman's attention. You could be sweet and kind. Perhaps some tokens of appreciation." By the look on his face, her message was, again, flying over his head faster than a fighter jet so she tried to clarify. "Gifts, Todd. You know...flowers or candy? Most women appreciate gifts." She grinned, knowing the suggestions were more of a way to make Donna fear Todd's next move than to actually help him get her attention.

Donna made a face that was reminiscent of the look one gets when choosing the wrong public stall to use. In a low tone she said, "How about absence? Yeah, that's what this woman would appreciate." She quickly turned her attention back to Todd, "Don't even think about it, nitwit."

Todd looked from one woman to the other, shrugged, and walked off.

Donna turned her attention back to Julia. “You are just plain evil, Julia Abernathy.” She heard Julia giggle in response. “I think the best part of Todd got left on the sheets at conception.”

Julia wrinkled her nose in disgust. “Eeeeeewww, that’s just nasty. Do you have to be so crude?”

“Virgin much?” Donna pealed in laughter at the shocked look on her friend’s face. Donna and Julia had become fast friends two months ago when Julia joined the firm. Once Julia was deemed to be worthy, she was invited to the “Ladies Who Lunch” group that had been formed by five key women at the office; Donna, Lori, Justine, Tipper, and Maggie. Justine had referred to the initiation as being “filleted, grilled, and served up.” For one to be a full-fledged member, the others in the group would ask key questions which the initiate had to answer. Julia gamely answered the questions, some a little more timidly than others, with as much bravery as she could muster, and the group was thoroughly charmed by her naivety.

Julia found the group scandalously entertaining. Since her upbringing was more conservative, she found herself being more of an observer than a participant. Each of the women brought a diverse set of values, wealth, and experiences to make daily lunches the highlight of the work day. At the urging of Maggie, they had begun brown-bagging it and taking their lunches across the street to North Ridge Park to people watch. Tipper, being the most privileged one of the group, refused to pack her own repast and had a firm deliver lunch each day to her office in a brown bag which she could take to the park.

“You are such a snob, Tipper,” Lori said between bites of her tuna on rye.

“What, you want me to starve? The only meal I can make involves reservations.” Tipper opened her bag and began taking out the containers of food and setting them in front of her on the large

blanket they all shared.

“Oh, how hard is it to open a couple jars and spread peanut butter and jelly on bread?” Donna smirked then bit into her ham and cheese sandwich.

Tipper started to choke on her beef tips but grabbed a bottle of Pellegrino to wash it down quickly. “You’ve got to be joking. Who eats that over the age of five?” Each woman raised her hand and Tipper just made a disbelieving noise before taking another bite of food.

They all continued to eat and make small talk, which mostly involved catching up what happened the night before. Fall was a favorite time of year as it not only ushered in new and returning television shows, but also the tentative planning for the upcoming holidays. Each took their turn and sometimes talked over the others to agree or disagree on some point of interest. As the conversation died down, they focused on the surrounding environs to include the people in near proximity.

“Look at that guy over there.” Maggie, the chubby love-starved woman of the group, pointed to a middle-aged man feeding ducks at the pond. All eyes turned in that direction.

Justine immediately cackled, “Oh yeah, those white socks and sandals are totally manly and sexy.” Her eyes got wide in a sign of recognition, “I wonder if he’s taking fashion tips from Lori?” The group sucked in and held their collective breaths. They secretly loved the regular jibes between the two women.

Lori laughed then looked at Justine and said, “Pfft...you know he kind of reminds me of Micah.” The group burst out in laughter, all except for Justine who narrowed her eyes at Lori

and responded in kind. “Look you fashion reject, I buy Micah’s clothes. He is hot couture! Unlike you and your family, he does not participate in the Saturday morning ritual of garage sale trolling to find new togs.” Justine shot Lori a fake smile as her perfectly manicured nails swept an imaginary blonde hair behind her ear.

Tipper closed her eyes and grimaced over Justine’s misuse of haute couture and countered, “Oh, get over yourself, Justine. You know the only reason you married Micah Jackson was because you could dress him up like a Ken doll and wouldn’t have to change your monogrammed sheets and towels.”

Before Justine could reply Donna asked, “So, Tipper, how’s that hunt for ex-husband number four coming along?”

Tipper’s mouth turned up in a slow smile, she was about to respond when she happened to look over at Justine. All of Justine’s composure had vanished as she sat wide-eyed with her jaw agape. Before she could finish turning her head to see what Justine found so fascinating, she heard her slight southern drawl, “Oh my God, y’all!”

At that exclamation, all heads turned in the direction of Justine’s preoccupation to see a jogger coming up the path to their right. There were so many attributes to notice and each woman had a personal favorite. Tipper immediately focused on the hard glistening quads as they stretched and flexed from the pounding they were receiving at the shift in body weight against the hard packed dirt trail. Maggie was fascinated by the narrow waist and slim hips and just knew that if it were warmer the jogger would be sporting six-pack abdominal muscles. Justine was fixated by the broad shoulders and defined pectoral muscles she could envision underneath the shirt. Donna just stared at the pumping biceps, the sweat making them look ready for a body building competition. Lori took it all in but was waiting for the view once the jogger passed their group.



Julia did a quick scan then focused on the exquisite facial symmetry, with its square jaw, perfectly formed nose, and determined set to the mouth. She was disappointed the jogger wore sunglasses and a ball cap, as it didn't allow her to see the eyes or much of the hair.

Once the jogger loped past them with the speed of a gazelle, Lori was able to admire the tight gluts and sighed in appreciation. Julia had originally thought the jogger had very little hair, but found it was tied back in a very short dark ponytail.

"I think my egg has left an ovary and is making its way through my fallopian tube." Justine continued to watch the subject of their various fantasies disappear from her line of sight.

Tipper pulled herself from her reverie, "Joggers don't usually shave their legs, do they?"

Lori was the first one to respond. "None of the ones I know do. My brother does, but he's a cyclist. He says it has something to do with cutting down on wind resistance, or something. I can tell you, after watching that man, in action, jogging is my new spectator sport."

Julia laughed at Lori's comment. "Some competitive swimmers shave."

Maggie nodded her head. "Weight lifters shave as well, but he didn't look that cut."

"Oh, who the hell cares? That man got my biological clock ringing!" Justine closed her eyes and had a vision of being held in those strong arms and being kissed senseless.

"You know, I don't think I could stand it if Matt shaved his arms and legs." Donna continued,

“First, the man is a fur bearing mammal. He’s not much for keeping up with shaving his face much less full body hair. Second, all that stubble rubbing on me would be like getting sand papered to a fine polish. It could be a new way to exfoliate.” Donna laughed.

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“Yes...no... no...ah ha. I can meet you after my workout. Yes. Well, it will take me about two hours. Yes, that includes getting ready. Look, I’m sitting in my car at the park now. I’ll see you soon.” Snapping the cell phone shut and putting it and the keys in the glove box, she was almost ready to begin. The last two items were in the back seat, and with a short reach, a gray ball cap and iPod were securely in hand. Clay slipped on the well-worn hat, placed the buds in her ears, and tucked the mp3 player in her left arm band. A brief look in the rear view mirror revealed everything was in place. She exited the car and with a quick press of a thumb on the outside door panel, the car was locked.

It was a beautiful day with the sun just past its zenith in the azure sky. The bright golden light nourished the plentiful trees and, in appreciation, their leaves danced to the rhythm of the crisp fall air. Soon it would be too cold to wear a short sleeve shirt and shorts, but Clay was determined to enjoy it as long as possible.

The entrance to the park lay ahead and she strode toward it, eager to get to her stretches. Looking around she was pleased to see so many fellow townsfolk enjoying the beautiful day. She propped her leg up on a large birch tree and began to stretch. A young mother pushing a stroller and talking on a cell phone slowed her pace to peruse Clay like she was the special of the day at one of the local diners. Clay gave her a sexy half smile as she in turn eyed the woman. She was the girl next door pretty with her shoulder length auburn hair gleaming like a copper penny. Her frame was of average build and it was evident she had yet to loose the baby fat sitting around her middle. It was obvious the woman was intrigued but unwilling to advance her curiosity. Clay gave her a slight nod and then turned her attention back to her warm up routine.

Joggers were treated to some of the most diversified terrain as the trail wound through small forests of trees, hills, bends, and a short cliff that kept the ocean waters at bay. A short stretch of the trail led around a large pond next to a vast open area, which was a favorite place to picnic and to those wanting a little exercise with their canine companions. Many times Clay found herself competing for ground while avoiding a dog on its way to catch a Frisbee or ball. One day she was not so lucky. She had emerged from the wooded trail listening to music when she decided to change the playlist on her iPod. Just as she was getting ready to pause the music and switch the tunes, her legs were hit from behind. The sudden push, combined with her own momentum caused her to rapidly fall forward. In an unconscious move, she abandoned the iPod, pulled her arms up and tried to roll to avoid a broken limb. Although her knees took the brunt of the fall, fortune was on her side as she only suffered a few scrapes. It did teach her to pay closer attention and, from that day forward, she stuck to one playlist and kept her eyes attuned to things in her vicinity.

A couple of miles into her routine she burst through the foliage into the bright sunlight. Muscles straining from the affect of her exertion, sweat running in rivulets down her body while pulse pounding music blasted through her ear buds. The rush of adrenaline combined with the upbeat tempo gave her a euphoric sense of invincibility. She had been consistently exercising her body for years, pushing hard, punishing any sense of complacency, and stoking the inner flames of achievement. Her body was sculpted to near perfection with so little body fat it barely registered. She knew how good she looked and did it not only for herself but, also, for the attention she received. Clay used her physical form, coupled with her natural beauty, to gain attention, then used her androgyny to upset the balance. She liked to push the boundaries of perception and used her body and sexuality to achieve that end. She loved conquest.

The park teemed with people and her eyes flicked from one to another. About thirty feet ahead

and to her right sat a group of women on a large blanket shaded by a magnificent elm tree. It was an eclectic group of ages and appearances, but Clay's interest focused on the smaller mid-twenties, petite pixie-haired blonde in the coordinated preppy ensembles. As Clay neared she could tell the group had stopped talking and turned their heads in her direction. The lustful yearnings were evident, except the woman who attracted her interest. Clay bit the inside of her lower lip to keep from laughing at the gawking women and concentrated on the trail ahead. Once they were out of her sight, her mind replayed the reaction of the smallest blonde. Sure, she looked interested, just not in a libidinous way.

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Saturday morning was simply glorious with temperatures cool enough to require a light sweater. Always an early riser, Julia did her chores then prepared to spend some time outdoors. She packed a small travel cooler bag with a thermos of hot chocolate, bottles of water and some fruit, intent on being outside for a while. Julia decided to relax in the park with her latest read. She took time to choose just the right area on a hill to skillfully place her small blanket so her head would be elevated enough to comfortably read her book. Settled on her blanket, travel bag in easy reach and bundled in her most loved and well-worn comfortable sweater, she started reading.

The sun had risen high in the sky when the world around her remerged as vibrations coming through the blanket. She realized someone was nearby and traveling fast. In the time it took her to sit up and look around she was only able to glimpse a form disappearing into the tree line.

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Clay alternated her routine in the park, so she could enjoy more of the sun than shade. On her first pass in the clearing, she noticed a woman alone relaxing with a book. Deciding to alter her path again to get a better look, she took a circuitous trail that led her to the top of the hill. With the sultry, dark, house workout music thumping sounds through her ear buds, she took a good look at the woman's profile. Skin taut and unlined, fresh with the blush of youth, small endearing nose, and tender, pink kissable lips. Her crown of textured, short blonde hair waved slightly in

the breeze. The thought of untainted innocence came to Clay's mind. It was beautiful, yet haunting, as it brought Clay's own lost innocence to the fore. Tendrils of sadness crept through her thoughts but she pushed them back, not willing to examine lost dreams and ideologies of youth that were crushed by the intrusion of a complex life. Turning her mind to the present, and this young woman, who although uninvited, had already firmly captured Clay's imagination. The lyrics of the song she listened to only cemented these feelings. It matched the visual stimulus so much that she wanted to meet this woman. She decided that when she finished her run, if the woman was still there, she would introduce herself.

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Julia was engrossed in her book when, out of her peripheral vision, she noticed a tall man sit down near her personal space. She was determined to ignore the unwanted stranger and continued reading.

"It's a beautiful day," a resonate contralto voice commented.

Julia put her book face down on her lap and looked over with the intent of telling the visitor that she'd rather be alone. Then it struck her. The jogger they all admired and thought about over the last two days had stopped to talk to her. She was gobsmacked at this turn of events. She sat up and demurely cleared her dry throat. "Yes, it is." She placed her book down on the blanket and reached over to grab a bottle of water from her bag, intent on hydrating her vocal cords, when her manners interceded. She looked back to the stranger, "Would you like some water?" In anticipation of the answer, Julia brought out two bottles of water.

"Yes, thank you." Clay was genuinely surprised at the woman's thoughtfulness. She took the water and, in a few large gulps, finished the bottle. "Oh, that was good." She rubbed her mouth with the back of her left hand. Then offered her right hand out in introduction. "I'm Clay."

Julia shook Clay's hand. The grip was firm but not overpowering. "Julia."

Clay held her hand for a few more seconds than necessary and enjoyed the slight flush of color that appeared on Julia's face. It was a charming reaction and totally unexpected. Clay was used to women who were hungry and eager. It was always in their eyes and body language. This woman didn't give those signals. It was a new experience for Clay and threw her off her usual predator method of interaction. Her mind raced to find ground for conversation. "What are you reading?" Clay winced internally at the question and mentally chastised herself.

Julia picked the book up from the blanket allowing the cover to show. "It's the newest Paris deJardin book Blood and Power." Julia's eyes brightened at the thought of discussing the book she was pages away from finishing.

"I bought it but have yet to read it. Truthfully, I picked it up because of all the controversy. I generally only keep up with news and politics and to relax I read biographies." Clay watched as Julia's enthusiasm faded and quickly asked, "Well, is it worth all the firestorm of attention?"

"Oh yes, but I don't want to ruin it for you." Julia took a sip of water. "I just get so irritated when someone gives out all the details before I've had a chance to read a particular book." Her face scrunched up in displeasure, causing little wrinkles to form around her nose.

Clay smiled at the charming reaction and said, "Well, then we'll have to discuss it together after I read it." Clay shivered as her body temperature cooled from her run. Not wanting to end the encounter, she asked, "Would you like to get some coffee or hot chocolate? There's a wonderful little café across the park."

Julia suddenly tensed and she stumbled out, "Uh...that would be lovely but I can't today. I really should be going. I get so caught up when I read that I lose track of time." She began packing her book and thermos. "I'm supposed to meet a few friends and I've got to get ready." Julia picked up her napkin wrapped apple core. If she had turned around, she would have seen the surprise on Clay's face at the brush-off.

Clay stood. "Well, Julia, it was very nice meeting you."

Julia looked up and gave Clay a radiant smile. "It was nice meeting you as well, Clay. Perhaps we'll see each other again. I would enjoy discussing the book with you after you've had a chance to read it." Julia's body language was relaxed again.

Clay gave her a genuine smile. "We both enjoy the park, so I'm sure we will. I'll let you know when I've read the book."

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It was late by the time Julia arrived back at her apartment. Setting her two large shopping bags on the dining room table, she quickly made her way to the kitchen. Since she left the park, her day had been quite busy and she hadn't had time to eat or relax. Julia stood perched at the open refrigerator door looking for inspiration. With not much to choose from, she grabbed a container of leftover Chinese food. As she prepared to reheat her meal, she reflected back on her meeting with Clay.

She enjoyed the brief visit and was flattered by the attention. Something about Clay intrigued her, but she hadn't had time to really ponder the feeling. Julia concentrated her thoughts back to their first encounter. Clay was the embodiment of beauty and form. Beauty. Julia knitted her

brow, wondering why that word filtered through her mind. Men could be beautiful, but normally she would use handsome to describe them. Perhaps, the word beautiful popped into her mind, because it was the lack of body hair she normally associated with men. No, that wasn't really it. Her thoughts were interrupted by the signal from her microwave. She sat down at the kitchen bar and began eating, all the while her thoughts on Clay.

Julia was determined to solve this riddle and let her mind replay the moment she heard Clay's voice. It was deep, but lacking the masculine vibrations that come from the low recesses of the sound box. Was it more breathy? No, that wasn't quite right either. Melodic? Definitely not. It was rich, smooth and just skirted the surface like the sound of skates gliding on ice. It, too, was beautiful. Beautiful, there was that word again. Sound box.

The words jumped into her mind again. Adam's apple. Did Clay have one? She didn't remember seeing it. She let her mind's eye rove over the body that jogged by her earlier. He was tall and carried himself with grace and agility. His body was lean and muscular, but musculature that perfectly fit his thinner carriage and frame, missing the chiseled bulk of most men. Her mind zipped, unbidden, to her college days, when she would occasionally go to one of the women's basketball games. Those athletes too, had the same well crafted bodies as did the jogger. It was then, in that moment, when all the puzzle pieces fit into place, Clay was a woman.

Julia's eyes opened wide at the revelation. Yes, that was it. It all made sense now. She started to chuckle thinking about how the Ladies made quite a fuss over Clay. If they only knew the truth, they would be appalled. Julia decided to keep this information to herself and wait for the opportune moment to dash the fantasies of the lunch group. Then she remembered when Clay invited her for coffee. She thought at the time that Clay was trying to pick her up. Again, she laughed at herself over her misread of the situation. Her mirth began to recede when she thought about it again. Her instincts were rarely wrong; although everything about Clay threw



what she knew out the window. Perhaps Clay was trying to pick her up. She put her fork down on the plate and stared at the food. Was Clay a lesbian? Why would Clay be interested in her? Was she interested? These questions bothered her in no small way. She thought back to her dating history and past boyfriends. She enjoyed her brief time with the men in her life. She found their tenure lacking, as she wouldn't allow them any more than hand holding and light kissing on their dates. She was raised to believe that a physical intimate expression of love was something reserved for two people who were devoted to each other and bound together by matrimony. She knew it was considered an antiquated notion by many of her friends and the majority at large, but it was right for her.

She blushed at the memory of Clay briefly holding her hand, when they met this morning. It was warm and strong, powerful but soothing. Her eyes so captivating and unusual, with irises so light blue they could be described as glacial, but not cold. Magnetic. With a little half smile she shook the thoughts from her head.

After dinner was done and the kitchen cleaned, Julia took her shopping bags to the bedroom. She casually threw them on her bed then walked into the bathroom with the intention of taking a warm, relaxing shower followed by a soak in the tub.

Wrapped in a towel, she made her way over to the dresser and grabbed a pair of ivory panties and matching camisole. She dressed in her undergarments after tossing the towel to a nearby chair. Digging into the first shopping bag she pulled out a pair of calf high black boots followed by black socks and wool navy trousers. The next bag held a single breasted dark blue shell jacket with nine gold buttons that went from waist to neck, along with a blue Kepi with a black braid. She looked at the ensemble and winced. How on earth did she ever let the Ladies persuade her to dress like a union soldier for the office Halloween party? She loved dressing up for Halloween and reminisced over past costumes. They were all very feminine and usually

followed a theme; Snow White, Tinkerbell, Cinderella. Looking back to the bed she grimaced and rolled her eyes. She bemoaned the fact that she waited so long to go out and find something to wear. Even though this outfit would do nothing to make her feel feminine or attractive, she vowed to make the best of it since she was out of options. Working late and taking work home had taken its toll on her downtime and creativity. The only ray of sunshine to this otherwise lackluster wardrobe selection was that although the party was on a Thursday night, the staff had the following day off.

Her employer held the party each year at his beach home, an imposing modern two-story structure that stood on concrete pillars. Grey with white trim, it sported a large deck that spanned half of the home and a smaller deck, just off a loft, facing the shore, which supported a tall, vertical staircase that led to a widow's walk. While neighboring beach homes were quaint and of the proper New England style, this home was mammoth and became the white elephant of the coast for miles.

It was one of two anticipated parties of the year. Halloween and Christmas were large gala affairs that included not only the current staff, but also people that worked for the firm in years past. The events lasted well into the early morning hours and quite a few attendees had their over indulgences immortalized in photographs. Julia was determined to keep her wits about her to avoid being captured on film and framed for all to see in the break room.

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The Ladies drove together in Maggie's vehicle, the SUV not only had on-board navigation to keep them from getting lost, but room to avoid wrinkling their costumes. The drive up the coast was darkly beautiful as the light of the full moon splayed its milky white fingers across the sleeping sand dunes on either side of the road. It made the journey feel remote and desolate, other worldly. Perfect for a gathering on All Saint's Eve.

Parking was a little challenging and, after a couple passes, they found a spot on the side of the road not too far from their destination. The walk to the house was not a great distance and wouldn't have been difficult if it were not for the sand and lack of fabric on some of the outfits on this chilly night.

"I thought there would be valet parking. My nipples are so cold they're about ready to pop off," Justine whined. She had been on a continual rant since they left the cozy warmth of the truck.

Lori rolled her eyes and chuckled. "It's fall, Justine, and you're wearing ode to I Dream of Jeannie. Women in harems wear more clothes."

Donna was agitated and had enough of Justine's complaining. "Listen, I cream on weenie, shut the hell up."

Julia's nose wrinkled in disgust and annoyance and tuned out the rest of the conversation. She ruminated again over her own costume. Both her jacket and trousers were heavy and made of wool, which kept her comfortable in the cool evening air. She did worry about the temperature indoors and hoped she wouldn't be sweating before the end of the evening. Self-consciously she tugged at her Kepi then used her fingers to rake the hair around the edges.

As they neared the house, they heard what sounded like Salsa. They all looked at each other in confusion, not expecting to hear this type of music. Last year they were treated to the iconic and epic trumpet of Big Band to accompany a Swing Era theme. Undaunted they continued and as they rounded the last dune they all stopped, wide-eyed, and stared at the building. The owner had again followed a theme but, as was the practice, it was never the traditional Halloween décor of ghosts, ghouls, and goblins. Rather, it was bedecked in multicolored lights and streamers. They followed the lighted trail of mini red and black Italian winter solstice masks

that adorned poles that flanked the walkway until it led them to the open double front door.

They stepped through the front door, like Alice through the looking glass, willing their senses to accept the jarring world of sights, sounds and smells that would be the envy of every Carnivale party ever hosted. Like the outside of the house, inside, long silk streamers of varying bold colors and garish pennants hung at intervals from the ceilings. Small twinkling gold colored lights bordered the interior architecture tapping out their disjointed mixture of visual stimulus. Everyone was in costume and in happy celebration, savoring their good fortune of being invited to this Bacchanalian event. Amid the lively sounds of music and conversation, they could detect the tantalizing aroma of edible delights. Intent on joining the festivities as a group, with Tipper in the lead, they moved single file around the crowd deeper into the house. To their left was a large open area with a crowd of people dancing, while others milled about on the periphery watching in rapt fascination. Occasional cheering could be heard over the distinctive and lively Latin music. Straight ahead was a wide oak and iron staircase that was roped off by a chain wrapped in red velvet fabric. Tipper steered the group to the right and up to a massive custom glass and iron bar. Two bartenders moved about in controlled chaos taking orders and mixing drinks and had at their disposal four, twelve foot long, fully stocked glass shelves of every kind of liquor.

Drinks in hand they moved around checking out the costumes of the other partygoers. Julia was up to two Marie Antoinettes, several vampires, a Pillsbury doughboy, and a zombie when she found herself bunched up with the others at the edge of the dance floor. There were several couples moving gracefully to the rhythm of the fast Latin beat. One couple in particular looked like professional dancers; the woman wearing a beautiful ivory Carnivale mask with feather plumage on top of each corner, in a mid-thigh bright yellow sequined dress with a long open neck flashing iridescent pearls and matching yellow high heels. The man wore a black tricorn and a renaissance mask of yellow and blue, in a long midnight blue brocade jacket, white shirt and cravat, gold satin breeches and buckle shoes. They were clearly the favorite and moved

around the dance floor with practiced ease and a decidedly theatrical flair. When the song ended, the man took his dance partner's hands and drew her toward him and kissed both her cheeks. With protests from the audience, he left the dance floor and moved away from the crowd.

Julia's eyes followed him until he disappeared. She continued to watch the dancers until she heard her stomach rumble. Julia tapped Lori on the shoulder and let her know she was going in search of sustenance. Tipper overhead Julia and decided she, too, needed food, so she put her arm in the crook of Julia's, and together they went foraging.

They followed the scent until they reached the back of the home. Before their eyes they found two long buffet tables with a variety of delicacies to satisfy their palates. Unlike other parties Julia had attended, this one used actual china and silverware. She carefully looked over her selections and placed small amounts of several items on her plate. Dishes in hand, they moved out of the way so they could eat without fear of being jostled.

Still in eyeshot of the buffet table, Julia spotted the male dancer she had seen earlier, in his stunning colonialist period costume, getting a plate and preparing to assuage his hunger, as well. He didn't appear to deliberate his choices but went straight for the shrimp bowl. Several minutes and shrimp later, he, too, moved out of the way of the tables and took a spot near a wall, so he could lean against it while he ate. She tried not to stare at the man, but something seemed so familiar about him. Once, when she took a surreptitious look at him, she thought they had made eye contact, but she wasn't sure. If they had he didn't acknowledge her in any way. Her thoughts went back to her less than flattering costume and she, again, felt very unappealing.

Julia and Tipper finished eating and were looking to find a place to leave their plates when one

of the waitstaff came up and politely relieved them of their burden. They were about to move about again and join their companions when the dancer Julia had seen earlier came up to them. Julia immediately recognized those mesmerizing light blue eyes behind the mask.

“Julia. How lovely to see you again.” The colonist reached out and took her hand, giving the back a light kiss. “I love the choice of costume. The dark blue really accentuates your eyes.”

Julia was surprised at the show of gallantry and compliment, then, without consent, her face flushed in shy embarrassment. She could see Tipper turn and look at her, waiting for an introduction. “Clay. Hello, it’s nice to see you as well. This is my friend Tipper.”

Clay reached for Tipper’s hand and repeated the same action with her. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Tipper.” Tipper gave a demure smile and responded in kind. She was too caught up gazing into Clay’s captivating eyes to speak.

Julia saw Tipper’s interest and, although she couldn’t quite understand it, she didn’t want to share Clay’s attention, so she redirected the conversation. “I didn’t know you would be here.”

Clay smiled and directed her eyes back to Julia. “I could say the same of you. My father is the host of this decadent little party. Being his only child, I’m expected to make an appearance. Honestly, they are fun and I do enjoy seeing old friends and meeting new. I presume you both work for the firm?”

Before Tipper had a chance to say anything, Julia answered, “Yes. I started in early August, so this is my first party.”

Before Clay had a chance to respond, Tipper asked, "How do you two know each other?" She knew Julia hadn't discussed meeting any new men, nor was she currently dating. She deduced they couldn't have met in the office since she had never seen Clay step foot in the building before, at least not in the last two years since she had hired on with the firm. Briefly, she mentally chastised herself for missing the party last year and the opportunity to have met Clay earlier.

Clay spoke up before Julia had a chance to answer. "I met Julia several days ago at the park."

"The park?" Tipper was thoroughly confused.

Clay smiled broadly since she knew her next words would reveal she was the jogger they had stared at earlier in the week. "I find the park very stimulating." Seeing Tipper's brows knit slightly in confusion she continued. "I jog there everyday."

It took Tipper a second to process this news, then realization hit her. Without conscious thought her eyes roamed over Clay's body. She could see the muscular thighs she had come to adore straining the gold satin breeches just below a rather large codpiece.

"Hey! Clay," a tall, thin older gentleman dressed as a court jester called out. With as much dignity as he could muster in his glittering, green, elf shoes, he joined them.

"They're calling for you." He placed his hand on Clay's shoulder. "Heard Josh challenged you to do the tango to that new piece he found." He looked at Julia and Tipper. "Ladies." He did a slight bow and gave them a large, toothy grin then turned his attention back to Clay. "Well, are

you going to keep everyone waiting?"

Clay turned her attention back to the women. "Ladies, this old rogue is my Uncle Albert. Don't let him get either of you alone." She laughed when she heard Albert snort his objection. "Albert, this beautiful soldier is Julia ..."

"Abernathy," Julia offered her last name.

Clay smiled. "Thank you. Julia Abernathy." She turned. "And the lovely, elfin princess in white is Tipper..."

"de Clare," Tipper responded.

"Tipper de Clare."

"Au chante, Mademoiselle de Clare." Albert took her hand and, like his niece, kissed the smooth skin. "Forgive me, but Tipper doesn't sound like an old Norman name."

Tipper was pleased that Albert knew of her surname's origin so she elaborated. "It was a nickname given to me years ago, but that's a story for another time. I was born Catherine Marie de Clare."

"Ah, lovely indeed. Do you tango, Catherine Marie de Clare?" Albert inquired.

Tipper smiled mischievously. "I have, but it's been a few years."



Albert turned his head to Clay and suggested, “You should tango with Catherine. I think you two would make a stunning couple.”

Clay turned her attention back to Tipper, offered her hand, “Would you do me the honor of joining me for a dance?” She took Tipper’s hand, but spared a few seconds to look at Julia, hoping her eyes conveyed an apology for being put in a situation of having to leave her alone.

Crestfallen, Julia watched as Tipper accepted the invitation. She understood Tipper was the obvious beautiful and talented choice, but it didn’t take the sting out of being expendable. Even in her unhappiness, there still existed an eagerness to see Clay dance again and it prompted her to move her feet and follow. Julia jockeyed for position, the closest she could get to the dance floor was just behind Lori and Justine. Together, they watched as the last dance number was completed and the dancers ushered off the floor.

“Ladies and gentleman.” A young man dressed as Quasimodo shuffled and dragged his way to the center of the dance floor with a microphone in hand. “Most of you here know Clay.” He paused as the catcalls and jeers rang out. He turned to Clay and gave her a wink before continuing. “My, my, Clay, they do know you.” The crowd laughed and whistled their agreement. Quasimodo used hand gestures to calm the mood then continued, “Every year we select one dance to challenge Clay since we all love watching twinkle toes work the mojo. So tonight it’s the tango.” The captivated audience roared their approval. “Maestro, if you please.” He made an exaggerated sweep of his hand to offer Clay the stage.

Clay led Tipper to the floor and, with no further fanfare, brought them together in an open embrace and waited for the first notes of La Cumparsita to commence. The song began and,

much to Julia's delight, it was a faster tempo than the traditional piece. There was no gentle easing into this style of tango, no close bodies and sway of hips rife with the promise of steamy sex. Clay's lead was crisp and precise with perfect steps and head snaps. It was hot and passionate and filled many of those watching with a longing, a dream of being claimed and scorched by the raw power and sexuality. When Tipper wrapped her arm around Clay's neck and presented her raised shapely slender leg for Clay to glide her hand gently down the exposed flesh, Julia found she, too, wanted to feel that kind sensuality for herself. She had never experienced unbridled abandon, to live in the moment of exquisite pleasure, to relinquish control, and be swept up in a roiling tide of passion. To be immersed in this kind of sexual haze was as unnerving as it was captivating to her. Although this was a dance, being performed by two acquaintances, the sheer naked energy and symmetry was poetic and alluring, and Julia was mesmerized, in spite of her efforts to control her reaction. It sparked a fantasy to be that woman, in Clay's arms, to feel that powerful hand, to live in the moment of sheer perfection and unconstrained sensuality.

Lori looked on in awe. "Did Tipper learn that in finishing school?"

"Honey, I don't think she's finished." Justine whispered softly for she, too, was spellbound by the blistering and commanding display of power and eroticism.

Clay twirled Tipper around the dance floor in a flourish of practiced ease. As the song came to its conclusion, Tipper was dipped then pulled up and crushed to Clay's chest.

The crowd was initially stunned into silence by what they had just witnessed. Clay gave a quick peck to both Tipper's cheeks, released her embrace, then presented themselves to the audience with a slight bow. They were met with enthusiastic applause and whistles. Observers of the spectacle were so moved many of them patted Clay and Tipper as they walked by. They

both made their way over to the Ladies group; Tipper to regroup with her friends and Clay to spirit Julia away. She found the woman fascinating and irresistible and was intent on getting to know her better.

“Would you care for a walk?” Clay untied her cravat and removed her mask to provide some relief to her overheated body.

Julia watched as small rivulets of sweat trickled down Clay’s neck, causing unexpected small flutters of excitement in her stomach. She nodded her head. “I would like that very much.”

Clay took Julia’s hand and guided her through the throng to double doors just a few feet away from the bar. Placing her palm on the small of Julia’s back, she led her through the doorway and into an expansive glass enclosed atrium. The temperature was slightly cooler and refreshing after experiencing the squeeze of flesh from which they had taken leave, and they were grateful for the reprieve. Julia was astounded by all that her senses revealed, from the light perfume of floral delights to the over abundance of vast, lush greenery. She especially enjoyed the artful way the hanging plants made the space feel more like an ancient and inviting garden. Hands still clasped they slowly made their way to the center of the room.

“Wow.” Julia stood in front of a fountain of frolicking water nymphs. Their poses were playful with a provocative edge that was accentuated by the way the water cascaded over exposed bosoms and bellies. It was artfully erotic and, as Julia stared, she felt her cheeks warm.

Clay gave a wry smile at her reaction and with a small tug of her hand she moved them slowly around the fountain. They came to a stop in front of a white marble bench where Clay directed them to sit. Julia was able to see more of the outside landscape from this position and delighted in the large Juniper trees with their cluster of blue cones like grapes waiting to be

plucked. It was all so overwhelming and so beautiful and decidedly romantic. Briefly she worried Clay would make a romantic overture, then worried that she wouldn't, which she found very confusing. Deciding not to dwell on things that would best be handled if, and when, they occurred, she began the conversation.

"The tango was beautiful. Where did you learn to dance?"

Clay gave an enigmatic smile then let out a little sigh. "You have to promise you won't tell a soul." Before she continued, she took an exaggerated look around. Julia giggled then composed herself when she saw Clay looking at her with a raised eyebrow and mischievous smile. "I discovered my love for dancing by accident really. While I was at Kent State prep school, I had a crush on a woman who had a passion for the ballet. She was on the dance performance team, and her talents were extraordinary. One year, I made the trip to Rockefeller Center just to watch her perform." Clay paused, her thoughts turning inward as she relived the moment. "Until that time, my dancing consisted of solitary rock shows in the privacy of my own room." They both laughed. "Of course I just had to win her affections, so I arranged to take private lessons. After trying different styles, I found I had a real talent and affinity for ballroom dancing."

"You certainly do." Julia gave her a sweet smile.

"Thank you. It took a year of dancing weekly, with only a reprieve on Sundays, before I felt comfortable enough to actually orbit Tonya's inner circle. It was divine to be in her light, and I enjoyed every moment we spent together." Clay stopped and lowered her head slightly.

From Clay's flagging posture it was clear the next part of this story would not be a happy one.

Julia guessed it would be a sad tale of unrequited love. In empathy she placed her hand on Clay's. "What happened?"

"She was killed by a drunk driver." Clay took a deep breath before continuing, "She learned that morning of being accepted to Juilliard and, in her usual fashion, celebrated the occasion by going shopping." Clay swallowed to clear her dry throat. "Just seventeen years old with an incredible zest for life. She was filled with such kindness and heartfelt compassion, with an innocent heart that knew no artifice, hate or malice. None of us will ever be the same without her, but there is solace that comes from having had the grace of her, however briefly, in our lives."

Clay brought her head up to look at Julia to find she had a small tear rolling down her cheek. She was so moved that she sucked in her breath then let it out along with a choked cry, realizing she was sitting in the presence of another pure heart. Without hesitation Julia guided Clay's head to her shoulder and held her tight.

"I'm so sorry for your loss. She must have been an incredible person." She felt Clay nod in agreement. Julia pulled off the tricorne from Clay's head and rested her hand protectively on her pecan colored hair. After a few minutes Clay sat up, thoroughly embarrassed at having shown such emotion to someone she hardly knew.

Wanting desperately to shift the focus from herself, she redirected the conversation to Julia. "I think it's time you told me a little about yourself." Clay smiled and rubbed her moist eyes then adjusted her ponytail.

"Not much to tell, really." Julia shrugged her shoulders then continued, "I was born and raised in Miami. I have a brother and two sisters, but I'm the baby, which they never let me forget." Julia

smiled. "I moved to Boca Raton and went to FAU and graduated with a B.S. in Accounting. A year and a half ago, I left a very boring job with a large accounting firm in Fort Lauderdale to move here and help my great aunt. She had to have double hip replacement surgery and refused any notion of outside help during recovery. She's quite the spitfire and gets her way most of the time."

Clay got the impression that Julia's great aunt wasn't the only firebrand in the family. "How is she doing now?"

"She's doing well and has more mobility now, but she's 82 and naturally slowing down. Of course, this irritates her to no end. It's trying for her as her mind is young, but her body isn't. I'm so thankful she has such a good sense of humor."

"Will you go back to Florida?" Clay found the notion unsettling and was perplexed by this unwelcome feeling.

"I don't think so. I do miss south Florida, but I find the change of seasons is something that I've come to love."

"Especially when the leaves change in the fall."

Julia nodded her head. "Oh, I just love fall with all the brilliant colors. It's like seeing the world with new eyes."

"It is breathtaking. I also happen to enjoy the winter, as I'm an avid skier. Have you learned to

ski?"

"Skiing." Julia acted like she was contemplating the thought. "Doesn't that require coordination? I'll have you know the word coordination is not in the Abernathy vocabulary." Julia smiled in self-deprecation.

Clay chuckled. "Well, it does help. Let me guess, you think you have two left feet?" She watched as Julia nodded. "You know, yoga would help improve your balance and coordination. You should try it."

"I'll look in to it, thanks for the suggestion." Julia looked at Clay for a minute then changed topics. "Tell me more about yourself, Clay Evans."

"I could if I were an Evans." Clay laughed at Julia's confusion. "My name is Amanda Park Clayton-Hamilton. Don Evans is my stepfather, but the only one I have ever known. My father was killed in a plane crash in Nepal before I was born."

"That is so sad." Julia again placed her hand on Clay's.

"It was, but more for my mother than myself. In her grief she closed herself off from everyone and everything. It wasn't until she met Don that she began to live again. They met when I was five and married a year later. He's a good man and I'm blessed to have him in my life."

"Is she here tonight?"

“No, she couldn’t make it this year. She’s in England visiting relatives, but we expect her back next month.” They sat in silence for a moment. “I’m a bit thirsty. Would you care for some champagne?”

“I really don’t drink much.” Julia wrinkled her nose.

Clay laughed and winked. “Champagne is not considered drinking. I brought a few bottles from my private stock and, if you would care to try it, I hope you like it as much as I do.” She stood and held her hand out to Julia. Their private world ended abruptly as they stepped back into the discordant ruckus of the main house. Clay signaled one of the shapely female waitstaff and leaned to whisper into her ear. Julia noticed the action and to her surprise became a little jealous of the attention and quickly worked to dispel the feelings. The woman nodded her head and left to fulfill the request.

Julia saw Clay fumbling with her cravat in an apparent attempt to resettle her costume. She quickly intervened and, in moments, the garment was tied and finished off with a quick pat of Julia’s hand.

Before either of them could begin a new conversation, they spied the ladies en masse walking purposefully in their direction. Clay mentally sighed, realizing her time alone with Julia was quickly coming to an end.

A circle quickly formed and Clay was introduced to the other members she had yet to meet. Tipper quickly pointed out Clay’s enthusiasm for jogging and watched in mirthful silence, as each woman tried to suppress their excitement. It was apparent to Clay that only Julia knew of her female identity and she was intrigued that the bombshell hadn’t been dropped on the group. Clay answered their questions about her exercise routine and expanded on certain points of



interest. Two of the staff interrupted their conversation when the champagne was brought over along with two glasses. Clay requested another two bottles and enough glasses to share with the rest of Julia's friends. Soon there were three stainless steel buckets of iced Clos du Mesnil sitting on a table, which the staff had relocated to be more convenient to their band of merry revelers. Each woman was served and after a short toast had their first sip of the offered nectar. Julia was enchanted by the soft delicate oak flavor, thinking she could get used to the taste of this champagne.

As the night progressed, the conversation flowed, as did the champagne. Clay was becoming anxious as the night wore on, worried she wouldn't have a chance again to have Julia alone. She decided that, although it might be rude, she was going to have to take matters in hand. She subtly moved closer to the object of her interest.

While the group was otherwise occupied in a lively discussion concerning the advantages and disadvantages of speed dating, Clay leaned in close and in said in a low tone, "Come Julia, I want you to experience something." Clay moved slightly away to look at Julia's eyes; her pupils were slightly dilated from a mixture of curiosity and champagne. Julia stared back at Clay then slowly nodded her head and gently took Clay's hand. Clay folded her hand around Julia's and felt the warmth and slight moisture of anticipation. She could feel her own heart begin to race with a longing to be intimately closer.

Without a word, Clay artfully led Julia away from their circle and then through the surrounding partygoers toward a staircase. She unhooked the velvet chain and moved them up the steps. As they made their ascent, Clay looked back at Julia. She could see Julia's slight confusion and nervousness, but she didn't speak or attempt to withdraw. Clay gave her a soft smile and her heart lightened when Julia returned it with one of her own. The air was beginning to feel cooler away from the crowd. Clay could feel the dampness under her jacket reacting to the

change in temperature. It was a welcome relief from the cloying mass of bodies one floor below them. Leading Julia to an open room, they passed through a small study on their way out to a small deck. The crispness of the air and the slight breeze felt good against her heated skin. She could hear Julia take in a sharp breath and feel her shiver, whether in anticipation or from the cold air she wasn't sure.

Julia was startled by the rush of cold air but quickly adapted so that it was a pleasant respite to her warm costume. Outside the world was painted in shades of gray, a stark contrast to the colorful and loud tones from where they had retreated. Before she had a chance to enjoy the differences, Clay was leading her further away from the deck. Content to follow she began climbing another staircase, acutely aware of the movement of the shapely backside ahead of her. Clay's body, tight and muscular, with its bold and raw seductive power as it followed its masters will in the tango. Her face became warm and flushed with the thought of where her mind had strayed. Once at the top, she was led another few feet to the end of a balcony. Placing her hands on the metal railing, she marveled at the panorama of her surroundings from atop the widow's walk. It was a starless night, a velvety blackness void of all but a white orb in contrast. A moon full in all its brilliance stood sentry over the sea bathing the surface in its heavenly light. She shivered in awe. It was then she felt a warm body press behind her.

"So beautiful." Clay leaned in and whispered softly near her ear.

The effect of Clay being so close and feeling her warm breath made Julia's heart pick up its cadence. Her body was sending signals with which she wasn't in the least familiar. It was like being cold and hot at the same time. She closed her eyes and breathed deeply to center herself. It was then she felt Clay's hands slowly rubbing the length of her arms.

"Are you cold?" Clay mouthed near Julia's ear. Her lips turned up in a little smile for she could

feel Julia's body react to the slight stimulus. No sound escaped Julia's throat although she could feel a small tremble as a result of her words. Taking her silence for acceptance, Clay placed her hands to either side of Julia's and molded her body along her length. She heard a small catch in Julia's breathing and leaned in to lightly kiss the shell of her ear.

Her head turned slightly toward Clay's mouth as she whispered, "What are you doing to me?" Her words hitched in her throat. An unmistakable desire to be touched raced through her, betraying things she held dear in her heart. Without thought her traitorous body pushed back to be closer to Clay.

"You have touched me, in a way I haven't felt in a very long time." Clay traced and interspersed light kisses around Julia's ear. Slowly she replaced her lips with her mouth and gently sucked on her earlobe.

"Ohhh..." Julia moaned and arched her back, turning her head to give Clay closer access to her mouth. What started out as light tingles flowing through her body gave way to a liquid fire, which threatened to burn her from the inside out. All she wanted was to feel Clay's lips on hers. Part of her reasoning mind tried to make sense of what was happening. She was losing control, her fantasy taking shape from out of the ether, permitting her baser instincts to cloud her thoughts. Maybe it was the champagne. It couldn't be her, could it? No, it wasn't the champagne. She'd hadn't had enough for it to affect her this way, but she felt possessed, trapped by the power of her own hunger. She was dangerously close to being lost in the heat, the need, the moment.

Clay could hear and feel the shallow panting and knew Julia was caught in their mutual desire. She moved her lips gently across Julia's jaw and gently kissed the corner of her mouth. Julia slightly turned and watched Clay's mouth as it hovered near hers. As her mouth descended, Julia closed her eyes, and then opened them in surprise when she felt a light kiss at the other

corner of her mouth. When Clay pulled back enough for her to see her eyes, she gazed not only upon desire, but a gentleness that was tender enough to make her ache for more. She hesitantly brought a hand up to rest on the side of Clay's strong face.

Clay brought their mouths together gently at first, letting her lips caress and glide over soft tender skin. Julia turned more into the kiss, so their bodies were facing each other. In one fluid motion Julia's hand slid from Clay's cheek to the back of her neck. Clay's arm went about Julia's waist as the other rested at her hip. She brought them tightly together and deepened the kiss. At the first touch of the tip of Clay's tongue on hers, Julia moaned, feeling the burn of excitement travel from her neck down to the apex of her thighs where it nestled into a deep thrumming.

Clay gave a soft moan hearing Julia's excitement rise. Her left hand slowly traveled from Julia's hip to rest at the underside of her breast. Julia rose up on her toes to thwart the invading palm. Clay could feel Julia's internal struggle; her kisses were hungry, burning, her body trembled in anticipation, but she was fighting her urges. Clay used the hand around Julia's waist to slowly massage her back to soothe her fears.

Clay reluctantly broke the kiss, but hovered just near Julia's lips and whispered, "Relax and just feel." Clay moved her left hand from Julia's side and brought it around to grasp Julia's hand at her neck. "Feel my skin, the warmth, the fire." She moved Julia's hand from around her neck to rest on top of her chest. "Feel how my heart beats at your touch." She moved Julia's hand further into her jacket to rest above her left breast. Julia could feel the strong rapid beat. In that moment she began to understand the pull of desire, the headiness of lust, and the capacity of her own needs.

Julia left her hand on Clay's chest and moved back to look in Clay's eyes. "I...I...oh God!" She

began to shake again and closed her eyes to still her emotions.

Clay leaned in and lightly kissed Julia's lips. "What is it? What do you need?" She continued to hover and softly brush her lips around Julia's mouth.

Julia didn't immediately respond as her speech was being short circuited by Clay's attentions. When she was able to form words they were low and breathless. "I don't know. I've never felt this way before."

"Nothing will happen that you don't want." Clay removed her hand from on top of Julia's and again began gently stroking her lower back. Her mouth languidly moved to Julia's earlobe and drew the tender flesh into her mouth. Julia moaned low and long with the attention. With alternating nips and kisses, Clay moved down to taste the skin of her neck. The staccato of Julia's heartbeat made her pulse pound.

Julia found herself being moved backward, until her lower back was against the balcony railing. The contrast of the hard railing at her back and Clay's body pressing her front was exhilarating. When she felt Clay's hand knead her breast over her clothes, her center twitched so hard she gasped from the reaction. Her nipple hardened painfully.

Clay moved her mouth further down Julia's neck and to the top of her jacket. She began to slowly separate the buttons while her mouth continued to trail down newly exposed skin. Julia shuddered as she felt the cold night air touch her half naked chest. Gooseflesh pimpled along her skin, but it was a relief to her overheated body. As Clay's hot mouth engulfed her rock hard, rosy nipple, she hissed and arched her back. Her hand moved from Clay's chest to the back of her head to bring her closer.

“Ohhhhhh....” The guttural sound escaped her lips when she felt the double assault on her tender, rigid flesh; Clay’s wet, hot mouth on one nipple while her skilled fingers alternated between light pinching and squeezing.

“You feel so good, so responsive to my touch.” Clay moved her mouth to the other breast, lightly swirling her tongue around the nipple before taking it in her mouth. “So lovely and intoxicating.”

It wasn’t until Julia felt the button of her trousers being opened that she began to regain her senses. With a sharp gasp she pleaded, “Wait.” Julia used the hand she had in Clay’s hair to hold her still. “I can’t do that.”

Clay stilled her hands and moved her head to look up at Julia. Her flushed face and rapid breathing didn’t disguise the level of arousal or conflict. Without redirecting her gaze from Julia’s eyes, she straightened, pulled Julia’s jacket closed and engulfed her in a warm embrace. Softly she kissed Julia’s temple. “What is wrong?”

Julia’s mind and body were at odds with each other, but she had the presence of mind to know that tomorrow she would regret going any further. She quietly spoke. “I...uhhh...I just can’t.”

Clay gave Julia a gentle smile, hoping to soothe her, realizing desire had its boundaries and she had found one of them. In the past, Clay would have found a way to gracefully extricate herself from the awkward situation and count the evening’s lack of a passionate conclusion as a rare loss but, with Julia, she truly wanted to understand why they would go no further.

Clay kissed the top of Julia’s head. “Please, tell me what is wrong.”

“Nothing.” Julia quickly answered, then sighed. Everything.” She took in a deep cleansing breath and pulled away enough to lock eyes with Clay. “I have never felt anything like this before, it’s so intense, I feel so much, so overwhelmed.” She searched Clay’s face for understand and beheld an earnest interest behind a sweet smile.

“It is, isn’t it?”

“Yes, too much, too fast.” Julia nodded in agreement and watched as Clay’s smile flagged.

“There is a part of me that wants to let go, and just enjoy the moment for what it is, but it’s not who I am, Clay.”

Clay’s gaze turned introspective. Intimacy with love, a choice she ran from years ago, no attachment, no chance of allowing her emotions to become involved. Tonya’s untimely and abrupt end taught her just how fragile and precious love could be, and how suffocating those devastating emotions had rendered her soul. Could she allow Julia to breach the comfortable state of disconnect she had relied on to keep her psyche intact?

Julia reached up her hand and softly stroked Clay’s jaw, bringing her back to the present. “What is it?”

The earnestness of Julia’s concerned gaze was Clay’s undoing, as she felt the once impenetrable damn of emotion begin to crumble; she closed her eyes, and for the first time in years, let her heart speak. “This is not meaningless to me.” She opened her eyes. “You have awakened a part of me I thought long dead.” She clutched Julia tighter and used her hand to tuck Julia’s head to the crook of her neck, fearing that if she didn’t, those emerald eyes would

see the tears that unexpectedly welled up and threatened to escape.

Julia was genuinely moved by the honesty and depth of Clay's words, and realized when she felt Clay's breathing hitch, she was using every bit of her strength to keep from crying. It was that moment, Julia knew she needed to be closer to Clay, to free them both of the chains that kept them bound and apart, she wanted to feel this powerful and equally fragile woman love her.

Clay felt Julia place a light kiss on her neck and her heart leapt in joy. With that one physical expression, she knew Julia understood and accepted the burgeoning feelings between them.

Clay pulled back slightly so she could again gaze upon Julia's beautiful face and, with a moments hesitation, leaned in and brushed their lips together. It was one of the sweetest moments she had ever felt, and brought their mouths firmly together when she felt Julia's arms settle around her neck.

They kissed for long moments, feeling the ardor build, Clay placed her hand between the folds of Julia's unbuttoned jacket to touch her heated flesh. Even with their mouths locked in a passionate exchange, Clay could hear Julia's excited moan and subtle shift to give Clay more access.

Clay's hand moved from between Julia's breasts to settle her palm across the right, feeling the pebbled nipple push into her hand. Julia abruptly broke the kiss. "Ohhh..." She eyes fluttered shut, her body weakening from the sheer intensity of the feeling of Clay's warm hand cupping her naked breast.



Their bodies moved together until Julia's lower back was again supported by the iron railing. Clay brought their mouths together in a hungry kiss, her tongue seeking another, while her fingers lightly squeezed the small breast in her hand. Julia's continual moans and slight writhing movements snared Clay in an intoxicating passion that she was unsure she'd ever sober from. Wanting to feel the wellspring of Julia's desire, Clay slowly moved her hand down to Julia's navel.

Needing to be sure Julia would accept her further attention, she gradually broke the kiss, looked down to emerald eyes as she again dropped her hand down to the button of Julia's trousers. Their eyes never left each other as Clay brought the zipper slowly down.

Julia's breathing hitched and she shuddered, almost violently, when she felt Clay's hand reach in to rest her fingers against her damp, satin clad center. No one had ever touched her there and it was as thrilling as it was frightening. Fire and tingling shocks rocked her most private area as Clay moved her fingers in long strokes around either side of her clitoris. The burn of arousal was so acute it threatened to engulf her in flames. When the touch strayed to her center, her body involuntarily jerked in Clay's arms.

Clay's mouth covered Julia's in a hungry kiss, swallowing both their moans. They continued to kiss as Clay slowly stroked the wet, burning flesh of Julia's center until she felt Julia's fingernails imbed themselves in her jacket. She realized Julia was close to falling over the precipice of an orgasm and stilled her hand.

Julia broke the kiss and looked at Clay in confusion. Her panting was so acute she couldn't form words, but her fevered look spoke volumes to her paramour. She wanted more and yet was afraid of where it would take her.

Clay leaned over Julia forcing her to arch her already straining back and spoke softly in her ear. "I want to taste you. I want you to come in my mouth." Clay removed her fingers from their warm enclave and brought both hands up to move the material of the coat aside and fill her hands with Julia's aching breasts. She moved down and took a nipple in her mouth again and lathed it with her hot tongue.

Julia's body and voice trembled as she whispered her response. "Oh please...."

Clay smiled against Julia's skin, knowing of the delights she was going to experience. Releasing the nipple, she kissed and licked her way down Julia's chest to the top of her wool trousers. Julia's balance teetered in her excitement. Clay brought her hands around to grab her bottom to keep her from falling and to knead the heart-shaped muscles. Julia groaned and brought her hands down to clasp either side of Clay's head to stabilize her wobbling legs.

Clay brought her hands to the waistband of Julia's trousers and gently pulled them down to her quivering thighs, leaving her panties in place. She slowly dropped to her knees and used Julia's backside to pull her body close. She placed her mouth at the apex of Julia's center, teasing her with her hot breath. Julia jerked when she felt Clay's finger move her wet panties to the side then kissed her soaked, throbbing flesh. Julia's eyes fluttered shut as her senses threatened to overload. She couldn't stop shaking, her synapses jittering in an electrical field of passion.

"Ohhh..." Julia groaned low and long, body writhing, when she felt Clay's fiery, wet tongue touch her clitoris for the first time. "Ohhh...God." The touch was exquisite and she didn't want it to stop until she ceased to exist. She moved one of her hands down to the back of Clay's head again, encouraging her to move in deeper to taste her soul. Clay kept teasing the engorged bud, dipping down occasionally to capture fresh desire as it trickled from Julia's body. Clay

could feel the tension again rising in Julia and knew by the violent trembling release was imminent. Julia strained to clamp her thighs together when Clay latched on to her clitoris and sucked hard, sending her over into the pinnacle of release. Clay heard a muffled scream and was jerked to and fro from Julia's spasms, threatening to buck her from her moist treasure.

As Julia's body calmed, her muscles loosened, her legs quivering with the strain of holding her weight.

Clay stood and pulled Julia's exhausted shaking body into her arms and kissed her neck. "I've got you, and I'll never let you go." She brought her head up to gaze in Julia's eyes as tears made their way down her flushed cheeks. They came together in a gentle kiss full of unspoken promises of a future yet to be written.

Reluctantly, Clay withdrew from their soft kissing to smile at Julia. She relaxed her hold and, with a mischievous grin, slowly bent down so that she was again, staring at Julia's ivory lace panties.

"My body can't take any more." Julia watched as Clay leaned in and lightly kissed her mound, which caused her body to have a slight aftershock at the light stimulus. She was about to protest again, but instead watched as Clay's hands found the top of her trousers and, as she stood up, brought them to rest at her waist.

"We can't have you catching a cold now, can we?" She zipped Julia's pants, leaned down, and captured Julia's swollen lips in a brief kiss. "Come home with me, Julia."

Julia brought her hand up to caress Clay's face. She was warmed by the affectionate gaze and

decided that, yes, with Clay was where she wanted to be. She nodded her head, leaned in, and brought their mouths together, again.

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