



Sign of Spring

Kate Lowell

A Goodreads Love Has No Boundaries Story

Love Has No Boundaries

An M/M Romance series

SIGN OF SPRING

By Kate Lowell

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love Has No Boundaries* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a free gift to you.

What Is Love Has No Boundaries?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what they do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love Has No Boundaries*.

Whether you are an avid M/M romance reader or new to the genre, you are in for a delicious treat.

Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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Photo Description

Two dark-haired young men lying in a poppy field. The longer haired one looks pensively into the camera. The other, his head pillowed on his lover's shoulder, looks at his lover. Red flower tattoos can be seen on the bicep of the second man, where his arm curls around the head of the man looking at the camera.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

I never thought I'd say this, but I'm in love. No, not schmoopy "love at first sight love", but real, honest to god, "you're my missing puzzle piece" love. Who would've thought I'd find it on my road trip across the States? I mean, he's not even really my type. I don't usually go for the tattooed, carefree, "go wherever the wind takes me" type, but he sure charmed the hell out of me in the diner where we first met. He kind of has that way with people. Hell, next thing I knew he was in my car and we were on our way.

We became fast friends, had a lot in common, and the UST between us was palpable

And the sex? Smoking hot. Especially the makeup sex when we've pissed each other off after being confined to a car for hours on end. There was that one time in the poppy field...

Sincerely,

Brittany

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: road trip, PTSD, outdoor sex, car sex, male nurse, breath play

Word count: 14,840

Dedication

To Brittany, who posted such a lovely picture I couldn't resist.
To the ladies and gents of my critique group, The House of
Manlove—dudes, you rock! And to everyone who loves to see
men in love—nice to know I'm in such good company.

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“We’re lost, Justin!”

“No, we’re not. We’re just taking the scenic route. See? Look where the sun is. We’re still heading north. Sort of.”

I crumpled the crappy map between my hands and stuffed it into the footwell, where I stomped on it for good measure. Cheap, giveaway tourist garbage.

Justin chuckled. “Well, now we’re really lost.” He guided the car around a curve with the same negligent attitude that had been so attractive yesterday, but he was going to end up with my hands around his throat today.

“I’m going to check my phone, see if we have service again. GPS will get us out of this.” I pulled my phone out, only to have Justin snatch it out of my hands and toss it carelessly over his shoulder. “Justin! This is a convertible!”

“Robin! I heard it hit the floor in the backseat,” he mocked, but gently, his smile taking the edge off the words. His hand landed on my thigh with a reassuring squeeze, and then started to creep up.

I pushed it away peevishly. “It’ll be dark before we get there, at this rate.”

“So? Relax. You’re on stress leave. Start de-stressing.”

I tried. I really did. But the vision of my phone tumbling down the road behind us wouldn’t leave me. I’d just bought that phone. I started to undo my seatbelt, until Justin shot me an “Are you really going to do that?” look. I sighed and gazed out over the countryside. Rolling hills, green grass, trees and a few horses scattered around for variety’s sake. Pretty, but not near as interesting as Justin. Propping my elbow on the car door, I watched him as he negotiated the curves of the back road he’d gotten us lost on.

Who would have thought I’d end up here from where I’d started? When the other nurses found me sobbing uncontrollably in the quiet room of the

Palliative Care Unit, I seemed to be the only one who was surprised by it all. Even the doctor they called to sedate me hadn't been surprised. It had seemed like such a good idea, moving from Oncology, where everyone had praised my connection with patients and families. I'd thought transferring to Palliative, giving my support to those facing their final moments, was a way to make even more of a difference.

It only took me fifteen months to burn out—a new record. I felt like a tree constantly poised on the border between autumn and winter, with no chance ever of spring. Sure, there were bad days in Oncology, but there were miracles too. My only miracle in Palliative was that I'd lasted as long as I did.

“What?” he snapped.

“I didn't say anything!”

“You're sitting there, staring at me with a puss on your face like you've been sucking a lemon.”

“I am not. You're subconsciously transferring your own emotions.”

He rolled his eyes and shook his finger in my direction. “There you go with that medical shit. Can't you just leave it behind? Isn't that why you're out on this road trip?”

I huffed and looked back out at the rolling green hills of wherever we were on the road to Nowhere I Wanted To Be.

With no warning, Justin hit the brakes, sending the car skewing over the pavement like a fish trying to flop back into the water. The seatbelt caught me hard across my breastbone, and I couldn't help myself, but I braced myself against the dash.

“Ow!” I yelled. It didn't really hurt. I was just pissed off, though I wasn't sure about what. Maybe just about being stuck in the car since six this morning. Maybe about not knowing if we were actually heading somewhere we could get something better to eat than potato chips and greasy burgers. Or maybe I was just pissed off. At everything. And everyone. And myself, mostly.

Yeah, that was it.

The car jolted to a stop at the side of this stupid, nowhere road.

“What the hell did you do that for?” I snarled.

Justin turned off the ignition with a vicious snap of his wrist and jumped out of the car. “I’m going for a walk.”

“Why?”

“Because I’m sick of being trapped in this damn car with someone who acts like a hungover porcupine. Go walk it off, or whatever it is that you need to do to get your head screwed back on straight.”

I watched him stalk up the road, his back straight, the edges of his tattoos peeking out around the sleeves of his T-shirt. It felt like watching my life walk away from me.

Two weeks after they’d hauled me off to recover in the medical ward, I’d pulled out my credit card, rented a huge old convertible and hit the road. I still had six weeks left in my mandatory stress leave—I was going to spend it on life, not death. So, I ate in fast-food joints and greasy spoons, had breakfast for supper and dessert for breakfast, and I decided where I was going to drive that day while I packed the car.

The other thing I did was fall in love.

Crazy, right? You don’t go out on a road trip and expect to lose your heart. Especially me. I didn’t have enough left to lose—or so I’d thought.

I was sitting in a diner, eating Belgian waffles covered in ice cream and chocolate syrup for breakfast, when he walked in. I noticed him right away, but I didn’t realize he’d noticed me as well until he slid onto the bench across the table from me.

“Celebrating something?” he asked.

I shrugged and forced my eyes back to my breakfast. “Not really. Just felt like it.”

He laughed and suddenly I couldn't breathe. My eyes flew up to stare at him, and my brain stuttered to a halt as my heart and body took over the operation. We ended up sharing my breakfast, and the next thing I knew, he'd called in sick to tour me around the area.

We spent that night together, in the room he rented in one of the cheap roadside motels that dotted the landscape. The sagging mattress kept me rolling into him all night long and I would wake, half suffocating and laughing at the same time. Not that we slept much. If we weren't screwing like a couple of mink, we were talking. He could talk about anything. We had so much fun; I didn't want to see it end.

Apparently he didn't want it to end either. The next morning, he was in my car and we were heading north across Wyoming.

That was a week into my trip. We were at five weeks now, and I couldn't imagine my life without him. Which I needed to be able to do, because I was due back to talk to the hospital administrators tomorrow and—well—my old life wasn't this one, and it certainly wouldn't suit Justin's freewheeling personality.

Automatically, my hand went to my pocket, searching for the phone and the e-mail that had been the bane of my existence for the past two days. "Damn!" I muttered, remembering Justin tossing it merrily over his shoulder. I unlocked the seat belt and squeezed myself between the seats to rummage behind them. Mostly what I found was garbage, including my half-empty water bottle from yesterday, but some determined searching finally located it underneath a McDonald's bag that still held a few cold, ketchup-covered fries. The rental company was going to charge me through the nose for the mess we were making of the car, but I didn't care. I had the phone in my hands and, like one of those bad dreams where you knew the monster was waiting but you couldn't stop walking forward, I watched my fingers tap the e-mail icon.

I took my time, reading through the e-mails that had arrived today, as if that could make the other one disappear. Friends checking on me, letting me know how patients were doing. A newsletter from the nurses' union, another one from a cancer group that I'd joined before I made the switch to Palliative.

The last one was a receipt for the flowers I'd sent to Ida's funeral yesterday. I smiled sadly. She'd known the breakdown was coming. She'd warned me, as well as she was able to, with the MS taking everything it could from her, to the point where she could barely speak. And I hadn't listened, so caught up in doing my job that I didn't see anything but the charts, the bracelets, and the labels on the meds.

A flick of my thumb scrolled the screen back four days. There it was, the e-mail from Neeraj in Human Resources—*Robin, you have an appointment to speak with Dr. Ogilvie on Monday, June 24th at nine o'clock*. That was all it said. But that short sentence seemed full of doom to me. Was I going to lose my job for unprofessional conduct? Were they going to shuffle me off into some corner to stare at paperwork all day?

I didn't want to stop being a nurse. Hence the frantic drive back cross-country—sixteen and eighteen hour days stuck in the car while I worried and fretted and Justin tolerated my moods.

Justin. I sighed and thunked my head against the headrest. I'd better go apologize.

Just as I swung my legs out of the car to go looking for him, Justin reappeared over the curve of the hill. He still took my breath away, with his cropped hair and hard, manual-labor muscles. The tail of the dragon that curled over his shoulder crawled out of his sleeve to wrap around his left bicep, glowing in the afternoon sun in luminescent greens and blues. At two in the afternoon, he had a scruff of beard that made things low in my belly shiver with excitement. Memories of him dragging those bristles over the tender skin below my navel and up to play them over my nipples brought a whimper to my lips.

"I'm sorry."

"You need to come see this!"

We spoke at the same time, and then broke off awkwardly. I stared up at him, looking at the solid lines of his face and the sensual curve of his lips. How could I be so totally head over heels for someone in this short a time? It

wasn't even that I wanted to jump him all the time, though that was certainly a factor. I hardly understood it myself—he woke up parts of me that I'd forgotten about, or that I never knew I had. He made me more myself, somehow. When I was with him, the man who lived by the clock and triple checked everything faded away.

To Justin, the glass wasn't half full. It was completely full—half water and half air—both absolutely necessary for living, he told me once.

I got out of the car and walked up to him, placing my hands flat on his chest. This close, I could see the red flowers tattooed on his right bicep. I still wasn't convinced they were poppies, though that's what he said they were.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I've been an ass all day. You deserve better than that."

"Well, if you're going to be an ass, at least it's a mighty fine one." He reached behind me and squeezed one side of my butt, pulling me a step closer so I was pressed against his chest. "Yep," he continued. "Love that ass." His lips met mine, stealing the laugh he always seemed to coax out of me.

Oh, God, I was going to miss him.

He pulled me closer and deepened the kiss. I felt his tongue skate along my lower lip before it slid inside to toy with mine. I moaned and opened my mouth wider, sliding my hands up to grip his shoulders.

Justin pulled his mouth away and slid it over to my ear. "Get in the car."

What? Oh, car sex. Yeah! "I like the way your mind works."

He laughed, deep and sexy. My breath caught as shocks of desire electrified my skin. I'd never been with someone who could do things like that to me with only his voice. He knew it too and it only seemed to make his own pleasure more real. With a final kiss, he drew me to the car, opened the door, and gently pushed me into the seat. He closed the door and walked around to the other side.

"Isn't the steering wheel going to get in the way?" I asked him as he fell into the driver's seat and pulled his door shut.

He grinned at me and started the car.

“Justin?”

But we were already bowling down the road, turning off the pavement and onto an unpaved country lane. Dust plumed up behind us, a giant billowing cloud blocking out the past as we sped into whatever adventure Justin had found while we were apart. His right hand left the wheel and insinuated itself between my thighs, his fingers playing against the swell of my cock. I spread my legs slightly to make it easier for him, and laid my head back against the headrest, closing my eyes so I could pay attention to the sensations he created.

He petted me through my jeans until I was squirming. I felt the car turn, and Justin cupped his hand over my cock as the convertible lurched over a series of bumps, the unpredictable swaying forcing me into his palm over and over again until I arched away from the seat to rub myself against him.

Justin laughed. “Naughty Birdie. You’re supposed to stay in your seat when the car’s moving.”

“You make that kind of hard.”

He stopped the car and gave me a quick squeeze before removing his hand. “It’s not kind of hard, it’s very hard. Unless you’re packing a gun.”

I opened my eyes and smiled at him. “Wanna see it go off?”

“I wanna see it, anyway.”

I undid the button of my jeans and pulled the zipper down, watching him the whole time. His lips parted and, from the look on his face, you’d think it was Christmas. I don’t know what kind of rose-colored contacts he had in, but somehow he always made me feel handsome, desirable, instead of the just-this-side-of-average I knew I was.

Wiggling out of my jeans was tough while crammed in the car, but watching him react to every twitch and roll of my hips was entertaining. And amazingly hot. By the time my jeans had taken up residence in the footwell, Justin had his own pants open and a hand inside them. It felt dirty, in an erotic way, sitting on the leather seats in an open convertible, wearing nothing but my T-shirt and watching my lover stroke himself beside me.

“Come here,” I whispered.

He pulled his hand out of his jeans and reached down between his legs to slide the seat back.

Good idea. I copied him, but instead of just sitting back up, I made a show of slowly running my hand up the inside of my thigh as I sat back. Smiling lazily at him, I moved my legs as far apart as the console and the door would let me, and trailed my fingers over my balls, stroking them softly and letting the spiral of desire build.

“Holy shit, Robin, what you do to me.” He reached across the car and cupped the back of my head, swallowing my moans as he kissed me. I abandoned my balls and reached for his, dragging at his hips until he grunted and crawled across the car to straddle my legs, knees bracketing my thighs on the seat. His jeans were in my way, so I dug my fingers in behind the waistband and pulled them down until they wouldn’t go any farther.

“Take your shirt off for me?” I begged, lifting the hem so I could press my mouth to the curve of his ribs.

He stripped it off in two seconds flat, tossing it into the back seat of the car and lacing his fingers together behind my head. “Don’t stop.”

“No,” I answered and made a noise that was half-laugh, half-moan. Not like I ever could stop, with his bare skin right there in front of me.

I couldn’t decide where to start. The flat planes of his belly called to me, but I could see his nipples standing out sharply just above my head, and his cock teased at the notch of my sternum. I could smell him, bitter salt and sweat and just a hint of sweetness. My breath shuddered out of me and I leaned forward to slide my lips and tongue down the groove in the center of his abs. I bit him, carefully, when I reached his bellybutton, and circled my tongue around it. His cock rubbed damp lines over my neck and my shoulders as I moved.

He took a long, ragged breath. “Robin,” he whispered and stroked my hair. It had grown out since I left home, and he could wrap it ’round his fingers now. Holding me close against him, Justin guided my head down until my

mouth met the head of his cock. “Suck me, darlin’. I want to feel your throat around me.”

Yessss. I whimpered as he slipped inside. At least once every time we fucked, I needed to have him in my mouth, to slide my lips down his shaft until I could lick the top of his ball-sac while my throat spasmed around him. It drove him wild and made me hotter than hell. I was getting damn good at holding my breath by this point.

He moved his hands to the headrest behind me, giving me the freedom to slip up and down his length as I pleased. I often teased him about his enlightened self-interest, but in truth, he was just that thoughtful.

A slow start wasn’t in the cards for us today, not with my mood. I wrapped my fingers around the muscles of his ass, gripping so hard I could feel the flesh bulge up between them. With the tip of my tongue, I started the process of licking every inch of him, angling my head in order to cover every part. I kept the licks small, but quick, because I was already swallowing in anticipation of driving myself down on him.

He took one of his hands away from the seat and feathered his fingers gently through my hair, dragging the tips across my scalp and down my neck until he could get a firm grip on my shoulder.

“Don’t hurt yourself.”

I pulled back. “I won’t.” He knew me so well already, knew I was capable of choking myself half-faint on his cock, for the sheer pleasure of the oxygen-deprivation buzz and the taste of him on my tongue. It was the only time we ever changed roles, where I became the wild one and he the responsible partner.

Stay with me forever.

I tightened my fingers a bit more and leaned in to bite gently on the tendon at the top of his inner thigh. Justin squirmed vainly to escape. He’s delightfully ticklish there, but he was trapped between his jeans and my thighs, which bound his legs in place more effectively than any shackle. I grinned and

continued the torment, licking along the tender skin at the top of his thigh and then sucking on his hip.

“Robin, don’t be such a shit.”

I sucked harder and left a small round hickey as a sort of *I was here* marker. “Don’t, don’t, don’t,” I chided, and smiled suggestively at him, “All you ever say is don’t.” Before he could reply, I put my mouth on his balls and sucked on them as well, though I was careful not to hurt him.

I heard his groan above me and then the rapid panting of his breath. And when I pulled away, he said, “Don’t stop.”

“Another don’t.” I kissed my way across the tops of his thighs and licked my way down to his jeans in long, steady strokes. “You’re just never happy, are you?”

“I’d be a lot happier with my cock in your mouth.”

I glanced up at him through my eyelashes and traced the side of his cock with the tip of my tongue, until I could play it around his slit and watch the tendons stand out in his neck. He was breathing like a runner after a fast quarter-mile and, whether it was the warmth of the sun or me, sweat coated his skin in a fine, shining layer. It made him look like an ancient Greek athlete, oiled and ready for the games.

With a chuckle, I opened my mouth and let him glide inside, tapping my tongue against the underside as I rocked my head forward and back. Small strokes at first, but then I tilted my head down so he scraped over my tongue and pushed myself farther down on him. Not quite to the bottom—that was still to come—but close enough that Justin started to swear in whispers and the headrest creaked under the force of his hands.

I could tell he was getting close. He felt the tiniest bit bigger in my mouth and the words tumbling from him had degenerated into some crazy form of pig-Esperanto. Time to set up for my happy ending.

A long, slow breath out emptied my lungs completely, so the rush would happen sooner. I could imagine the red blood cells, darkening from scarlet to

maroon as they gave up the last of their oxygen to the cells in my body. When the first urges to breathe hit me, I pressed myself down over Justin's cock. My lips touched the skin of his belly and I drove myself further down, even as my throat panicked and tried to force him back out. Justin groaned and the sounds he made changed to high, plaintive gasps. But I was where I wanted to be and I stretched my tongue out to rub it over the skin just under the root of his cock, where his scrotum began.

The first prickling darkness swirled at the edges of my sight as I continued to hold my breath. I fumbled one hand down to my own cock, and frantically stroked it. Bright pinwheels sparkled across the center of my vision, which was getting narrower with each passing second. I worked my hand faster and faster as my head began to spin. Justin twitched and I felt him spill down my throat, just as I reached my limit. I threw myself back against the seat, sucked in a huge lungful of air and came so hard I thought my balls had come out too.

Justin's hands found my head, tangled themselves in my hair and pulled me up to rest against his stomach. I let him hold me there while I gasped for breath and waited for my head to stop spinning.

"Fuck, Robin." Justin turned my face up so I could see his eyes. "You scare the shit out of me sometimes."

I laughed and kissed his belly, just under his sternal notch, where the curve of his ribs draped across his torso like Broadway curtains. "Only with you, Jus." I looked back up at him. "I know I can trust you."

"You crazy, blue-eyed—how much porn do you watch, anyway?"

"What?" *Where did that come from?*

"*That* is a move straight out of a porn movie. You know that, right?"

I laughed and rubbed my nose in embarrassment. "Oh. No, actually, I learned that at work."

"Bullshit. No way you learned that in nursing school."

"No, seriously. Part of the degree is you go out and work in different departments to get practical experience with someone who keeps an eye on

you. One of my placements was in the Emergency Department. And one night, the EMTs brought in this guy and they were all rolling their eyes and joking. I guess he had a habit of doing it, but he used a belt around his neck and sometimes it got stuck.”

Justin interrupted me, his fingers tight in my hair. “Don’t you ever do that. Never, ever, Robin. Promise me.” He looked truly frightened, which frightened me in turn.

“I wouldn’t... Jus, really. I never even thought about doing something like that before. Not until you.”

“So sleeping with me makes you want to risk your life?”

Oh, okay. I patted his not quite soft cock. “This would never hurt me. And you like it, right?”

“I do, but if you’re getting into that choking stuff...”

“Justin, the thought of putting a belt around my neck scares the hell out of me. But sucking you into my throat and holding you there long enough to make you lose your mind? Yeah, that’s addictive. If it wasn’t your cock, I wouldn’t want to do it.”

He cupped the sides of my face firmly, so I couldn’t look away from him. “Promise me, Robin. If I’d known that was where you were coming from, I’d never have let you do it. I thought you were just being—I don’t know, generous. Or greedy.”

I snorted with laughter. “Mm, yeah. Well, if you want to think of it that way, I won’t object. It felt pretty selfish to me.” I looked down at my legs and my hand, covered in come. The bottom of my T-shirt, too, hadn’t escaped the wrath of the one-eyed monster. I giggled at the thought and started cleaning my hand with the bottom of my T-shirt. After all, it was already dirty, right?

“What’s so funny?” Justin asked, but he was smiling as he did it.

I shook my head. “Nothing.” That seemed sort of dismissive, so I added, “Just happy.”

Justin smiled back at me. “Me too. But I’m also getting a charley horse.” He shoved open the car door and we began the awkward process of getting his jeans pulled up far enough that he could maneuver his legs past mine and climb out of the car.

He tripped getting out and fell laughing onto the grass. I stripped off my shirt and threw it in the back seat before I tumbled out of the car myself and leapt on top of him.

“Hi,” he murmured, a contented smile on his lips.

I grinned and kissed the end of his nose. “Thanks for letting me apologize to you properly.”

The smile broadened. “We should fight more often.”

I frowned at him. “I’d rather not, thanks anyway.”

He chuckled and let his head fall back onto the rough grass beneath him. Here, in the shelter of the trees, the sun could still reach us, but only the faintest of breezes moved the blades of grass. I laid my head on his chest and let my eyes close, soaking up the heat.

The breeze picked up and whispered cool across my skin. I shivered.

Justin lifted his head. “There’s a spot past the trees where it’s a bit more sheltered. Why don’t we move in there?”

I was about to say, “I’m comfortable here,” when that darn breeze came back and snuck up between my thighs to tickle my balls. I changed it to, “Yeah, let’s do that.”

“I’ll get the blanket out of the trunk. Wouldn’t want to mark up your pretty skin.”

I flopped ungracefully off Justin’s chest and watched as he kicked off his jeans and strolled over to the rear of the car. It was an impressive sight, even for someone used to bodies in various states of undress. I rolled onto my side and propped my head on my hand. Justin worked a lot of jobs that kept him moving and it showed in the lean bulk of his body. With every step, a hollow appeared and disappeared in the sides of his thighs, as the muscles bunched

and glided under the skin. He leaned over the passenger door to hit the button for the trunk, giving me an unimpeded view of the back of his balls and the dark hair that covered them.

I couldn't help the contented stretch of my lips as I watched. *Yum*. And even more eye candy as he moved to the back of the car and lifted the trunk lid. The muscles in his arms and chest flexed, the red flowers tattooed around his right bicep blazing in the sunshine.

"What's the smile for?" He closed the trunk and walked back to me.

I grinned at him as he dropped onto the grass. "Just admiring your vastus lateralis and your biceps femoris. Not to mention your gluteus maximus."

He bit me gently, just above my nipple. "Ooh, I love it when you talk dirty medical talk. What else would you like to admire?"

"Hmm." I sat up and pushed him onto his back so I could straddle him. My own set of gluteus maximi fit perfectly within the curve of his pelvis. The root of his cock nestled against my crack and my pelvic muscles twitched in hopeful anticipation.

I drew my finger down his cheek and across his lower lip. "There's the zygomaticus major, for your wonderful smile." Thinking hard—years had passed since my anatomy class—I traced the side of his neck. "You have a lovely trapezius. Perfect for sinking my teeth into." With a small snort of laughter, I did just that, dragging my teeth over the bulge of muscle just above his collarbone.

"All the better to eat you with?" He laughed as he said the words.

"There has been a bit of riding going on in the last month." I licked across the front of his shoulder and down his arm to the crook of his elbow. The veins showed blue under the thin skin, and I played my tongue across the tender hollow, tracing them up and down his arm.

"Which muscle are you admiring now?"

"Mm, anterior deltoid and biceps brachii."

“What are they for?” His voice sounded strained now, as if he was distracted, or trying to be distracted.

I grinned against the hollow under his collarbone. “Holding me tightly.” When I said that, he raised his arms and pulled me fully against him. One of his hands cupped the back of my head and then I was being kissed like I’d never been kissed before, even by Justin. I could breathe, but only barely and my head spun with it. He nipped at my lips and my tongue, using his mouth to direct me wherever he wanted. I wasn’t hard yet—it was too soon for that—but I *wanted*.

He rolled us over so I was underneath him and braced his arms above my head. The sun shone through his hair like a halo and cast shadows where his muscles stood out above me. I spread my thighs wider in invitation and lifted my mouth to beg for more of his kisses. He obliged, sealing his mouth over mine and I let him take me.

I moaned when he left my mouth to bury his face in the side of my neck. He let out a long breath, flexed his hips momentarily against me and lifted his head.

“You’re like human Viagra, you know that?” He crawled farther down my body to tease at my chest. I gasped and ripped out handfuls of grass, before giving up and clasping my hands behind his head. His cock, hard once more, pushed against the inside of my thigh.

At almost five years younger than me, he often beat me to the punch when it came to recovering. Not that I minded. The feel of him inside was more than enough to get me off, even if I couldn’t manage another erection quite as quickly as he did. So, I squirmed beneath him to encourage some more action on his part.

He chuckled and the vibration against my stiff nipples wrenched a whimper from my throat. “Oh, I like that.” He licked around the areola and then blew on it, laughing as my hips jerked and my cock finally filled in response to his teasing.

That fickle breeze came up again and Justin winced. “Yikes. That’s cold.”

I grinned and wiggled against him. "I'm comfortable."

He laughed and let his weight rest on me. "Yes, you *are* a comfortable spot to relax, but my balls are talking about crawling up inside me to visit my bellybutton. Let's go someplace the wind can't find us."

I was disappointed that we weren't going to go another round, but I didn't want him to freeze, so I nodded and waited for him to let me up. Justin kissed the center of my chest and then, just before he stood up, he blew a raspberry against the side of my waist.

"Justin!" I swatted at him, laughing, but he was ready for me and I missed.

He jumped up. "Get up then, Birdie, and I'll show you what spring is all about."

I rolled to my feet and headed for the car.

"Where are you going?" I heard him say behind me.

"Get some clothes out of the trunk. We made a mess of the ones I was wearing." I turned to see him halfway to the edge of the copse of trees.

"Don't bother."

"We're going to walk around in the buff?"

"You won't need them."

My knees almost buckled. I reached out and steadied myself on the car door. He says these things to me and I can't think any more. All I can do is react and he knows it.

Justin walked back to me, blanket and lube in hand. "You're beautiful when you do that."

"Do what?" I mumbled.

"Look at me like you've never seen anything you wanted more."

That's because it's true. I plastered myself against him, careless of the whisker burn I knew I was getting as I sucked on his lips and traced his mouth

with my tongue. He shoved me against the car door, one hand hooked under my thigh as I tried to climb his body and wrap myself around him.

“Shit, I didn’t plan to do this here,” he gasped in my ear.

“Fuck me, Justin,” I moaned and rubbed my cock over his. “Fuck me now, I don’t care where.”

With a growl, he picked me up and walked the few steps to the front of the car. He laid me down on the hood, the blanket half underneath me, and my legs still locked around his hips. He picked me up again, a harsh, almost violent movement that made me cry out and run my hands frantically over his back. I wanted him so badly.

When he put me down this time, it was much gentler, and the blanket was spread over the car to protect my skin. I tried to sit up, to run my hands over the planes of his chest and abs, but he pushed me back.

“Let me look at you.”

I did as he asked. How could I not, with those eyes caressing me like phantom hands? I swear, I could feel them, running the length of my body, like butterfly feet on my skin. The sun shone on him, highlighting the strong bones and the lean, well-worked muscles. I curled my toes and clenched my ass to control my impatience, but it didn’t help. “Justin,” I begged, reaching up for him.

He reached for the lube, never taking his eyes off me. I heard the cap click, and then his hand was between my legs, his fingers pushing inside me. I squeezed, wishing his fingers were his cock, and did my best to ride them. Justin laughed and added another. I saw the bottle fly off to the side and then he shifted in front of me, his knee up on the hood of the car, capturing one of my legs in the hollow between his thigh and his waist. He leaned across my body and used his free hand to push my other leg away to open me up completely to him. I was helpless, immobilized in the hot sun while Justin played with me and made me beg.

“Justin, no more, please!” He buried his fingers inside me, pressing deep while his thumb massaged my taint. I pushed at his knee without any real

desire to escape. It was a pro forma protest; I didn't have any real desire for him to stop, but it felt like the thing to do. Of course, Justin was well aware of that.

"I'll stop when I think you've really had enough, Birdie." He added a third finger and spread my legs a little farther apart.

I let my head fall back against the hood of the car and concentrated on just riding the waves of pleasure he coaxed out of my prostate. He had me pinned down so tight, I couldn't move anything except my arms, so I crossed them over my face and moaned.

Justin laughed, deep and sexy, and I was free.

"Jus?" I lifted my arms away from my face, as he seized my hips and pulled, positioning me at the edge of the hood. He grabbed my ankles and wrapped my legs around his waist. As I watched, he reached down toward the front of the car, coming back with a condom.

"I don't remember ordering an in-car condom dispenser," I remarked.

He grinned at me. "I stuck it in the grill so it wouldn't get lost." He tore the package open and rolled it on with eager speed. "Sing for me, Birdie. Spring's coming." With his hands clasping the curve of my hips, he set the head of his cock against me and pushed inside.

I gasped and locked my ankles behind his back. Those first moments were always the most intense for me, the feeling of giving myself up to him, of letting go of my need to control everything. As he pushed steadily in, I concentrated on that, submerging myself in the warmth of the sun, the feel of his hands on my hips and the heat of Justin as he filled the empty spots inside me. I watched his face as he eased inside me. He'd closed his eyes and, when I could finally feel the weight of his balls against me, his lips parted on a long sigh.

"Damn, you feel better every time, Robin." He shifted his hips and my entire existence narrowed down to that point of connection between our two bodies.

“Fuck me, Jus,” I begged in a low voice. I cupped his face in my hands and curled up to kiss him. “Make me yell. I know you can do it.”

“Ah, a challenge,” he whispered against my lips. “Well, sir, I accept.”

Justin began his attack with a long slow glide out and in, delicious friction that made my breath hitch before I bit my lip and let my head fall back against the car. I moved my hands down to rest on his shoulders, enjoying the flex and shift of the muscles as he levered his lower body back and forth. He sped up gradually, rocking his hips as he penetrated me so my sense of him changed with each second. And always, always, as he pulled back, he dragged the head of his cock across my prostate. I think he liked the way it made me whimper and took my words from me, so that I became nothing more than a mindless creature, pawing at him in frenzied greed.

Justin grasped my shoulders, plunging forward with even greater speed. A high, rhythmic whine began in my throat, timed to the beat of his thrusts. The muscles in my legs tensed and my hips left the surface of the car as I arched into the pleasure, lights flashing behind my eyes to outstrip even the sun’s glow. I hung there, poised in that moment of uncertainty for a period of time that felt infinite, and then I came, all my tension and fears rushing out of me in a surge of bliss and a roar of satisfaction. My hips and legs jerked, fighting for control over Justin as he chased his own rapture inside me.

I only had moments to enjoy watching him without the distraction of my own need when he tensed, opened his mouth on a choked yell and crushed himself against me. Once, twice, maybe a third time—I’m not sure. I was so lost in watching him, in knowing that I had made him look like that, cry out in that manner, that even my own body ceased to matter.

Justin panted for a minute, long heavy expulsions of air, and then moved his hands from my shoulders to the hood of the car. He collapsed then, like a balloon with a slow leak, a gradual descent toward me until he could tuck his head under my chin. I stroked a quiet path up his sides and feathered my hands over his back, for the pure joy of touching him in this state. He was beautiful, sweaty and exhausted, the wild stallion brought to his knees by ecstasy.

I'm not sure how long we stayed there. Long enough that he went mostly soft inside me. Long enough that the alternating warm and cool of his breath against my nipple was starting to reawaken my own interest. I tried to think about other things but, really, all I wanted was to feel his weight on me, the sun shining warm upon us.

Justin shifted above me. "Am I too heavy for you?"

I smiled, though he couldn't see it. "No. I like the way you feel."

"Oh, good. I like it here, too." His voice was gravelly, like he was well on his way to going to sleep. The muscles in his arms flexed as he settled himself more comfortably against me.

I traced one of the flowers on the curve of his bicep. "You know, I still think these are poinsettias."

He snorted, but didn't open his eyes. "Tell you what. Pick one, and that can be your poinsettia. Robin's poinsettia. I'll have your name tattooed around it."

I laughed.

He lifted his head and opened his eyes. "I think I need to lie down."

I glanced down at our bodies, still joined, and his chest, brushing against mine. "I think you are."

He laughed and bit me. "I mean, properly lying down. I still haven't shown you what I brought you here to see." He slid out of me, and I sighed in disappointment. I wasn't entirely ready to be two separate entities yet.

"Come on." He clasped my hands with his and dragged me, protesting the whole time, into a sitting position. "You'll love this, I promise."

I slithered awkwardly off the hood of the car. He caught me when I wobbled, my legs not quite ready to support my weight, or even to come back together again. We were both sticky with my come, so I staggered away to grab my T-shirt out of the back seat of the car. Justin laughed behind me.

“What’s so funny?” I asked him, as I dug out my half-empty water bottle and used it to wet the cloth. Justin walked up beside me while I dabbed at the streaks and smears that covered my chest and belly.

“You walk like you’ve been riding a horse all day.”

I glanced down at his cock and grinned. “Or someone who’s hung like one, anyway.”

He stole the T-shirt from me and laughed as he cleaned himself up. “Not really, but thanks anyway.” He wiped himself down and threw the shirt back into the car. “Grab the camera, will ya?”

“Sure.” I leaned over the door and popped the glove compartment. Justin’s camera was expensive; not professional photographer expensive, but it was quality. And he knew how to use it.

I was about to hand it to him, when I had a thought. “You’re not planning to take *my* picture, are you?” I normally didn’t mind—and we had some spectacular ones on there—but today I wasn’t in the mood.

“Trust me, Birdie.” He grinned, took the camera from me and then captured my hand to lead me around a small clump of trees. A modest house crouched in the tall grass, wildflowers waving gently around its walls.

“Justin...”

He chuckled and pulled me forward. “No one’s here. Trust me.”

I looked at the windows, dark and staring like the eyes of a coma patient. The thought made me shudder, and I curled myself into Justin for comfort.

“You okay?” He stroked my hair, ran a gentle hand down the length of my back.

I nodded into the curve of his neck. “Just a bad thought.”

He hugged me tighter. “No thinking, Robin. Not today. Just be.”

“I’m trying.”

“I know.” He kissed me. “You’re so strong. Let someone else carry the world for a while.”

We stayed like that for several minutes, until I could shut the image of those eyes away. Justin's arms were a safe haven, a shelter I counted on. *What am I thinking, taking him home with me? When he sees what I'm really like, how long will he stay? Or will he choose to stay, and lose himself in the process?*

Neither option was one I wanted to consider.

His lips brushed against my ear. "You ready to see your surprise?"

I looked up at the house again and, this time, the windows were just windows. *He makes me so brave.*

"You're sure there's no one still living here?"

He grinned and wrapped his arm around my waist, the bare skin of his hip warm against mine. "I peeked in the windows. Unless they're sleeping on the floor, there's no one here."

"Oh."

"Follow me." He led me around the side of the house, to a garden that hadn't seen a human touch in a couple of years, I guessed. A few ragged flowers still clung to the lilac bushes that edged the space, while the sweet scent of apple blossoms filled the air. Wildflowers romped underneath the branches, brilliant patches of colour dabbed here and there, like a drunken painter had passed by on his way to a bacchanal.

"Wow," I said. Not very original, but I was blown away by the feral loveliness of it.

He pressed his chest to my back, and spread the hand not holding the camera across my stomach. "I thought you'd like it. As soon as I saw it, I wanted to take your picture here. Youth, surrounded by wild beauty."

"You're nuts, you know that?"

He laughed and kissed the side of my neck. "Go climb that apple tree."

I looked down at my current state of undress. "Not a chance."

"It'll be fine. Look, the branches are low on this one."

He shoved me gently toward the tree and, with the help of his shoulder under my butt and a few off-color remarks, I made it up to the branch he wanted. “Now what?” I asked.

“Just sit there and peek down at me, like a wood sprite or something.”

I did my best to follow his instructions, peering down at him between the flowers, reaching out toward clumps of blossoms or lying along a branch. Once he was satisfied, I climbed gingerly down and he dragged me around the yard to smell flowers and kneel beside statuary.

A patch of poppies spreading out into the neighboring field caught his eye. “Come over here, the color will be perfect for you.” He stood me with my back to the open field and the late afternoon sun shining toward me. “Just stand there and hold these.” He plucked a couple of poppies and gave them to me, cupping my hands around the stems. “Put your hands like this and hold them in front of your chest.” He stepped back a few paces and put the camera up to his eye. “Yeah, like that. Hold that.” The camera clicked and he stepped back again, tipping it on its side to take a few more pictures. “Damn, you’re stunning.”

“Oh, bullshit, Justin.”

He pulled the camera away from his face and stared at me. “What is your problem today?”

I shrugged and tossed the flowers away. “I don’t know.” I flopped down on the grass, the crimson petals of the poppies swaying above me. One in particular seemed to be nodding derisively at me, so I grabbed it and ripped it violently off its roots.

He stretched himself out beside me and dropped the camera gently on the grass before he propped his chin in his hands and fixed me with his gaze. “You lying to me, or to yourself?”

Goddammit! I stared up at the clouds. He was too damn sharp for my own good. The minutes stretched out and I blessed his infinite patience with me, while I tried to order my thoughts and work up the courage to confess my worries to him.

In the end, I decided I'd better just tell him the truth. After all, he'd figure it out sooner or later. Better he left me now, before he became as much a part of me as my arm or my leg. To be honest, I was pretty sure he was already, but I might still survive the amputation if it happened soon.

I rolled up on my side, but I couldn't bring myself to look directly at him. Instead, I wound some of the long blades of grass around my forefinger, tugging with ever-increasing force until the stems broke off, and then did it again.

After the third time I did this, Justin put his hand over mine, ending my unnecessary torture of the local flora. I glanced up at him and knew I couldn't put this off any more.

"You know, this has been an incredible four weeks." I fixed my eyes on my fingers, where they combed through the broken stems in front of me.

Justin laughed and tilted his head to one side. "You sound like you're breaking up with me."

The corners of my mouth turned down and I focused even harder on the grass in front of me.

"Robin?"

I started pulling out the plants by the roots, creating a neat circle of bare earth between us.

He tipped my chin up and forced me to look at him. "You're thinking again. I thought you were going to stop doing that."

He sounded worried. I felt like an asshole. But like ripping off a Band-Aid, it had to be done and was something that was better done quickly.

"I mean, we had a lot of fun, right?" I was doing this all wrong, I could see it on his face, but the words pouring out of my mouth had a mind and an agenda of their own. "It's just that, my life at home—it's different. There's no adventures, I go to work every day—assuming I even have a job now—I come home, I do housework, watch TV and go to bed. It's not like—" His hand over my mouth stopped the torrent of words.

“Silly Birdie. Adventures are where you find them. Yes, I like to wander. I like to stay still sometimes, too. Depends on the company.”

I flopped onto my back again. “You say that now.”

He crawled closer to me. “I’ve said it before, too. This is how I am. I like you. I know that there’s an uptight control freak in there. He’s fun to pick on.”

I squinted up at him. “Is that why you squeeze the toothpaste in the middle?”

His grin was answer enough.

“You bastard,” I said, but then I had to laugh. “All right, I’ll stop trying to guess what’s going on in your head.”

“Finally!” He kissed me, slow and easy. When the kiss ended, though, it was his turn to look uncertain. “Are you sure you’re not going to get tired of me?”

My mind boggled. The idea of ever getting tired of Justin was so far outside my thoughts I simply couldn’t comprehend it. “Why would you ask that?”

He shrugged and laid his head on my shoulder. “You’re this high-powered, successful nurse. You have all these plans. I mean, you’ve got money saved, for crying out loud. Me, I live from day to day. If I don’t have money, I do without. If I do, I spend it. That’s not going to drive you crazy?”

I thought about that. We’d been living pretty much off my sick-leave benefits. I’d never thought about it before, just assumed that Justin’s lack of money was because he was travelling with me. “Have you ever had any money to save?”

He opened his mouth to reply and froze. A strange expression crossed his face. “I dunno. Maybe. A little.”

“So you’ve never really had a chance to save any money?”

“Never really thought about it. And moving around all the time, stuff kinda gets used up.”

I could see that. I had a good job—maybe, still—no debts, and not an expensive life, except for the apartment. “Could you stand being tied to one place? Because I can’t roam all over with my job. Assuming I still have one.”

“I never found anyplace I wanted to be tied down to. Not until now.”

My heart froze. Which of the small and large towns we’d wandered through had caught his fancy? I forced myself to ask, “Where is that?” and held my breath for the response.

He lifted his head and smiled at me before pressing a kiss right over my heart. “Right here, Birdie.”

I closed my eyes as some huge emotion welled up in my chest. I didn’t know if it was relief, or terror or pure joy. All I knew was that it was so overwhelming; my only choice was to try to ride the wave and not go under.

“Birdie?” Justin’s voice was worried.

I opened my eyes. How did I tell him what I was thinking without making a complete idiot of myself? “You’re serious about that?”

“Of course!” He looked surprised. “Have I ever lied to you in any way?”

No, he never had. He was the most open book I’d ever met. “Oh.”

“So you’ll keep me?” he asked.

“Try and escape,” I told him and pulled him into a fierce, possessive kiss. He laughed against my lips and kissed me back. I let the weight of his mouth force my head back against the ground and let myself drown in the pleasure of his lips and tongue.

I’m not sure how long he kissed me. It was erotic as hell—his tongue sliding past mine, his lips brushing across my cheeks and my eyelids before returning to take possession of my mouth. He’d stop occasionally to run his whiskers up my neck, making me squirm and cry out, before he came back to my mouth to nibble and suck until I was completely helpless underneath him.

When his hand landed on my cock, I was in such a state all I could do was moan and twitch. My heels dug into the ground as he pressed his palm along

my length. He slid it slowly up and down, running his fingertips over my balls with each down stroke. On every third or fourth trip, he'd cup them, or gently scratch his nails over my taint. I grabbed his wrist and tried to keep his hand where I wanted it, but all it did was lose me his mouth as he pulled back to grin fiendishly at me.

“Behave, Birdie.”

And then, *damn*, he pulled my arms up above my head and pinned them there, before returning to the maddening tease of his mouth and hand.

I tugged against his grip—not hard, but enough to be able to say I had.

He grinned against my mouth and pressed my cock a little harder against my belly. I moaned and rocked my hips for him. He rewarded me by turning to bite gently down on my right nipple. The pressure of his teeth on me, as he teased the tip with his tongue, forced a strangled gasp out of my mouth. In desperation, I shut my eyes and focused on not drowning beneath the agonizing pleasure.

It didn't work.

Justin straddled my hips and pressed his cock to mine, stroking them both in a rhythm that matched the frantic beat of my heart. My third climax of the day was approaching, but slower this time, something I didn't know if I should be grateful for or not. On one hand, it felt so damn good. On the other, I was seriously starting to worry about my brainstem stroking out and leaving me a vegetable.

Oh, fuck. Justin squeezed tighter and began rocking his hips, his cock sliding up as his hand slid down. My heart started making plans to leap out of my chest. I pulled harder against his grip on my wrists and writhed beneath him as the torment ramped up another level.

He uttered a low groan, and I felt the sudden heat on my stomach and chest, smelled the bitter musk as he came. I could have groaned myself, in frustration, but with a squeeze and a twist of his fingers over the head of my cock, he brought me along with him. I arched as well as I could, lifting him off the ground as my legs tensed and my back curled in an almost tetanic seizure.

Over the roaring in my ears, I heard Justin saying, “That’s it, Robin. Damn, that’s beautiful.” And in that moment, I felt beautiful, because Justin thought I was.

Justin settled by my side, his legs tangled in mine and his head propped on one hand. “I love the way you look when you can’t hold back any more.” He kissed me, like a fall of petals, delicate and lovely against my lips. “It’s like something you keep just for me. Makes me feel... I don’t know... special.”

I licked my lips and cleared my throat. “You are special. I’ve never felt like this with anyone before.”

“That makes two of us, then.” He chuckled and trailed his fingers over my chest, where the flush was gradually receding. “Robin Red Breast,” he teased. He licked one nipple, before turning away, nimble fingers hunting amongst the poppy leaves for other, larger leaved plants to clean away the evidence of our pleasure. I trailed my fingers over the graceful curve of his hip and waist, fingertips gliding over the sweat-dewed skin as the muscles slid beneath it.

“I want this to work, Jus,” I blurted, surprising myself.

He turned back to me with a handful of leaves and a smile. “It will.” He began scraping our combined fluids off my belly and chest, tossing the soiled leaves to one side as he worked. When the leaves had done as much as they could do, I grabbed the corner of the blanket that we’d completely ignored and gave myself a last wipe down.

Justin kissed me as I finished. “Feeling more relaxed now?” His grin outshone the sun.

I smiled back at him. “Yes. Thank you for this afternoon. It was wonderful.”

“Many more to come.” He winked lecherously at me and I burst out laughing.

“You have such a dirty mind!”

He pinched me softly on one hip and slid his hand over my stomach to circle around my bellybutton. “So much to work with here, Birdie. It’s a wonder I let you out of bed at all.”

Oh, bloody hell. Maybe it’ll be worth losing my job, if it means I get to keep him. He won’t worry if we have no money. I pulled him down to lie beside me on the grass and rubbed my cheek against the point of his shoulder. “Maybe it’ll be okay, tomorrow. Something good will happen.” But who was I trying to convince?

Justin sat up. “I want a picture of us like this. In our poppy field.” He reached for the camera by our feet and then lay down with his head on my chest, body stretching away from me. His arm curled around my head, his fingers playing in the loose curls behind my ear. “Look at the camera, Robin.”

“I’d rather look at you,” I said. He laughed and gave me an upside down kiss. “Look at the camera,” he said again, his voice beguiling.

“All right.” And maybe I did want a picture, a physical reminder of this magical afternoon, with Justin chasing down every one of my fears and squashing them underfoot like so many cockroaches. If only real life worked like that. So I looked at the camera, to please him, but I couldn’t summon up a smile. He turned his head and gazed at me from under his eyelashes while the shutter clicked.

“Smile for me.”

“I don’t know if I can.”

He sat up. “Why?” Serious for once, he put a hand in the middle of my chest. “I know you’re bothered about this meeting, but I don’t get why you think it’s like doomsday coming to get you. He probably just needs you to fill out some forms so you can start back.”

I shook my head. “You don’t meet with the head of your department to fill out HR forms.” I didn’t mention that I had a new worry now—I wasn’t sure if I even wanted to go back to work. That total loss of control still loomed large in the back of my mind. What if I went back and it happened again?

“Maybe he wants to see what you’d like to do? It’s not all doom and gloom.” He rubbed his hand over my heart and slid it up to cup the back of my neck. “And even if it is, we’ll find something for you. Nothing is ever all bad.”

He made me smile, despite my determination not to. “You are such an optimist.” And maybe I was being Chicken Little.

“Hey, the glass is always full. It just depends on what you think is filling it. Don’t be sad, Robin. Spring’s coming.”

Dr. Ogilvie walked right up to me and held out his hand. “Robin, how are you feeling now?”

I gripped his hand, hoping he didn’t notice how shaky I was. “Better. Ready to get back to work.” I hoped. The thought of going back, even into Oncology, made my stomach sick with nerves.

“Good,” he said, ushering me into his office. He showed me to a chair and took his seat behind the wide rosewood desk. “Admin and I talked, and they’ve agreed to let me handle this. I’ve been thinking about where to place you when you came back, but I’d like to get your thoughts on the matter, as well. I don’t think Palliative would be a good choice. You were very good at it, but you’re simply not the type to let your patients go.” He smiled sympathetically at me.

I took a breath to calm myself. “No, I don’t think I’m cut out for Palliative.”

He opened a file that had been sitting on the desk in front of him. “The problem here, Robin, is that, in the current economic climate, there really aren’t that many openings that suit your qualifications.” I watched his eyes scan down the page. “You have no surgical training, no post-grad courses in psychiatric care. We need a few floaters, if you’d be interested in that?”

I swallowed hard and flattened my hands against my thighs. “I don’t think I can really be picky, after...” My voice trailed off.

“Robin, I don’t want to lose you as a nurse. I’ve already had a few private clinics sniffing around when they heard you might be available.”

“What?”

“You don’t know your reputation, do you? You could walk out that door and have a job in any of half a dozen Oncology clinics today. And I’d certainly give you a good reference. But I’d like to keep you—we have two retirements coming up in the Oncology department within the next year. I want you back.”

“But... in Palliative...”

“Palliative needs a different skill set than the one you have. You’re precise, you’re well-informed, and you keep the whole patient in mind the entire time you’re with them, not just their illness. The mind-body connection can’t be ignored, especially in cancer treatment. Your patients *feel* that connection to you and it makes them fight harder, live longer.” He looked down at the folder in front of him. “I should never have approved your transfer to Palliative, so I have to take some of the blame for that.” He sighed and looked directly at me. “I can understand if you wanted to move to a private clinic. Better pay, more regular hours. I don’t have anything to offer you, really, except the floater or a short term position covering for a sick leave in maternity. Unless...”

I sat forward on my chair. “Yes?”

He closed the folder and leaned back in the chair. “I have a friend who’s setting up a charity hospital in Africa. He’s looking for an experienced nurse to help him get it established and to help him train the native staff. Thing is, he wants them for at least eight months and would prefer a year or more if he could get it.”

“Africa?”

“Chad, to be specific. You’ve got experience in Pediatrics, which is what he needs. The vast majority of what you’ll be dealing with is malnutrition and emergency medical care for teens and younger children.”

“I don’t have any administrative experience, except in the Cancer Center.”

“Are you telling me you can’t learn that?”

“No. No, I can learn it. But, wouldn’t he want someone who already knows how to run a hospital?”

“No, he wants someone who knows how to be a nurse. And you’ve got the administrative basics; this will be just somewhat bigger, and maybe a little bit stranger. It won’t be like here, that’s for sure.”

It wouldn’t be like here. Which was a selling point. But Chad. And what about Justin? “Can I think about it for a day or two?”

“Of course. You still have a few days left. I’m meeting Damien for supper tonight—why don’t you come along? You can ask all your questions then.”

What do you say when your head is whirling like an out of control merry-go-round? “I—okay, that sounds good. Where are you meeting?”

“At the Cattleman. Nothing like a good steak and a cold beer.”

I laughed and stood up, my head spinning with relief and joy and terror. It seemed to have become a habit with me lately.

Dr. Ogilvie stood up, too. “I’ll see you tonight at seven, then.” He walked me to the door.

As we left the office, Justin stood up from one of the doctor’s reception chairs. His anxious look reminded me of how much I loved him, as much as the bouquet of poppies he held in his hand told me that he felt the same way. He glanced between me and Dr. Ogilvie.

I stepped forward and put a hand on his arm. “Justin, this is Dr. Ogilvie, the Chief Oncologist.” I turned back to the doctor and realized that I didn’t really know how to introduce Justin. Was he my boyfriend? A friend? Some guy I was banging?

As usual, Justin stepped in to save me. “Hi, I’m Robin’s boyfriend, Justin Blue.” He shook the doctor’s hand and then handed me the flowers. “I saw these at a place down the street and thought you’d like them.” The twinkle in his eye said he knew exactly what I was thinking. My mouth twitched, and I held the flowers in front of my chest.

“Robin, why don’t you bring Justin along tonight? I’m sure he’ll have questions.”

Justin raised his eyebrows at me.

I cleared my throat and shuffled my feet. “Dr. Ogilvie knows someone who’s setting up a hospital in Chad and he needs a nurse. We’re invited to supper to meet him tonight.”

Justin’s eyes grew wide and, for a moment, I panicked, thinking he was going to call the whole thing off. Instead, he broke out into a huge grin. “Africa? That would be amazing!”

I gaped at him. “You know where Chad is?”

He laughed. “Northern Africa, right? Think of the pictures I could take.” His expression didn’t change in the slightest, so why was I suddenly dragged back to yesterday in the flower garden? My breath caught at the idea of Justin and his camera, and me with no clothing. And then Justin with no clothing and what we could get up to on the African savannah. I conveniently ignored the possibility of lions. Did Chad even have lions?

Wrenching my thoughts back to the here and now, I gripped his arm with a bit more urgency. “You’d want to go?”

He grinned and then sobered. “Maybe we should talk about this at the apartment.” He glanced up at Dr. Ogilvie. “This is a big change for Robin. We’ll need some time.”

I glanced at the doctor, worried that he might be offended by Justin’s straightforward approach. He only smiled and nodded encouragingly at him. “Come to dinner tonight with your questions. I’ll make sure Damien’s primed with answers when you get there.”

We laughed and said our good-byes and then Justin ushered me out of the office, his hand warm on my hip as we walked silently along the hallway. I was grateful for it; I needed time to think, to process all this. If I let this move forward, my life would be upended completely. But hadn’t I been wishing for that, if only for a bit, just yesterday?

Outside the hospital, clouds scudded across the sky. I watched the patches of sun and shadows chase each other across the neatly manicured lawn and the formal flowerbeds that welcomed patients and visitors to the Cancer Center.

Justin dug in his pocket, coming up with a small paper bag. He reached inside and pulled out a cookie.

“Here,” he said, breaking off a piece and popping it into my mouth. “Thought you could use this too.”

I chewed and thought some more, while Justin fed me, like I was in truth one of the robins that dotted the grass surrounding us. The breeze made the poppies in my hand dance, and I ran my fingers over the silk of their petals, trying to corral my wayward thoughts. I’d been working my way toward change for the past four weeks. Could I jump into this one with both feet?

“What do you think about it?” I asked Justin.

He smiled and tossed a few crumbs at a particularly aggressive bird, before stretching his arms out along the back of the bench. “You know me. I’m happy wherever. The question is, can you be happy?”

I slumped in my seat. “I don’t know.” I reached into the paper bag dangling from his fingertips and fished out a chunk of cookie. Breaking pieces off the end of it, I started a campaign to coax the robin up to our feet. “I should be jumping for joy. I mean, he wants me back. Regrets letting me transfer out of the department. And a chance to go work outside the country. That’s amazing, right? So, why am I...” I understood so little about my own feelings, I couldn’t even figure out how to finish the sentence.

Justin smiled at me and shook his head. I waited for him to say something, to make it all come clear to me, but instead, he tipped his head back and watched the clouds scurry by.

“Jus?”

He looked at me, still with that smile on his lips. It was only then that I realized he wasn’t going to tell me anything, because I already knew.

“You think I’ve been looking for a way out for a while, don’t you?”

The smile grew broader, and he closed his eyes.

I tossed the last of the cookie onto the ground, where the robin pounced on it, and mirrored Justin's posture, letting my mind make pictures of the clouds above. "So, you think I should take this?"

"I think you should live your life for you, Birdie, just for while."

Justin wasn't going to give me an answer—I had to find it myself. I tried to picture myself, back in Oncology, or even floating to different departments, and it nearly brought on the panic attack that had set this whole train in motion.

But, Africa?

I didn't know much about the continent, let alone Chad. Easily remedied, though. I'd always been a whiz at research. I stood up and held out my hand to Justin. "Let's head over to the library. I need to look some stuff up."

He grinned and let me pull him to his feet. As we left, he poured the crumbs out of the paper bag and threw them on the ground in front of our robin.

One month later, it was our last night in the apartment. The furniture was all in storage and the only things left were some disposable dishes and the air mattress and blankets we were going to sleep on that night.

Justin was already in bed, totally ready for tomorrow's adventure. Me, not so much. Now that the moment was upon us, I was restless, uncertain. I wandered the apartment in only my boxers, looking out the windows at the familiar vistas, tracing the edges of the sills and the hardware on the kitchen cupboards.

"Come to bed, Birdie."

I sighed and walked into the living room.

Justin held up a hand and pulled me down to the mattress. "Nervous?" he asked and kissed my temple.

“Yeah. Wondering if this is the right choice.”

“There are no wrong choices, Robin. Not if no one’s getting hurt. Just different choices and different outcomes. There’s something interesting behind each one.”

I tugged the blanket over me and snuggled against him so we spooned on the mattress. His arm wrapped around me, heavy enough that I knew nothing could tear me away until he moved it. “Yeah. You’re right. It’s just—”

His hand covered my mouth. “No thinking, Birdie. You made your decision, I made mine. Whatever happens, we have each other, and we work through it together.” He canted his hips forward, rubbing his developing erection against my ass. “Need a distraction?”

I chuckled. “Not need, but want? Yeah. Always.” I reached back to slide my hand under the waistband of his boxers. “You offering?”

His boxers disappeared with astounding speed. “For you, it’s always on the menu.” I felt his palm slide over my hip and then he was tugging at my own boxers. “Lift your hips. There’s something in my way.”

Damn, but he could make me laugh, even when I was tired, and nerved up and questioning every move I made. Obediently, I shifted on the mattress and let him perform his magic, the cloth vanishing with a few efficient tugs.

Justin snuggled up against the back of my thighs and kissed me between my shoulder blades. “That’s better.” He rolled me onto my stomach and seated himself on the tops of my thighs, his cock resting lightly on the crack of my ass while his hands worked at the tense muscles of my back. “No wonder you’re tired. All this tension. I’ll have to teach you to meditate while we’re in Africa.”

“Do Africans meditate?”

“Does it matter?”

His hands were warm, almost hot, on my back, long, firm strokes that gradually coaxed my muscles into a state more conducive to sleep. By the time

he'd worked out all the knots, I was completely relaxed and, contrarily, so hard even the air mattress was uncomfortable beneath me.

"Ready to sleep now?" Justin breathed in my ear.

I huffed a laugh and sighed. "Not in the least. But I think you may have outsmarted yourself—I feel like a limp noodle."

He reached underneath me, making me gasp as he wrapped his fingers around the only part of my anatomy that seemed awake. "Never letting you cook me spaghetti, if this is how you define a limp noodle." He let go of me and slid down between my legs. His chest rested on my back, and I could feel his cock seeking entry. "Up for something less—Shiatsu?"

I laughed into my pillow. Trust Justin to make a connection between deep tissue massage and sex. "Sure. Just don't expect a lot of activity from this end."

He kissed the back of my neck and licked his way down to my shoulder. "I can handle the activity part."

"Please," I whispered.

He chuckled softly and began. It was different tonight; gentle caresses that ghosted over my skin, awakening nerve endings I didn't even know I had. My breath grew shaky as he moved about my body, touching, stroking, kissing—intently attentive to every inch of me. I began to shift underneath him, spreading my legs and pushing back in open invitation. And still he continued, until all I could do was quiver and moan under his hands and mouth.

I think he must have spent the better part of an hour loving me like that. I watched the moonlight through the window, as it crept across the room, and wallowed in the delight he created. Not just the physical sensations, but knowing that he cared enough to do this for me, when I could feel his own arousal, hard and insistent as it brushed against me with every movement of his body.

Then, through the haze of desire and sensation, I heard the click of a lube bottle and warm fingers made their way inside to continue the soft petting, but

to a much different effect. I knew now that he liked to hear me, to judge his success by the sounds he cajoled from my lips. I let the moans and the sighs fall from my mouth, clutching at the blankets beneath me as he continued his seduction.

Justin had already brought me right up to the edge several times, before backing off to tease me, when he finally replaced his fingers with his cock. I made a strangled sound as he pushed inside and sobbed in time to his thrusts afterward. Beyond thinking or speech, I reached behind me to lay a hand on the muscles of his ass, so I could feel him tense and relax as he drove into me. Every muscle in my body was tight and getting tighter and each jolt of pleasure drove me a little higher, a little closer to that cliff edge I yearned for.

It was his tongue, running delicately up the ridges of my spine that threw me over the edge. I yelled and grabbed his hand, moving it to clasp my balls as they spasmed and shot their load, taking my brain with them. He grunted behind me, and then made a small whimpering gasp before he lunged forward, the slap of flesh on flesh louder as he let himself go. The hand not on my balls landed on my shoulder, pinning me in place when he forced himself hard against the back of my thighs, as he won through to his own release. I couldn't think, but my body knew what it wanted and it pushed back toward him to take him as deep as possible.

When his last shudders had eased, he withdrew, kissed the small of my back as I collapsed on the mattress, and headed off to the bathroom to get rid of the condom I hadn't even noticed him putting on. That made me smile—not only had I been so out of my mind that I'd ignored the basic rules of new relationships, but Justin had kept his senses long enough to be sure we didn't.

He came back and crawled into our bed, spooning me again. "You feel much more relaxed now, Birdie."

I laughed. "Exercise will do that to you."

He kissed me behind my ear. "Good. Now go to sleep."

So I did.

The alarm woke us in plenty of time. I called a cab while Justin deflated the air mattress and packed it away. We rode to the airport in sleepy silence, checked our bags and had breakfast. I walked onto the plane like I was in a dream and was asleep again as soon as we fell into our seats. A pattern that was to continue all the way to our final destination.

“Birdie, wake up, we’re here.” Justin shook me awake. “We’ll be landing in a few minutes. You want the window seat so you can watch? It’s beautiful.”

I knuckled the sleep out of my eyes. “I can just squish over and look past you.”

“Come here.” With a mischievous glance over his shoulder to check on the flight attendant, he pulled me into his lap and positioned us so we could both look out the window.

The colours were so different from home—more a faded brown-olive, with patches of verdant green. The roads were a funny brick red and, as we approached, I could see that the runways were the same color. I wondered what it was made of. Most of my research had been on the political climate of the area. No way was I going to fly half way across the world to end up shot, or worse. But where we were going was relatively peaceful, compared to other parts of Central Africa.

The airport was small. We’d be stepping out of the plane, right into the open. I watched over Justin’s shoulder as we circled and then started our approach.

With a couple of bumps, we were down and rolling toward a small low building. Bright sunshine flashed off the windows, blinding me momentarily. The seatbelt sign finally went off, and we were able to stretch tired limbs and retrieve our belongings from the overhead compartment.

The plane slowly emptied, and we made our awkward way toward the front, bags and hips bumping against the seats in the narrow passage. I could smell something different in the air; a wildness that you didn’t get back home. When I got to the door, I paused, caught up in the sights and sounds of our new home.

Justin stepped up behind me. “What do you think, Birdie?”

I twisted my head back to look at him. “I love it.” Then I kissed him and added, “Thank you for making me brave.”

“You were always brave, Robin. You just couldn’t see it.” He put a hand on my hip and urged me down onto the ground. At the bottom, our new boss, Damien, waited in a battered Jeep. I turned to look back at Justin, whose delighted grin shone easily as brightly as the sun. Maybe Justin wasn’t the only one who’d found a home where he least expected it. I paused at the bottom of the stairs to pat the center of his chest and drop a brief kiss on his lips, before turning to climb into the Jeep and plunge into adventure.

THE END

Author Bio

Kate Lowell absolutely despises writing author bios. She'd rather be writing something she can make up. But, she can tell you that she's had a long and varied career, working in the fields of both human and veterinary medicine, has taught at all levels of education (including post-secondary) and currently lives on an organic farm in the middle of nowhere. She has one rescue cat, and two ponies, one of whom was also a rescue. Plus the assorted pigs, hens, ducks, geese, dogs, and cows that populate the farm itself. In the winter, she writes in the sunniest corner of the kitchen. In the summer, the whole shebang moves outdoors to the back deck, where many words are written and almost as many glasses of wine are drunk. Which probably explains some of the words. She has the attention span of a gnat with ADD, so she likes to switch genres a LOT. And don't ask her about squirrels. Or peanut butter.

Contact Info

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