

I Don't Have To Do Anything

A Jointly-Written Fairly Legal Fanfic



By Autumn Rayne & Desina

A Tale In 15 Chapters (and counting...)

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Foreword

by Desina

This story series started as a one-shot by Autumn Rayne. Then I wrote a follow-on, then she wrote a follow-on to my follow-on—and so it continued.

Right now, we're up to fifteen chapters and not done yet.

Cover photo is obviously courtesy of Fairly Legal's production company, Universal Cable Productions, from episode 2x06, *What They Seem*. The screen cap itself comes from [Ryan Johnson's fan site](#). There are lots of great pictures and clips from Ryan's work there. You should check them out.

[Autumn's fanfiction.net profile page can be found at this link](#). Like Twitter? You can follow her at [@Autumn7811](#).

[Desina's fanfiction.net profile page can be found at this link](#). Like Twitter? You can follow me at [@DesinaAlani](#).

This document, in its current incarnation, resides on my web site at [desinaalani.com](#). Feel free to check to see if there's an update.

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I Don't Have To Do Anything

by Autumn Rayne

It's late and I really just want to go home. Yet, here I am, sitting in the quaint, sterile customer lounge, waiting as the guys balance the tires on my car. I was passively watching the news on the television suspended from the ceiling, but that has become a futile effort as I am continually finding my gaze drifting to a very uninteresting portion of grey carpeting. I know what's happening. My mind is purposely diverting my attention, focusing my eyes to stare blankly at the floor so it may concentrate on a brown-haired woman by the name of Kate Reed. The number of times I flick my eyes back to the television is becoming increasingly irrelevant as my brain is overpowering my refusal to settle on that particular thought.

My head is wrapped so tightly around Kate right now. I close my eyes and all I see is Kate searching her pocket for her phone. I see her walking out of the elevator. I see *all* of her walking out of the elevator. Hey, I'm a guy. And I like nice things. And there she was so, yeah, I let my eyes roam as she walked away. When she turned around and I lifted my eyes to hers, something changed. The urges I had been fighting all week, wanting to hold her, wanting to kiss her, washed over me like a flood. The doors closing between us snapped me from my reverie, forcing me to take a few steps forward to guide the doors back into the recess, but the thoughts lingered. I could barely process what she was saying as I tried to find

an excuse, *any* excuse, to justify fulfilling my fancy. Then I caught the words: "I'll see you tomorrow." Now, I never *have to* do anything. That's what I told Kate yesterday. And, it's true. At least it was until that moment. As she said her good-byes, as she turned to walk away, I lost the battle and I gave in to the impulse. I *had to* do something to keep her close.

I reached out and grabbed her arm, pulling her back to me. My eyes found her mouth as she, in her clumsy back step, ended up exactly where I wanted her: pressed against me. With my hands on her hips, I leaned into her, kissing her softly. She started to back away, removing her arm from between our bodies and placing it on my chest to put some distance between us. But I wasn't willing to let her go. I wrapped my arms around her smaller frame, slowly recovering the small amount of space she had managed to procure. Then Kate gave in. She relaxed a bit and accepted the kiss, becoming a willing participant. I felt her hand on my neck, then in my hair and every bit of my being screamed in delight of the contact. When our lips separated, I opened my eyes, thinking our kiss had ended. I was surprised when her hand held my jaw and she leaned in for a rather involved connection of our lips.

With this last caress, Kate realized what we were doing. She pushed me back, pulling her mouth from mine. I licked my lips, relishing the fact that I could still taste her, and lifted my gaze from her mouth to her very confused and very surprised eyes. "I'm sorry. I had to do that." Truth. I had to. I had to know how soft her lips were, how she would feel in my arms. She wished me a good "tire thing" and we exchanged a small series of awkward good-byes. As we parted, the elevator doors closed, separating us for good.

As much as it stops there, however, it doesn't stop there. Because here I am, in this damned lounge, alone with my thoughts. And in my thoughts, we don't go our separate ways. No, no. "I'm sorry," I tell her, lifting my hand and gently taking her chin between my thumb and forefinger. "I had to do that," I whisper

against her mouth. And I kiss her again, softly, lingering slightly. She doesn't protest, doesn't push me away, so I let the backs of my fingers glide under her chin and across her neck. She meets my eyes, a small crinkle knitting her brow, and I know I have touched a sensitive spot under her ear. I settle my hand behind her neck and slowly pull her mouth to mine. Again, the kiss is soft, lasting mere seconds longer than the one before.

Kate still doesn't push me away.

I move us from the doorway of the elevator, carefully dropping my coat and briefcase on the floor so I can wrap my arm around her waist. I take her coat and purse and place them next to mine as I kiss her a third time, still with a tender touch. Her hands, now unoccupied, move to my shoulders. This is the last warning I give her, the last opportunity to stop everything.

But she doesn't. Instead, she sighs against my mouth.

I turn her around, gradually and carefully pushing her against the wall next to the elevator as I nip at her lips with deliberate slowness. I press my body into hers, finally covering her mouth completely. I can feel the ripple of tension that swells around her body as her fingers tighten gently on my shoulders. I continue to kiss her, taking my dear sweet time to tease her lips. She tries to return the kiss, but a well-timed shift of my body along hers interrupts her efforts and prompts a soft whine of desire.

I think that I may be full of myself for believing Kate would allow me to continue such a bold move. No, I *know* I am full of myself for thinking that. But, Kate didn't put much time or effort into stopping me when our lips first met. She may not be the strongest woman, but she *is* feisty and if she really wanted out of that moment, she could have easily freed herself. *She returned the kiss.* She didn't push me away and slap me across the face. She didn't yell at me and tell me how off base I was. *She returned the kiss.* So, I am choosing to believe that I did *something* right.

"Mr. Grogan? Your vehicle is ready."

"Thank you." Of course it's ready. It's not enough to be stuck in this lounge with nothing to divert my attention from Kate, but now my vehicle is ready and the only place it has to take me is home. Home, where I'll have plenty of places to imagine satisfying my curiosities about Kate. I want her lying in my bed with my arms wrapped around her. I want her beneath me, submissive, and above me, demanding. I want Kate in any and every manner that entails.

Dinner. Maybe I should invite her to dinner. Maybe I can figure out what that 'something right' was, and do it again. And again and again, because kissing Kate in front of the elevators at the Reed and Reed offices just does not do my fantasies justice.

Forgetting Something

by Desina

As I slip into the Aston Martin, I'm aware that I need to go back to the office. As we've already established, I don't *have* to. But I need to. I don't know if she'll be there. Part of me hopes to hell she will be, and part of me is terrified at the thought. I just know I won't be able to sleep unless I at least try to see her again. Knowing me, I'll make it worse. Much worse.

I just can't help myself.

I park in the space neatly stenciled with my name, not that anyone cares at this hour. The parking levels beneath our building are empty. I sit in the car for a moment berating myself for my foolish hopes.

It's cold, but I want to feel the sting. I open the car door, take off my coat, toss it on the passenger side. Take off my suit jacket. Take off my tie. Unbutton a couple of buttons. I slump back down in the driver's seat.

This is madness.

I reach for the glove box and open it, withdrawing the flask from inside. I uncap it, sniffing the whiskey inside. My father's favorite. I ponder how much to drink, but then remember the half-drunk conversation Kate and I had after I had to come find my keys and she nearly beamed me with her saxophone. And then she took my keys from me, telling me, "You're not driving."

I'd lied to her that time, telling her the cab was waiting. It was, but I'd intended to drive straight home from the judge's house. The cab brought me a block from the judge's, and I re-parked another block further down the road, then set my watch for an hour to make sure I was sober enough that there was no question about my driving. All because Kate had shown that moment of concern.

I re-cap the flask and put it back in the glove compartment without having tasted a single drop. It's bad enough that she thought I was empty. Far worse would be her thinking I'm drunk and empty, or only coming back because I'm drunk. Better for her to know it's a sober decision.

Finally, I get out of the car, lock it, stand up straight, and walk to the elevator, awaiting its pleasant ding of readiness. A saying of my grandfather's comes to mind. "Remember this, boy. A Grogan always walks with pride, even when he's got nothing to be proud of and plenty to be ashamed of."

So why did I feel like I'm doing a walk of shame? I don't do shame.

The offices are completely dark. I step into hers, but she's not there.

Then I quietly open my own office door and see her lying on my couch, fully clothed, eyes closed, holding one of the throw pillows in her arms. For a moment, I can pretend that she's thinking of holding me. My lips curl into a smile.

I cross to the drawer I keep a blanket in, pulling it out and draping it gently over her slumbering form. It hugs her contours in ways that make me want to lick my lips in desire. I don't lick them simply because I'm afraid she'll open her eyes and see, and it will be more awkward.

She murmurs softly, but her eyes remain closed. I note the heels she's declined to take off, and I worry about my hideously expensive couch that the firm cannot afford to replace or even repair. It's stupid, but it's also a great excuse. I kneel by her feet and take the black pump in my right hand, her ankle gently in my left, and delicately remove her shoe. I watch her face, but nothing. She's asleep.

Her toes are a thing of beauty, and I don't say that lightly. I'm not exactly a foot fetishist, but I like nice feet. Given how many rings she wears, I half expected her to have a toe ring, and I'm a little disappointed that she doesn't.

I remove the other shoe just as gingerly and have just set it on the floor when her eyes bolt open. "Benedict Yancy Grogan, what the hell do you think you're doing?"

Despite myself, I smirk. "Protecting my investment, Katie. You're welcome to sleep on my couch, but please remove your shoes first."

"Oh," she says sheepishly. "I wasn't intending to sleep, actually. I should get home."

Now that she's awake, it's uncomfortably close. I would probably kiss her again. Hell, I can't imagine not kissing her every single moment of every single day.

I start pulling away and she grabs my shirt with her right hand, pulling me back into the discomfort zone. I probably have that lost sad puppy look on my face again. She tugs harder, and a button pops, landing between her breasts. Of course it does. I look at the button sadly, resisting the urge to retrieve it. She picks it up with her other hand, pulls me even closer, and chuckles softly. She slips her left hand to my waist, then drops the button into the pocket of my slacks.

I worry about that chuckle, wondering what was behind it, and I'm still wondering when I feel her lips brush ever so gently against mine. I catch the smoldering in her eyes as I brush back for the fraction of a second before she pulls away.

"Benny," she whispers.

Julius effing Caesar, I realize I'm hers to command. "Yes?"

She smiles, and her face could light up city blocks. "I never thought I'd see you on your knees."

Now I feel self-conscious about it, about having done the easy thing to remove her shoes, the way to really see her feet up close. I ponder my desire to pull out some peppermint massage oil, give her such an amazing foot rub that she'd beg for more, and I'd pull out the next massage oil for her legs, and then...

She didn't need to know about the drawer full of different massage oils I had.

Well, not tonight.

"Katie," I whispered.

"Mmm?"

"Are you sleeping here again?"

"Instead of the immaculate but sterile guest room?"

I thought of the very unsterile place I had, or at least I liked to think so. I'd never have managed it without a designer and buckets of money, though, because I spent too much time at the office. Hell, I had a home office I almost never used. "Yeah."

"No, I was going there, just not yet."

I tilted my head, not willing to ask the question.

She sighed. "I normally don't go there until Lauren goes to sleep, okay? There's only so much I can deal with her. It's just easier."

I almost wanted to volunteer my living room couch, but that would inevitably lead to my bed, and I knew she was far from ready for that even though I was not. Instead, I found myself emitting a soft sigh on her behalf.

"I can take you if you're ready now," I said. Immediately after realizing what I'd said, I felt my neck flush slightly and I added hastily, "To Lauren's!"

She giggled at my unintentional double entendre. "You blush!"

That only made it worse, of course. Still, I couldn't help but smile. I'd surprised her, and she was delighted by the surprise.

Once the giggling died down, she said, "I'm ready, but you'll need to put my shoes back on," she said, pointing her toes. "Since you're down there and all."

I held her left foot and used my best "I've seen a lot of shoe salesmen at Neiman Marcus and Nordstrom do this" technique. Truth is, I'd never really been the kind of man who'd taken women's shoes off a woman - or put them on her - but I could see that, with Kate, I would simply have to change.

I helped her up, put the blanket away, and grabbed two random files off my desk, then helped her into her coat and into my car. We drove to Lauren's in silence, both of us looking straight ahead.

I walked her to the door, as I always would do, and paused far enough away that she wouldn't think I was asking to be invited in. Last time had been a disaster, after all.

She unlocked the door, turned, and smiled. "Thank you," she said.

"For?"

"Being human." With that, she turned and closed the door behind me, and I walked to my car wondering what the hell she'd meant by it.

Tumble Lightly, Dear House of Cards

by Autumn Rayne

"Thank you," Kate said.

"For?"

"For being human." With that, she turned and closed the door behind me, and I walked to my car wondering what the hell she'd meant by that. Add one more layer to the Russian Doll that is Kate Reed. And, of course, I mean my analogy in a much more favorable way that Kate had used it. I am not empty. I, admittedly, have a propensity towards being an ass, but I'm not empty. We have different methods of getting what we want; mine, as I think I've proven tonight, just tend to be a bit more forward. Not that Kate isn't forward. When it comes to getting what is best for her clients, she displays beautiful bulldog tenacity. With a touch of crazy woman. But, where she herself is concerned, it doesn't seem like she has the same drive.

I just reach the front end of my car when I hear a soft noise behind me. I turn to find Kate standing outside of Lauren's front door. Keys in hand, she is slowly locking the doors. I note the worried look on her face and I immediately start moving towards her.

"What's wrong, Katie?"

"Oh." She turns to me, seemingly surprised that I'm still in the driveway.

"Are you sneaking out?" I smirk. She offers me a nervous smile and walks towards me, meeting me halfway along the sidewalk.

"Lauren's not asleep yet," she whispers. "She's in the living room reading." I nod and watch as she turns to look at the house. I again think to offer the couch in my apartment, but, again, think better of it. My self-control around Kate has been slipping. Clearly, or I would not have kissed her on a whim. The last thing I want to do is scare her.

"Do you want to drive around a bit?" I ask. She turns to me, a soft questioning look on her face. I shrug. "We'll take a quick ride. Maybe she'll be asleep by the time we come back." Kate takes a moment to think about it, looking back at the house one more time before agreeing to go with me. I open the passenger door for her, resisting every urge I have to press her against the side of my car and kiss her. After dropping into the driver's seat, I put the key in the ignition and listen for the soft, sexy hum as the engine turns over. I hold my smirk as all that soft sound does is make me think about other kinds of sexy hums I would like to hear.

We are on the road maybe fifteen minutes, driving to nowhere in particular, when I finally dare a glance in Kate's direction. She has found my suit jacket and has wrapped it around her shoulders. Though she is looking out the passenger window, her body is turned slightly in my direction. She looks down, moving her legs to the side as she frowns at the floorboard.

"Hmm."

"Katie?"

"I, uh, I was going to ask if you'd take me to a hotel." Thankfully, at this point we have reached a red-lit intersection. I am pretty sure I would have driven us right off the road with the comment she just made. I turn and look at her, eyebrows raised. It takes her a moment, but she finally looks in my direction, an embarrassed smile creeping across her lips. "I meant drop me off at a hotel." She

looks away again. "But I left my purse at Lauren's and I can't pay for a room without the contents of my purse."

"You don't want to go back?" She shakes her head in the negative. The light turns green and make a left-hand turn.

"Can you take me back to Reed and Reed? I promise not to sleep on your couch with my heels on." I can feel the blush start to creep up my cheeks again and as I take a quick look at Kate...I can tell by her mannerisms that she is blushing, too.

"No," I answer.

"Please don't make me go back to Lauren's," she pleads.

"You don't have to." Oh, no. I'm going to do it. I know I shouldn't, but I don't think I can stop the words before they leave my mouth. "You can stay at my place tonight." Damn it.

"Y-your...your place?"

"Yeah. Look, there's no need for you to get a room or sleep on the couch at the office." I stop at another red light and turn to Kate again. "I can take you to Lauren's in the morning for clothes and..." I gesture awkwardly with my hand. "And whatever girly things you may need." Kate laughs softly and nods.

"Okay." It's another fifteen minutes to my apartment. Fifteen minutes that seem to last for two hours. I am mentally making a list of the things I shouldn't say or do. Things that would definitely get me into trouble. But, as I pull into the parking garage, I realize that even if I had had two hours, it would not be enough time to complete that list.

As we take the elevator to the fifth floor, I start to replay our time in my office. The laugh that had me worried yet curious, the brush of her lips against mine, the blatant want in her eyes... Just what was she doing? The way she pulled away when I returned the chaste contact of our lips had me worried that maybe she was just toying with me, flirting in that Kate Reed fashion that I absolutely adore.

But then she whispered my name. "Benny." And...

"Uh, Ben?" I closed the door as Kate nervously played with the rings on her finger. "I don't...uh...I don't have anything to...to sleep in."

"Oh." ...*Oh!* "Um, do you want one of my t-shirts?" Holy hell, I am done for.

"If you don't mind."

"Of course not." I am giving my voice a boatload of credit right now for not wavering and being all squeaky. My brain is not exactly focused on what I'm saying or how I'm saying it because I can't get the thought of Kate wearing only my t-shirt out of my head. "Come on," I say, motioning her to follow me into my room. "You can change in here if you'd like." I really want to kick this teenage-esque mindset in the ass right now. I open the second dresser drawer, full of printed t-shirts. "Pick your poison," I joke. It's really *my* poison. If I can't handle thinking about Kate in one of my t-shirts, how am I going to handle seeing it?

I leave Kate to change and move to the hall closet for the extra pillow and blankets. I should have just come home after my 'tire thing'. But, nope, I had to go to the office. No, I *needed* to go. And it was not for the two files I pulled off my desk. No. I'm honestly not sure which files they are. I just grabbed the two on top, thinking it gave me a visible and viable excuse for returning to Reed and Reed.

As I drop heavily on the sofa, I mull over Kate's comment about being human. It bothers me that until today she hasn't seen me as such. Like I said, I *can* be a jerk sometimes. But I do care about people. I do care about what happens. It dawns on me that even though I've given Kate hard time this week about trying to save the whole world and tilting at windmills, this is probably this first time I've shown any *outward* concern during a case. Taking Kate's hand after telling her Lea's parole was denied...I knew she was upset and I was trying to be comforting. Bringing her a cup of freshly brewed coffee after we returned to Reed and Reed...

"Ben?" I turn towards the opening of the hallway, my jaw dropping and my mouth going dry. Kate makes her way to the sofa, legs bare from mid-thigh down,

the rest of her body covered in an old black and silver Raider's jersey. Though its dimensions are over-sized for her smaller frame, the cloth hangs fittingly over her shoulders and across her chest. My eyes fall to her bare feet and I think her black pumps would complete this look quite nicely. At least until I'm able to find that bottle of peppermint massage oil. There are so many ways this woman could kill me, and I would lay back, willingly accepting any punishment she saw fit to deliver. I lift my eyes to hers as she sits next to me. She's been talking to me and, for the second time tonight, I haven't heard a word spoken. She stops and tilts her head slightly to the side. "Are you all right?" she asks.

"I'm fine," I answer quietly.

"Okay." Kate smiles softly and leans her hands on the portion of cushion between us. "Anyway, thank you." She shifts forward and places a gentle kiss on my cheek. One small movement on my part, and I can claim her lips with my own. Again. I want to. So badly, I want to. But as I turn my head, as I feel our mouths brush ever so delicately, hear the soft intake of breath from Kate, I stand and move to the far side of the room.

What's Up, Doc?

by Desina

"Do you have any DVDs?" Kate asks me, but I'm still a bit gobsmacked by the kiss on the cheek. The whole night, really. Here she is in my living room. I know what I want to do, but what I have zero clue about is what I *should* do. And by should do, I mean whatever won't drive her away. Whatever won't make this seem weird right now, much less tomorrow morning. Okay, whatever won't make this seem *weirder*.

I'm just really thankful she picked a Raiders shirt and not, say, one of my college shirts. At least it won't make every trip to the alumni association physically painful every time I see someone else wearing the same shirt and am reminded of her.

"Huh?" Yeah, articulate litigator. That's me.

"Movies. I'm not ready to sleep, and I haven't seen a movie in ages. Not since..." She stops speaking before uttering the unsaid word, but I know what it is. Who he is. Justin.

"Oh, I have plenty." I motion to the built-in cabinet on the other wall. "Whatever you'd like to watch, Katie." I figure she's just being nice, she wants to unwind by herself.

She walks over and opens the built-in doors, staring in.

"Would you like popcorn?" I ask, trying to find something to do so I'm not tempted to hover.

"Please. With butter. Also, tequila." She looks at me. "If you have any."

"Of course I do." I fetch the Spring Hill local organic Jersey butter and the cast iron skillet along with the local popcorn and start heating the pan. She's looking at my favorite shelf, and I can't help but watch anxiously.

Carol, she'd never understood how I organized movies. She wanted all the comedies together and the drama together and everything had to be in one neat solitary category and all alphabetized. Some of my category organizations were alphabetic, some were thematic, some were chronological. This drove Carol mad and led to one of our biggest fights ever, the last fight before she cheated on me. Let's be honest, that's not why she cheated on me. I'm impossible. But it was the proverbial straw.

I still remember the way she curled her dark blonde hair around her ear as if that would make what she heard out of my mouth make more sense. The tightness between her brows. The way she pointed her finger at me and hurled invectives. At the time, I'd come to believe I deserved some of those, but I've since had time to reflect. No, Carol was not the woman for me. I was just slow to see that.

She blamed my odd sorting habit on my dyslexia. Blamed it on my inability to commit. But, really, I didn't think there was One True Universal Way of organizing videos. It's a good thing we hadn't been lawyers sharing a legal library or the litigation might still be ongoing, assuming we could find anything.

Kate tilts her head in curiosity. A few moments later, the puzzled expression softens into an oh of surprise, then transitions into a smile. "Films about San Francisco in date order?" she asks.

I grin.

Hell, who am I kidding? I'm tempted to ask her to marry me on the spot.

"Exactly so," I say. "Got a favorite?"

She pulls one out, and holds it up for me to see. "Excellent choice. I'll have the popcorn for you in a minute."

As she models the DVD case, I'm struck by how long her legs are. I'm used to thinking of her as short, but for a short person, she sure has legs that won't quit. Her bare feet remind me that I'd love to massage them, and I sigh.

"And the tequila," she reminds me.

"And the tequila."

Sudden movements make me realize she's not wearing a bra. I gulp. Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, how am I ever supposed to survive this night that I created? She may kill me tonight, but at least I'll die happy.

I bring out the popcorn first, along with napkins and bowls for each of us. "Just a minute, I'm going to change, then I'll get the tequila," I say.

After closing the bedroom door, I flip on the light. She's tossed her clothing onto my bed, lacy black bra on top of her other clothes. All I can hear is the rapid thud of my heart. I'm now half-convinced she actually has my demise planned to the hour and minute, but then my grandfather actually believed in fairies.

I moan softly, stripping painfully out of my suit slacks, finally able to comfortably bend over for the first time in almost an hour. I pull my USF sweatpants and a matching t-shirt out of drawers. I notice something fall; the button that Kate pulled off earlier. I pull a safety pin out of the sewing kit in my top drawer and pin the wayward button to the shirt, then hang it where I put clothing to repair.

I'm not ready to open the door. I'll never be ready, but she wants to watch a movie, and I hope she means with me, not just at my place. The longer I take, the less willing she'll be to watch with me. As an afterthought, I cross to the nightstand and search through the little bottles until I find the peppermint

massage oil that my friendly purveyor of massage oils insists is the best blend she has for feet.

She's curled up in the exact middle of the couch, toes hanging over the edge, blanket pulled to add modesty not normally available in a t-shirt and panties in such a pose. Well, I assume she's still wearing panties. I hope she is. I suppress a moan at the thought of her wearing only my well-worn t-shirt. I suddenly can't focus on anything.

Kate looks up at me expectantly, her mouth a small o of surprise.

Tequila. Right. I point my index finger as though I've just remembered. Which is true.

I clang around in the liquor cabinet until I find the one bottle of tequila: the hideously expensive and as-yet-unopened Dos Lunas Grand Reserve, then fetch two appropriate glasses. Crystal, of course, because my father would murder me if he knew I was serving hard liquor in anything but. Irish pride, thus Waterford crystal, and the real stuff, not the stuff made outside of Ireland. And the tequila, well, that's from Texas, not Mexico, but it's worth it.

Meanwhile, my mouth is going oh so dry just thinking about her, thinking about how lonely I've been without curvaceous company in my living room, even for an evening, since I've been at the firm. Frankly, I can't remember the last woman I had over. Could it really have been that long?

She moves the blanket out of my way and I settle down on her right as she dangles her legs over the side, putting a small bowl of popcorn on her lap. "This is really great popcorn, Ben."

I smile at her. "I'm not going to say it this time." I do like nice things and she knows that. I open the tequila and pour some for her first, waiting for her gesture to stop pouring. A hair over a double for her, and I pour the same amount for myself.

"Cheers," I say, and our glasses clink with the bell-like sound of real crystal.

After her first sip, she said, "You like nice tequila." She tossed more popcorn into her mouth.

"I do." I took a sip and closed my eyes to fully enjoy the taste. I'd previously had a lesser bottle from the same company, but not one this rare. Or expensive.

"Justin said the bottle at the bar that night cost more than his suit."

Despite myself, I snorted. "That would explain a lot."

She rolled her eyes.

"Seriously, it wasn't that expensive a bottle and we only had half of it. It wasn't even the most expensive bottle in the place. Unless he gets his suits at-," I waved my hand to think, "-well, some bad suit place, then it's not true."

"Fair enough. It's an educated guess this one cost more than his suit, though."

"Most assuredly."

"And your suit?" She squirmed uncomfortably at the question, pushing her hair back with her thumb.

She wanted honesty, obviously. "I don't know exactly how much my suits cost because I typically buy more than one at a time and I buy custom-made shirts at the same time. I typically budget for the whole package, not each component part. But, it's an expensive bottle of tequila, I'll grant you, and it's probably somewhere close to the cost of one of my suits."

"You were saving it for a special occasion," she said, pressing the line of questioning.

"Hence it being unopened," I admitted.

"I don't think it's that special an occasion," she said in that way women said, "you're not getting any." Not that I thought I was, of course, I'm not that much of an idiot. I know a long game when I see one.

I sighed. How to explain without admitting? How to tell her that it's special enough because women never came over? Or the few women I've been with over

the last three years were all one-night stands, and I really would rather curl up on the couch and watch a movie with someone special most nights? That I wanted the intimacy even though I wasn't all that great at it? Or that I just love her?

No, I'm definitely not admitting to that.

"Your company makes it special enough, Katie. Ready for the movie?"

She nods. Uncomfortable topic ended, shift to the not having awkward moments stage of the evening. I hit play, and the opening sounds of Barbra Streisand singing Cole Porter fill the room.

As the movie progresses, Katie relaxes slowly, smiling at the funny moments and lines. She occasionally silently mouths the lines, which makes me smile. I know the movie almost as well as she did.

Finally, she feels relaxed enough that she places her head at the opposite end of the couch and her calves across my lap. I smile, but inwardly I groan, because if she moves that right leg one more inch, she's going to discover what I've been a gentleman about, and I'd rather she not.

"Foot rub?" I ask after she's relaxed a bit in her new position. I've almost held or rubbed her feet three times since she's put them in temptation's way.

"Sure," she says, and I reach for the bottle of massage oil.

She looks at the bottle, then pauses the movie.

"You didn't have to pause it."

"Yes I did," she says quickly.

I shake my head no.

"Yes. I did," she says, much more slowly.

"Why?"

She raises an eyebrow. "Because you're going to take your shirt off and I'm going to watch."

I'm amused enough at this turn of events that I raise an eyebrow, stare her down for a moment as though I'm objecting, then I slowly peel off my shirt for her benefit, remembering to ripple all the muscle groups.

"Nice," she says approvingly. "Now turn toward me."

I slide my left knee onto the couch, slipping my left leg underneath both of hers, and turn so my head's facing hers, my right foot on the floor.

Kate placed her feet on my chest. "*Now* you can rub them."

I smile, put a few drops of peppermint massage oil on my hands, and take her left foot in my hand. She unpauses the movie, but that's the last moment we watch it intently. Instead, she's too busy sighing and moaning from my ministrations to seriously follow the film. Not that either of us need to; clearly we've both seen the movie a few dozen times over the years.

As I'm gently working a knot out of her right foot, I notice that she's absentmindedly massaging her lower lip with her index finger, aroused to the point of distraction. I suppress a smile. Perhaps she's as far gone as I am right now. No, that's just wishful thinking, I'm afraid.

A few minutes after I'm done, she directs me to turn back to my original sitting position. After I do so, she moves the pillow onto my lap and turns around, putting her hand underneath the pillow, resting it on my thigh. I let out a small sigh and straighten the blanket with my left hand.

By the time the VW Bug fails to make the Sausalito ferry and dives into the San Francisco Bay, she's sound asleep. I place my hand gently on her shoulder and lean back, wondering how I'm going to sleep in this position. She's shown me unusual trust this evening, and I don't want to mess it up.

In the final courtroom scene, where the poor judge is trying to make sense of everything and Barbra Streisand's character Judy is at the center of all the chaos, I smile. No wonder she loves this movie so much. In so many ways, she is Judy Maxwell.

I smile at the famed line, "Hello, Daddy." I wish I'd been able to meet Kate's father, though he likely wouldn't have approved of me. All I can do is be here with her now if she'll let me. Tonight, she's apparently letting me.

I turn the TV off and settle as much as I can for what will undoubtedly be a long night where Kate will sleep just fine but I will not.

Drinking It In

by Autumn Rayne

I've been sitting here on the couch, Kate's head in my lap, my hand on her shoulder, for about twenty minutes now. My eyes have adjusted to the darkness of the living room and with the bit of light from the time display on the DVR, I can just make out the slight crease in her brow. With a soft sigh, I lean my head against the back of the couch and close my eyes, hoping to gain the little sleep to be found in such a position. I am still trying to wrap my head around the trust she is showing me right now. Though we have come to know each other better, I certainly didn't think we had reached a comfortable level with this type of physical proximity. Well, I didn't think *Kate* had. *I* am in her personal space *all* of the time. And not just because I enjoy annoying her. That is simply an added bonus.

But...now that I think about it... There *was* the whole inattentional blindness demonstration. I suppose that *did* require a certain amount of proximal comfort. Would she really have opened her shirt, straddled my lap and pressed her chest into my face if there *was* no comfort?

And the foot rub... She did ask me to take of my shirt.

And I never did put it back on.

I lift my head and open my eyes as I hear a soft but strangled moan come from Kate. She shifts slightly and makes the noise again. Then I feel her hand tighten

just a bit on my thigh. She's dreaming, and I gather that it's not a good dream. She lifts her head suddenly, though not far off the throw pillow.

"Wh-" I stay quiet, I don't want to startle her, but I gently squeeze her shoulder. "Ben?" she calls.

"Yes?" She puts her head back onto the pillow, and I lift my hand from her shoulder as she wiggles until she is on her back.

"Ben." She turns to face me, her left hand finding the cushion to the right of my legs, and props herself up. I can't see her face, but I know she is just a breath away from me. I stay still, my hand suspended above my own shoulder.

"Yes?" I repeat, though this time the word leaves my mouth slowly.

"I was...I was...dreaming." I know she is telling me, but her inflection suggests she is not entirely sure what she was doing.

"Are you all right?" I ask, as I can feel her body shaking.

"I don't know," she whispers. I lower my hand, thankful that I end up placing it on her side instead of, well, anywhere else. Reluctantly, I help her into a more relaxed sitting position and I reach to my right to turn on the lamp on the end table. I turn to look at Kate. Her back is to me and she's running a hand through her hair. "I'm sorry," she says with a nervous laugh.

"Don't be." I shift a little, turning to square my body with hers. "You can't be held responsible for what you dream." I reach out, gently rubbing a reassuring hand over her shoulder. The tension in her body is incredible. I would offer a back rub, but after the foot rub...I can't handle another round of Kate sighing and moaning. If that *is* how she responds to back rubs.

However, the thought of her rubbing her finger along her bottom lip gives me an idea. An idea I think I can take advantage of at some point tonight...

"Oh, Ben." Kate moves again, her back now to the middle of the living room as she looks at me. "I fell asleep on you. I'm so sorry." I smirk lightly.

"Believe me, Katie, if it would have been a problem, I would have rolled you onto the floor." I give her a moment to chuckle at the visual. "What were you dreaming about?" All hints of a smile leave her face and she looks away. "Katie," I taunt, hooking a finger under her chin to direct her attention back to me. "What were you dreaming about?" Her eyes drop to my mouth and she lifts a finger, gently touching the middle of my lips. But, then she frowns and I'm thinking maybe I *don't* want to know about the dream.

"You were a vampire," she answers quietly.

"A vampire?" I ask, raising my eyebrows. Her finger wanders down my chin, lingering slightly before she drops her hand back to her side.

"Yeah," she smiles shyly. "I don't know what brought that on. You, uh, you tried to...to bite me."

"Tried?"

"Well, did. You...you k-kissed me and...then you bit...bit my neck." I nod and she touches my lips again. Oh, too close, Katie. Too close. "You don't have any pointy teeth in there, do you?" I shake my head in the negative and start mentally reciting the name of every Oakland A's player I can think of.

Which isn't very many at the moment.

"You know," I start, clearing my throat. "You did thank me earlier for 'being human'. Maybe that was what caused your...interesting little dream." Please, Katie, take the bait. Take the bait.

"Yeah. Maybe." Okay, well, she answered, but I was hoping that answer would come with a change in position. A farther away change in position. Katie! You are killing me!

"W-what, exactly, did you mean by that, anyway?" I hope to hell that she can't hear the squeak in my voice.

"Oh, well, I just..." She frowns as she tries to find the right words to articulate her thoughts. "You didn't have to try and re-open Lea's case." Kate leans back a bit and I relax a little. A very little.

"We established that already. I don't *have to* do anything."

"Ben," she scolds with a smile. "I mean that it was...nice of you."

"Nice?"

"Nice. And after you told me her parole was denied..." She shakes her head, looking away. I see a few tears slip down her cheek. "You took my hand, you brought me coffee... You showed...feelings."

"Feelings?" She lightly slaps my chest (still bare, by the way) as she realizes I am toying with her by repeating the words that are awkward for her to say.

"Feelings, Ben," she laughs gently. "I just...it was the first time you seemed to actually care about what happened during a case." She shrugs. "And you didn't make fun of me for being a girl and crying." I reach up and tuck a lock of hair behind her ear.

"It's all for fun, Katie," I say quietly. "I understand that you are a girl and cannot control your emotions as well as us men." She laughs whole-heartedly now and bats my hand away.

"You're mean."

"Oh, another 'human' trait!" Kate, from her backwards position on the couch, lunges across the small space between us and pretends to choke me. I laugh and settle my hands on her hips, pushing her down, laying her body over my legs, her head on the couch's armrest. We both stop laughing.

"Why did you kiss me?" she asks softly after a moment. I shake my head slowly, whispering my response.

"I had to." As soon as the words leave my mouth, I catch my mistake. Let the taunting begin.

"But you don't *have to* do anything." There it is, along with the expected teasing smile.

"That's the funny thing about you, Katie." I move my left hand to her arm, gently circling my thumb across the inside of her elbow. "When it comes to you, I find myself doing a lot of things I don't have to do." I feel the muscles in her arm stiffen slightly and Kate bites gently at the left side of her bottom lip. This is confirmation that I have found the sensitive spot along the inside of her arm that makes her lips tingle, just as the foot rub accomplished.

The only difference is that this time...this time I am close enough to touch my lips to hers and feel that tingle.

Maybe I Do Have To

by Desina

"You're so full of it," she says, repositioning herself so she's sitting on my lap looking me straight in the face, settling down in such a saucy manner that yes, I am indeed full of it. If she had any doubt before, she doesn't now, and the curl at the corners of her lips lets me know that.

I raise one eyebrow and look at her, not saying a word.

"There's something you have to do," she declares simply.

"Oh is there?" I taunt, guessing where she's going with this, but I'm not going to be the one to take all the risks this time.

"Mmmhmmm," she teases back, pressing her lips together after.

I tilt my head slightly, lick my lips, and smile. Her glance falls to my lips and she sighs softly. "How will I know what I," air quotes, "have to do if you don't tell me what it is?"

"Oh, so now I'm the one who tells you what you have to do?"

"I don't have to do anything you tell me, Katie. A lot of the time, I simply want to." I pause for effect. "Do I? Want to?"

She laughs. "Well, that's irrelevant because you have to."

"Have to what?"

She sighs in exasperation and looks down at my lips. "Kiss me. You have to kiss me."

"What, again?" I try very very hard not to grin, but I suspect my mouth is betraying me.

Kate begins to pout and looks a bit dejected. I pull her chin up with my knuckle.

I smile and lean forward, my lips not quite touching hers. "Well, if I have to kiss you, you know what you have to do?" I nuzzle her nose with my own as I approach her lips painfully slowly. "*You* have to enjoy it."

She smiles slightly as I wrap my arms loosely around her, and places her cold hands on my upper chest. I gasp at the sudden temperature shock, then realize she's putting her hands on my bare chest. Voluntarily.

"Are you cold, Katie?" I worry that I've been a bad host and neglected an important aspect of her comfort. It's been long enough since women have been over that I'd quite forgotten catering to that aspect of female biochemistry. I reach over and pull the blanket up for her, and as I wrap it around her gently, I use it to pull her toward me into my lips.

"No. Yes. Not important right now," she answers. "You're very warm," she says, clearly surprised by it. Like an inferno, actually.

My lips touch hers and I wonder how I'm ever going to stop. I tilt my head and tease her lips open with my own, smelling the tequila, popcorn, and butter on her breath. I curl my fingers in her hair as I plunge forward with my tongue.

Kate responds in kind, without hesitation, moaning softly as I claim her. Every sound sends shivers down my body, joined by the jolts as she moved her hands and ran her fingers through my hair, her neatly-trimmed nails leaving arcs of overloaded sensation zipping over my body. I'm amazed there's not actual sparks igniting the air.

Look, I have kissed an impressively large number of impressively beautiful women.

But I have never, ever, been kissed like this.

Kate Reed does nothing by half measures, and that includes kissing. Our first kiss earlier was so tentative, mostly as a result of my awkwardness, that I hadn't really thought through what bringing her to my place might mean. I knew it would be exquisite torture, but I severely underestimated both how exquisite and how much torture.

She pulls back for a breather and looks at me, hands paused in mid-stroke of my hair, which probably looks like a fright wig about now.

"Are you okay?" I ask, puzzled by the expression.

A tear rolls out of one eye, down her cheek. "I am," she says, "but Lea Faran isn't."

My heart slows to its normal pace and my skin cools. There would be no more hot necking this evening. More unusually, I realize I am absolutely okay with the sudden development, something that hadn't been true when I was with Carol. The implications of that reverberate through my body for a couple of seconds before I take Kate's hands in my own and answer. "I know she's not, Katie, but we did try. And she is better off knowing that we went to bat for her."

"Are you sure there's nothing more you could try with the motion?"

I think about it. I am excellent with legal research, but I'd only had one evening. Maybe I could do better, and maybe that research would help another client later on. "Okay, out of my own pocket, I'll pay for dinners for you, me, and Leo, plus overtime for Leo for two nights of legal research - but I can't do it until the week after next when I'm between trials. Would that work for you?"

She smiles. "Yeah. It would." Her smile droops and her face turns serious again. "Why did it hit me this hard?"

"Because you'd have made the same choice she did, Katie."

"Yeah." Tears roll down her face. "I would have."

"We both need sleep, but I'm guessing you'd rather not be alone."

She looks away, and my heart sinks with her expression. I want to make it all better, but I can't. There is no easy fix for this mood.

"Katie?" I say softly.

"Mmm?" she replies without looking at me.

"I can't get Lea out of prison tonight, but I can at least hold you. No hanky panky."

She finally looks up at me. "Okay," she says.

I help her up and she stretches like a cat. I take her hand in mine and lead her to my bedroom, where I move her clothes onto my dresser. I settle on top of the sheet, while she slides in underneath, and I pull the comforter over both of us.

She snuggles into my chest, her breath gently puffing against me, and I fall asleep with the woman of oh-so-many dreams in my arms.

I wake when the front door closes, alone in my bed with a post-it note stuck to my chest hair. Funny girl.

Killing Me Softly

by Autumn Rayne

I wake when the front door closes, alone in my bed with a post-it note stuck to my chest hair. Funny girl. I roll to my side, reaching to turn on the lamp on the night table. As I drop onto my back, I reach carefully for the post-it note. They never really seem to stick to anything, but I don't want to take the chance that this one came from a particularly sticky batch. I pull the note off my chest, releasing a sigh of relief as it comes off cleanly, and turn the green piece of paper in my hands.

"Ben," I read aloud. "Cabbed it back to Lauren's. Thank you for the movie and the popcorn." I smile gently and sit up, turning to look at the clock. Seeing that I have twenty minutes to my normal wake up time, I decide to start my day early. After stifling a yawn, I sigh and run a hand through my hair. "What the hell?" My fingers find something on the top of my head. Carefully, I remove the foreign object, dropping my hand to eye-level. "*Very* funny girl," I mutter as I look at a second post-it note. "And for the tequila."

I have never been accused of being a light sleeper and I make a mental note never to fall into a drunken sleep around Kate. If she can litter my body with post-its while I am sleeping sober, imagine the damage she could do while I'm in an alcohol-induced slumber.

My eyes wander to the right side of the bed, the side Kate had occupied. It had not taken long for either of us to fall asleep, but in the short time before my eyes closed, I breathed in every second of having Kate in my arms. She had settled quickly on my chest, allowing me to slip my arm under her body and wrap it around her small frame. I cannot lie, holding her like that felt so natural, so comfortable. It really makes me wonder what it would feel like to hold her after a little hanky panky. But, that is a thought I have to push from my head if I want to make it through the workday without spontaneously combusting.

I flip off the comforter and wander through the bedroom to the bathroom. I turn on the light and see my Raiders jersey neatly folded and laying on the vanity. I move to it, taking it in my hands and raising it to my face. It smells like Kate. Her perfume, her shampoo, every scent associated with her body. And now all I can think about is the kiss we shared on my couch. Her cold hands on my chest, her warm lips against mine, the butter, the tequila. *"Well, if I have to kiss you, you know what you have to do? **You** have to enjoy it."* The way Kate sighed as I slipped my tongue between her lips erased any insecurities I might have had about her reaction to our first kiss. Shock, surprise, what have you, she enjoyed it. And she clearly enjoyed it the second time around, as well.

Until she started thinking about Lea Farran.

It has been a very difficult week for Kate. Her emotional investment in cases makes her an incredible mediator. Each case she handles becomes personal and she fights to make sure her clients receive everything they deserve. But it also puts her in a horrible place when she hits a wall she cannot take down. Like Lea. I'm worried that I may have raised Kate's hopes in offering to further research Lea's case. Maybe we can do something more. But, what if we can't? I really do not want to put either woman through another disappointment.

With a sigh, I turn on the water in the shower and take off my sweatpants and boxers. I can't dwell on Lea's case right now. Not only do I have other cases to get

through, but I know Kate will spend the next two weeks doing enough dwelling for the entire firm. Someone needs to be able to keep her grounded when we start our after-hours researching.

I step into the shower, closing the glass door, and let the warm water float over my back. As I lean my head back into the water, I run my hands through my hair, making sure there are no wayward post-its hiding in the thickness of my bed head. I start scrubbing shampoo through my hair and remember the way Kate's fingers felt running over my scalp last night as she sat perched over my lap, pulled tightly against my body by the blanket around her. I think about the way she moaned, returning the kiss between bouts of being conquered. Oh, what I would have given to spend the night slowly conquering the rest of Kate Reed...

I turn to face the handle on the shower wall and turn the temperature to an unhealthy cold.

Since I left my apartment, I have been considering how our two upcoming nights of Lea Farran research may end. And not where Lea is concerned. Where Kate and I are concerned. I have no doubt that both nights will be long, Kate, Leo and myself working well past midnight. Leo will say his goodnights, mumbling something about wanting triple over-time. Once left alone, I will convince Kate to spend the night at my place. "By the time you get to Lauren's and get tucked into bed, it will be time to wake up, Katie," I'll say to her. "Just stay here. You know you're more than welcome." She'll turn down my offer a couple of times before I convince her otherwise. "Maybe I should keep an overnight bag here," she'll joke nervously. "Why? You can borrow another t-shirt." I'll force one awkward exchange after another until I have her in the same place she occupied last night: on my lap, so close to my mouth. I can practically feel the texture of the blanket in my hands as I think about how I will wrap it around the small of her back, pull her hips into mine, and seize her mouth with my own.

Ugh, I certainly hope it doesn't take two weeks to experience that again.

A thought strikes me as the elevator doors open and I move into the Reed and Reed foyer. What if Kate's reaction to my kiss had been simply a need to release the emotional turmoil of the week? What if she was in the 'doesn't mind if I use him' kind of mood she had adopted after the Chernof case? I hop up the stairs, head down as I move past Leo's empty desk. I don't want to know if Kate is here. For some reason, I feel as though seeing her would be a negative answer to my sudden doubts. I close the door to my office and drop my briefcase into the visitor's chair. As I move around to the other side of my desk, I frown, noticing a small block of blue post-its on the blotter, Kate's familiar scribbling adorning the top post-it.

Escalating Thoughts

by Desina

"Saw this, thought of you," the note says. I chuckle, then start looking around to see wherever else she might have stuck little notes. I'm half pleasantly surprised and half irritated that I find none. I still have this gnawing feeling there would be one on the back of my shirt and it'd say "kick me," but that's probably a complex from having been the last boy to hit a growth spurt in fifth grade because I was the youngest.

I walk over to Kate's office, but she's out. I look at Leo. "She's here somewhere."

I pick up her coffee cup, hide it from Leo with my body, then go and fetch her coffee, remembering to add sugar. I add my own "Saw this, thought of you," note to the coffee cup before returning it to its rightful place, and walk back to my office, Leo shaking his head.

I'm stuck in the conference room for an hour-long consult with a fascinating wrongful death case, but all I can think about is what Kate did to me last night and what she's continuing to do to me right now.

Her thinking of me had to be positive, right? It wasn't another Chernof thing? Heh, last night she said I was full of it. I guess that means I can't be empty, right? I smile despite both insults.

The client doesn't notice my absent-mindedness, thank goodness, and they have a good case.

One problem.

The opposing counsel is my ex, Lydia. The ex that's been opposing counsel on the Redmayne case, and, while Kate teased me about the case mercilessly, Kate never found out about our prior history, only that Lauren was riding my ass. This time, I'd need to tell her, and I'm not sure how I feel about that.

Lydia will also be out for blood. She was about to become partner when the Redmayne case would settle, but I'm guessing her flubbing that negotiation means that she didn't make partner after all, and that anger will be aimed my way.

I go over all the details with the client again, listening for any sound of inconsistency that might indicate it's a tougher case than it sounds. True, most cases that get to litigation have nuance and precedent and can blow up a thousand ways if one isn't careful, but I got this rich by being good at nuance.

Fortunately, the client's not in a hurry; he's about to go on a several-week vacation, just wants to line his attorney up before he leaves. I don't necessarily have to tell Kate or Lauren right away, but I will need to tell them before any settlement negotiations or trial.

I say to the client, "Look, you've got some time, and I'd need to look through the firm's schedule to make sure we could take the litigation on," I replied. "Shall we meet again next week?"

The client agrees and we shake hands, then part.

I finally return to my office, lean back, and see a post-it note on my coffee cup. I look inside, and there's coffee. Still hot. The note said the same thing: "Saw this, thought of you." I snap a picture with my phone, then realize there's a second post-it underneath. "P.S. - it's not empty, either."

That's as close as Kate came to an apology, typically. Hell, it was closer than I usually came to one. My mother claims that's why I'm not married yet - I don't know how to apologize properly.

I dig around my desk drawer looking for something I remember seeing in there a few months back, plundering through many different kinds and sizes of pads, some fountain pen cartridges extra staples - all kinds of things. I pull the drawer completely out and see what I'm looking for: a paper pad in the shape of a high-heeled shoe. I pull out another post-it and put the now-traditional note on top. I call Leo and have him tell her there's a meeting in the conference room, then sneak in and put it on her desk.

I give Leo a thumbs up, but he just rolls his eyes.

Leo calls me later, and I know it's a ploy to carry out the latest of Kate and my thought escalations, but I pretend to fall for it.

I return and there's a well-worn paperback of some obviously sexy vampire novel on my desk with the "Saw this, thought of you," post-it note. I see the edge of another post-it note inside, and open to a page with a pretty hot kissing scene. Nothing was written on the post-it, though. It couldn't possibly have been an accident.

I smile, pulling out a Russian nesting doll I kept in a drawer to give to her at the right moment.

I use up a bunch of post-it notes and put them inside:

One.

Surprise.

Inside.

Another.

In the middle, I place one folded post-it that said: And I like surprises.

Then, on the outside, I write the now-traditional post-it, "Saw this, thought of you."

I put the nesting doll set on her desk the next time she stepped away. I narrowly miss her heading back to her office, but Leo covers for me at the last minute by distracting her so she turns away from where I've moved to.

After Kate returns to her office, Leo chases me down.

"What?" I ask innocently.

"What's this?" he says, waving his hands.

"Oh, we're just having fun."

Leo's eyes narrow. "Okay, then, so long as it's fun. But if Kate gets upset, you're fixing it, not me."

"Understood."

I'm on the phone with opposing counsel for an ongoing case when Kate returns to her desk and takes the doll apart. She smiles, then looks up at me with exasperation.

Oh. I'm on a phone call. Right. "I'm sorry, there was some background noise and I missed that last sentence?"

Opposing counsel patiently re-explains the last of the terms they want for a settlement. No way in hell was my guy going to fall for that, though. I start politely pushing at opposing counsel, and Kate wanders back in with a smile and the Russian nesting doll, which she places on my desk and sneaks out of the room. I smile despite the sudden tenseness in the phone call.

The argument with opposing counsel is so rote that I turn the doll toward me, seeing a post-it note with a single word. Is.

Against my better judgement while on a phone call, I open the first nesting doll and see another post-it. This.

The second doll reveals the third note: Why.

And the third reveals the fourth note: You.

I pause before the fourth doll to plead my client's case with opposing counsel, but he's having none of it. I absentmindedly open the doll, not thinking what the note would say.

Love.

I open the last doll to see the note inside: Me?

After an awkward pause, I hear a voice on the phone. "Counselor?"

Say What?

by Autumn Rayne

"Counselor? Mr. Grogan, are you still there?" I blink twice and switch the receiver of the phone to my right hand.

"Call me when you come up with better terms." I hang up the phone, not feeling remotely sorry for having no recollection of the last few minutes of the call. I slowly move all of the dolls to the front of my desk, the post-its in front of me. My hands float in the air over them as I read the words again. And again and again. *Is this why you love me?* "Great Scott," I breathe. I am entirely surprised by this round of small, sticky pieces of paper. But, not unpleasantly so. I do, after all, like surprises.

"Mr. Benedict Yancy," Leo calls as he walks into my office. I immediately lay my arms over the desk, desperately trying to cover the post-its lined up across the blotter. He gives me an odd look but says nothing about the way I am scrunched over the desk. "Lauren has a new client for you and Kate to meet."

"Me...and Kate?" I squeak.

"Yes," he answers slowly. "You and Kate. Is that a problem?"

"Of course it's not."

"Okay. Well, here." He steps to the front of the desk and holds out a file folder. I lift my hand just an inch off the desk and wait for him to put the folder in my hand. He simply stares at me. "What's under your arms?"

"My desk," I answer. He tips his head to the side. "Just give me the damned folder."

"The client will be here in ten minutes." I breathe a sigh of relief as he leaves the office. That relief, however, does not last long. In ten minutes, I have to face Kate. I pull my arms from the desk and read the post-its again. And again and again. I don't know what to do with this question. Is she seriously asking me or is this just the next part of the game?

I quickly gather the post-its and shove them into my brief case. I spend my remaining six minutes trying to study the folder from Leo, but I am not a fool. I know not one word is sticking in my brain. No, that's a lie. There are six words that are stuck there, just not six that are printed within this file.

"New client," Kate sings as she wanders into my office. "Let's go, Benedict," she smiles. "Chop, chop." I watch her walk through the double doors across the room from my desk and my shoulders drop. This is going to be longest meet and greet of my life. I push my chair back from the desk and follow Kate to the conference room. After an exchange of pleasantries with our new client, Mr. Corey, we sit at the glass table and he begins to explain his business in the area and the services he requires from Reed and Reed.

And I am not listening.

At all.

Is that why you love me?

This all seems like it should have a straightforward solution, but it does not. Game or no game, there can be no denying that both parties are skilled flirts. Game or no game, there can be no denying that both parties enjoyed the kissing. Game or no game, there can be no denying that both parties have expressed interest. How deep does that interest run? Well, for my part, it is a bottomless pit.

Is that why you love me?

What if I say yes? What if she doesn't realize that I am telling her the truth?
What if she does? What if my answer scares her?

What if it doesn't?

What if I had all day to ask 'what if'?

I would be leaving this place in a straightjacket.

I shift my eyes from Mr. Corey to Kate and notice that she, like me, isn't exactly focused on our new client. Is she thinking about last night or the flirtatious display of post-it notes? Obsessing over me, as I have been her? Or is she simply bored by Mr. Corey? I need to figure out the last nineteen hours from Kate's perspective. Insight into her past thinking, her future behavior, will allow me to understand the nature of the question, thus enabling an appropriate answer. Luckily, being a master of nuance also comes in handy outside of litigation.

I hide a chuckle, remembering that I once asked Leo to kill me if I ever truly came to understand what goes on inside Kate's head. I have always known that woman would be the death of me.

I do not think that I should be the one flummoxed here. I am better than this at the flirting game. I should put the dolls back together with a single post-it note in the very center that reads 'yes'. Kate should be the one perplexed and confused, thrown for a loop by my answer. She should be the one wondering if there is any truth to the reoccurring post-its.

I have a feeling that her question may indeed hold a bit of serious curiosity and answering in the affirmative might just muck things up. I don't like to muck things up. And admitting to anyone, especially Kate, that I have feelings for said woman would certainly muck things up.

Mr. Corey stands and reaches across the table, and I realize that our meeting is over. I shake his hand and as he leaves the room, Kate turns to me.

"Is it lunch time yet?" she asks. I pull the cuff of my dark grey dress shirt over my wrist and look at my watch.

"It can be," I shrug.

"Do you have plans for lunch?"

"No."

"Then let's go somewhere," she says cheerily. She stands and I follow her out of the conference room. "Any cravings, Benny?" Oh, Dear Katie, you have no idea the kinds of cravings I have right now. She turns to look at me, walking backwards towards our offices. She raises an eyebrow suggestively and I see that mischievous look in her eyes. Maybe she *does* know what I'm craving. Kate stops just outside the doors of my office and I close almost all of the space between us.

"What do *you* want, Katie?" I ask quietly, leaning over her just a bit. Her smile falters briefly but she quickly recovers. I tilt my head slightly, curious as to what she is up to as she backs into my office. Her finger beckons my pursuance and I oblige. She circles behind me, closing the door, and runs her fingers across my lower back as she comes to stand in front of me again.

"Do you know what I want, Benedict?" I shake my head, watching as those fingers move over my arm and across my side, taking hold of my tie. She pulls gently, bringing our mouths very close. "I want," she whispers...

Whatever the Lady Desires

by Desina

She pauses for effect and I try not to let her know how much she's rattling me. I suspect she has a clue, minx that she is. She's waiting on me.

I raise an eyebrow and smile. "Oh, do tell." I hope it comes out calm and collected because I feel anything but.

She frowns slightly. "Don't you *know* already?" I can't tell if the pout is real or if it's part of the game. I bank on the latter.

"Oh, I believe that women, especially you, have the agency and skills to communicate their innermost desires, not to mention satisfy them."

"Nice save, Benedict." She tugs gently on my tie. "Hmm, how shall I phrase it?" She pauses dramatically and I tilt my head.

She drops my tie and puts her hand on my right shoulder, walking to my right side, then whispers in my ear, "Something sweet."

Kate takes her hand from my shoulder, then places her finger behind my ear, running her finger around the back of my neck at the hairline. By the time her finger reaches my other ear, I'm covered in goosebumps. "Something sticky in *all* the best ways," she whispers, and a million naughty thoughts burst simultaneously to mind.

She walks around to face me, puts her hands on my lapels. "And very, very rich." After a moment's pause, she adds, "Think you can help me with that?"

After the rich line, I'm certain she's just teasing me. For all Kate's stated hatred of new money, she's but one generation away from it, and she'd be utterly miserable in a life of poverty. A thought blips past: maybe that's partly what taxed her relationship with Justin. Her shoe collection probably ran half his annual salary, and that's just what I'd seen since the boat disaster. I wonder how much more she'd had before then.

Maybe she'd needed to feel that loss after her boat blew up, and I suddenly drop into her life making her realize that people like me can easily replace the material, but not the immaterial. Stupidly, I'd given her the impression that immaterial didn't matter to me at what was probably exactly the worst possible time to do so.

"I'm sure I could help you with a variety of satisfyingly sweet, sticky, *and rich* possibilities, Katie. Do you have a preference or should I just pick one?"

I suck in my lower lip, tilt my head, and look at her. She bursts out laughing.

"Are you blushing, Bennie?"

I feel the heat around my neck. I'd been so preoccupied with answering her retort, I hadn't noticed that side effect. I wouldn't call it blushing, not exactly. Hyper aware of Katie, sure. I was just glad she was looking at my neck and not significantly lower at that moment. Well, a little glad.

She puts her cool fingers on my neck. "Wow, you're really hot."

"I'm pleased you think so," I say, smiling. I whisper, "Especially after spending the night in my bed." I return to normal volume to ask, "Shall we go?" I hold out my arm for her.

She takes my arm and follows me to my car. I have an idea of where to take her, but my hands want to drive her to my place for an extended smorgasbord of sweet, sticky, and rich, including at least two items that she'd possibly intended. However, knowing me, I'd want to blow off the rest of the work day and neither the firm nor my case load could afford that today.

"You haven't answered my question," she says when she's buckled in.

During the meeting, I'd come up with several possible answers. My favorite: "Objection, counselor, we have not yet established that I love you." However, I sense that would push her away more than a more truthful and real answer would.

I sigh softly and brush my fingertips on her cheek as I look her in the eyes. "I'm not ready to answer that question." Her smile tells me that she's no more fooled by that answer than I would be, but that it's taken for what it is: an acceptable truth.

"Chocolate cake," she says right before I start the engine. "That's what I'm craving right now."

"If that's what the lady most desires, then that is what the lady shall have."

"I didn't say it was what I most desired," she clarifies. I raise an eyebrow, but she turns away and looks out the window.

"Then chocolate cake it is. I-"

"You know a guy."

I try not to sound irritated. "Not what I was going to say."

She looks at me and puts her hand on mine. "Oh?"

"Do you want lunch and cake or just cake? Because if you want both and are willing to go two places, then we can get the really great cake."

"I've had a rough morning, so I'd like both. Can we get the cake first, though?"

"Of course." I had no idea what she meant by a rough morning. What had I missed in my lingering bliss because she'd spent most of the night in my arms? Now wasn't the time to ask. Right.

I pull into a parking place a block away from Chocolate Monster, feed the meter, and we head into my favorite chocolate place in the city. She puts her hand in mine as we enter, and we settle into a table in the back.

She orders the chocolate cake, while I order the mousse.

While we're waiting for our orders, I'm trying not to think of watching Kate licking chocolate frosting off her fork - or various parts of my anatomy - and utterly fail at both.

Kate studies the many vintage chocolate posters on the wall, and I'm letting her be quiet. I only look where she's looking when a frown flickers on her face before her expression recovers.

One word on that poster is clear: Justin.

With that, I decide that I'm not going to grill her over dessert, and I'm not going to grill her over lunch. Those are to remain pleasant experiences so she'll want to go out with me again.

With each bite, I try to match her sumptuous savoring of her cake with my equally evocative enjoyment of my mousse.

After she finishes, I note she's missed a small spot of frosting near her lip. "Allow me," I offer, holding a clean napkin up. She holds her face still for me, eyes tracking my approaching fingers. I gently wipe the frosting away. "There."

She smiles slightly, then nods her head toward the door, indicating she's ready to leave.

I drop cash for the bill and a generous tip, and we walk in silence back to the Vantage.

"What would you like to eat?" I ask.

"Your choice, since I picked the dessert."

I turn the car south to SoMa and head for Restaurant Lulu, one of my favorite haunts, and toss the keys to the valet.

"I haven't been here in years," she says. "I'd almost forgotten about it."

"I come here at least once a month," I reply. "Usually for lunch."

She asks me to order for her, and I can tell that whatever's been stressing her out is taking its toll. She looks almost green. I order a pork loin sandwich for me and a rosemary chicken sandwich for her as well as a bacon and goat cheese tart appetizer to split. After the waiter leaves, I place my hand on hers. "Everything okay?"

"No, but I don't want to ruin lunch talking about it. Later?" She doesn't move her hand or twitch, and I let my hand linger.

"Okay," I agree, slowly withdrawing my hand.

She savors each bite with less gusto than the chocolate, and we feed each other tastes of our choices. I love the way her eyes watch my lips as she's guiding her fingers to my mouth.

We finish lunch pretty quickly for a restaurant crunch hour, and I help her back into my car after the valet fetches it. I begin to drive, and she starts in.

"I woke up just after dawn, and looked at my phone to see what time it was. Because I'd turned my ringer off, I'd missed a drunk text from Justin."

"Oh?" I ask, my stomach suddenly doing somersaults.

"Yeah. Booty call at one in the morning. I was asleep in your arms at the time."

"Does he frequently text you for booty calls?"

"Not since-" She sighs heavily. "We had a huge argument a few weeks before you joined the firm. He said being with me was like bombs and Christmas. He said that half the time he loved me and half the time he wished he'd never met me. Worst of all, he said this all in my office while other people were still in the building."

"Ouch. I'm sorry, Katie. You don't deserve that."

"That day, I told Leo what happened, and if I ever went back to Justin to have me committed. I changed the ring tone for Justin's cell phone to silence. So he's called me, and I haven't returned personal calls, but of course I have to return the professional ones."

"Which means you need to pretend you're not angry or hurt when you are."

"Yeah," she says softly. "So I woke up and you were so adorably angelic lying there with your arms around me and your hair in a little halo, and Justin's being a total ass. My first thought was that it was Opposite Day, but then I realized what an ass Justin's been for a long time. Before we had sex, he'd never have been able to control himself enough to sleep with me without trying to get some. You were a gentleman, which I wasn't expecting. Kind of hoping you wouldn't be so much of one, frankly."

At that revelation, I want to spend the rest of my life kissing her. A small voice intrudes, asking about the firm. No, I could give that up if I had to, so long as I wind up with Kate. The full weight of that sinks in, and I recall the arguments with Carol over the time spent at the office, and how she said that either that went or she would. I'd cave for a while, then I'd be back working long hours, leading to a boom-and-bust cycle of arguing. But I'd never really wanted to change my tune - until now. And, depressing revelation time, Carol was absolutely right to want out of the relationship, something I hadn't understood until just now.

I chuckle. "Well, we can work on that last. I try not to be an ass in relationships, but I'm just as human as everyone else. You can count on it: I will be one. Probably at the worst possible moment."

Kate doesn't answer but looks out the window.

"So is that why you left my bed? Because of the text?"

"God no. I didn't go visit Justin. I was just confused and wanted space to think."

"It's okay," I say. "The note placement made me smile."

The corners of her lips turn up ever so slightly, but she doesn't say anything.

I drive into the garage underneath the RR&G building, and pull my car into the appointed spot.

We get into the parking garage elevator alone. "So, tonight?"

She looks at me quizzically. "For?"

"Being less of a gentleman. Per your insistence, of course."

"We're not having this conversation," she says.

"Oh, it doesn't need to be a conversation, Katie. A simple 'yes' would do."

She spins and snaps at me. "You are *the* most infuriating man I've ever met."

I smile and ask sweetly, "Is that why you love me?"

The corners of Kate's lips rise slightly and she gives an obviously prepared answer, "Objection, counselor, we have not yet established that I love you."

Given that she and I are clearly thinking along the same lines, I should call ahead and have Leo start the homicide proceedings. Naturally, I don't. Instead, I press the elevator's stop button and lean in to kiss her, one word on my lips.

"Overruled."

Hither and Thither

by Autumn Rayne

"*Overruled.*" I am just a breath away from Kate's mouth when she lifts her hands to my chest and stops me.

"You have no basis to overrule my objection," she states, poking a finger into my sternum. I back up a couple of steps, trying to avoid the incessant prodding.

"No?"

"No." She smiles sweetly and spins on her heel. As she reaches for the emergency stop button, I realize that she has purposely moved me away from the panel. I wait for a moment as she pushes the button, allowing the elevator to resume its course. She settles in the middle of the car, facing the doors with smug smile on her face.

Is this a challenge? I think this is a challenge.

Hmm. She's going to make me work for this one.

I walk behind Kate and towards the panel, making quite the choreographed display of hitting the stop button. When I turn to look at Kate, her smile is gone and she is staring at me from the corner of her eyes. I have to hold back a smile as I move to stand in front of her. I clasp my hands behind my back as she looks up at me, eyes now narrowed.

"What are you doing?"

"I want to argue my case," I answer. Kate rolls her eyes and moves to her left, pushing the button again. I, in turn, hit the button, stopping the car once more. "I think I deserve the opportunity." I pout but she offers no sympathy. With a slight tilt of her head, she stretches her arm past my side, hand seeking the button. I gently grab her wrist before she can complete her action. Kate doesn't seem to notice that in our back and forth over the control panel, I have adjusted her position, putting her just a couple of steps away from the back corner of the elevator.

"How can you *possibly* have an argument?" she asks, pulling her hand free. "You kiss me once, proposition me and then declare my undying love for you?" She shakes her head. "That doesn't work." Interesting.

"First of all," I start, taking a step closer to her. "I've kissed you *twice*." She backs up a little and I press on. "Well, three times, but the kiss we shared in my office last night was kind of..." I shrug. "Fleeting." I take another step forward and she takes another one backwards. "The third time, much as the proposition, was per your insistence."

"The third time?" Kate frowns as though she doesn't remember that moment.

"The third time, on the couch in my living room," I remind her unnecessarily. "Per *your* insistence," I repeat slowly.

"What?" she practically screams. "*My* insistence?"

"Yes," I nod. I lift my eyes to the ceiling, pretending to be thoughtful. "I believe your exact words were 'Kiss me. You have to kiss me.'" I drop my gaze back to her eyes and she starts shaking her head.

"That's not what I said," she argues.

"And, just shortly before *this* conversation, you said..." I lift a finger, pointing at her. "And, I'm quoting again. 'You were a gentleman, which I wasn't expecting. Kind of hoping you wouldn't be so much of one.'" I pause and tilt my head, smart-ass smirk perfectly placed. "Frankly."

"Okay, you know what that is? That's just borderline creepy stalker."

"And then you admitted that your love for me is undying." Kate's jaw drops.

"I definitely did *not* say that."

"On the contrary, Katie, you did." I straighten the knot in my tie and smile. "I have to say I was quite flattered." Her eyes drift downwards and she frowns. I can tell she's replaying that part of the dialog in her mind, trying to find a way to tell me that I'm wrong. Her lips form a small 'oh' and she looks up at me. "So, may I overrule your objection now?"

"You have no grounds," Kate says, trying to sidestep me. I lift my arm, hooking it around her waist, to bring her back to me. Two small, calculated steps and I have her pinned in the corner of the elevator. My fingers find her chin, lifting her mouth, and I finally gain the contact of her lips against mine. She slumps back against the wall and I have to tighten my arm around her waist to keep her upright. Kate moans so quietly against my mouth, *the* hottest sound I have *ever* heard, and I dare to take my 'argument' a little farther. I wrap my fingers in her hair, deepening the kiss well beyond the intensity of the two we have already shared. Her body tenses in all the right ways as she shifts against me and I slow our kiss, unhurriedly ending it.

Kate is breathless and flushed when I pull away. Her eyes are closed and a small crease has found its way across her brow. I release her, turning to the control panel to restart the elevator. As I stand facing the doors, pleased with this seeming acceptance of my reasoning, I work to remove the smirk from my face before we reach our intended floor. Kate moves, hitting the button to stop the elevator.

"This is the longest ride *ever*, Katie," I say, turning to her with an overly sarcastic roll of my eyes.

"You can't do that."

"Do what?"

"Th-that," Kate stutters, motioning towards the back corner. I turn to look at the corner, nodding my head thoughtfully. "Kissing each other doesn't constitute love." I turn back to her. "There are other things that need to happen first."

"Such as?"

"Such as..." She struggles for a moment to answer. "Dinner," she states. "People go out to dinner. To get to know each other."

"We already know each other."

"Not like...that's not what I mean."

"We just had lunch together," I argue.

"Yeah, and what did you learn about me during lunch?" Her question is rhetorical, but that doesn't stop me from answering.

"I learned that you could give a guy a heart attack with the way you eat your chocolate cake." Kate is clearly unamused. "All right," I shrug. "Let's go out to dinner. Then you can concede to my point."

"I will not concede," she says shaking her head. "One dinner...It's not enough time to *really* get to know each other."

"So we'll go out twice."

"Ben," she whines. "You are being infuriating again." I tip my head to the side.

"We're right back to where we started, Katie. Is that why you love-" Before I can finish my sentence, Kate closes the space between us. She wraps her arms around my shoulders and presses her mouth against mine. My arms circle her waist as I enjoy the way she takes control of this kiss. It's tentative and slow, but oh so passionate. When she pulls back, she smiles lightly, her lips still very close to mine.

"Pick me up at seven," she whispers.

Getting To Know You

by Desina

I smile, victorious. "What kind of place?"

"Someplace trendy." The elevator doors open, and she steps out. She pauses, looks back at me, and says, "Oh, and don't wear a suit."

I know exactly what I'll be wearing, but have no idea what she'll wear. I can't worry about that now because Lauren has me scheduled within an inch of my life until 5:30. I try to brush all the good stuff with Kate aside and concentrate on my work, taking extensive phone call notes on a yellow legal pad to make up for the fact that I have the attention span of a senile gnat this afternoon.

My last call ends at 5:45 and I note that Kate's gone. I drop by Leo's desk. "Did Kate leave for the day?"

"Yes, she did. You leaving too?"

"Yep. Got a date." I try not to look as happy as I feel.

"Funny, so does Kate." Leo was trying to pry, but I'm not falling for it.

"Imagine that," I say, trying to sound casual.

On my way out the building, I forgo my car and walk to a souvenir shop a block away, pick up something for Kate, and then return for my car and drive home. I swear, the drive feels like it takes three times as long as normal. My watch disagrees.

I change into designer black jeans, a near-black purple silk shirt, and a black leather fitted jacket that I know makes me look hotter than usual. I call it my prowl jacket because it's gotten me laid more than any other article of clothing. It also hadn't seen the light of day in a year.

I arrive at Lauren's at 6:59 and I see Kate buttoning a coat I've never seen her wear before: royal blue, mid-thigh, and form-hugging. She steps into matching pumps. As she's bent over, I see a flash of a yellow dress under the coat. She picks up a matching blue clutch, then sees that I'm almost to the door.

"Lauren's not home yet, so let's jet. I don't want to have to explain myself to her."

When she enters the restaurant, she turns back to look at me and smiles. I've picked well, at least from her first impression.

I help her with her coat, then see the cut of the yellow dress, which shows more cleavage than I'd seen even during her inattentive blindness demonstration. It's the kind of dress where I'd just secretly beg for a woman to breathe. Just breathe. It's delightfully short, sleeveless, deeply cut with a U-neck, and similarly low-cut in back with criss-cross straps. I consider the topological problems of getting the dress off her: unzip then slip over the head? Seems like that's the only way unless there's some snaps or such under her hair.

I'm transfixed, and she laughs. It's not a "you were bad, you shouldn't have been looking" laugh but rather a "made you look and I'm gloating" laugh. I'm not sure, given my bias, but I think half the restaurant just stopped talking.

I'm glad I'm standing one foot ahead of the other because I'm pretty sure there's no blood left in my legs. I should just keel over like a delicate flower, but I don't. Miraculously.

I recover shakily and peel off my jacket, pulling out my wallet and phone. She looks admiringly at me. I tilt my head and raise an eyebrow in question.

"You look great," she says. "I wondered what you'd have that wasn't a suit."

"You look spectacular," I say. "Very sexy," I purr.

"Thank you." She smiles.

I guide her to our table, my hand high enough on her back that my thumb rests on her bare skin.

The hardest thing I've ever had to do in my life was act calm and collected during dinner when all I wanted to do was carry Kate into my bed and spend the night making mad, passionate love to her. Unless she's just being perverse, which could happen, the dress is a statement that her thoughts are probably similar to my own. I hope.

The restaurant itself doesn't live up to my usual tastes. The services is top-notch, but the chef is not. I'm disappointed but hope Kate is pleased enough.

We decide to share a chocolate mousse for dessert. When it's delivered, I slide it toward me.

"Come closer," I say, moving my chair toward her. She scoots toward me, reaching for a spoon. I slide the second spoon away and dip my spoon into the mousse, then lift it to her lips.

She opens her mouth for me, allowing me to slide the spoon past her lips, her tongue lapping at the mousse until the spoon is clean. I remove the spoon, starting to dip it back into the mousse, but she bats my hand away.

"Give me the spoon," she says. I hand it to her, then she puts it down for a moment. "Something's been bugging me all night."

"Oh?"

She reaches over and unbuttons two more of my shirt buttons. "It's completely unfair that I'm the one showing all the skin here."

"If only I'd known, we could have solved that problem earlier," I tease.

She picks the spoon back up and dips it into the mousse, holding it up for me. I see a suit out of the corner of my eye and a familiar stride. Justin. I don't look at

him, and he doesn't approach. Instead, I put my elbow on the table and lean on my hand then look adoringly at Kate.

"What are you doing?" she asks.

"Enjoying myself," I admit. It's my turn, so I feed her a bite. Each time, we try to be a little bit more outrageous and over the top with our enjoyment of the mousse until I feed her the very last bite.

When I pay the bill, she gestures for my wallet, which I hand to her.

"Very slim," she says.

"I keep it uncomplicated," I say.

My black Amex is already with the server. She pulls out my driver's license and Kaiser card, the medical marijuana card tucked neatly behind. She raises an eyebrow but says nothing and puts the three items back. Three of my business cards occupy the next slot and my ATM card the remaining slot on that side. The other side has my Amex, a Visa Signature card, and a World Mastercard. The latter two are a hotel card and an airline card, respectively.

She opens the bill section of my wallet to find two crisp \$100 bills. Nothing else in my wallet. She double-checks.

"Simple."

"I like to keep my wallet that way," I say.

"What about the rest?" she teases, wanting to know if I can put up with her.

"I prefer to keep all my complicated eggs in one basket," I say. "Speaking of, let me take you back to my place and make love to you."

"Wow, now there's a conversational transition."

I shrug. "You are complicated. I like that."

"Why?"

I sigh. "Because you come across like a real person and you don't try to hide that. I'm never sure with people who seem to be simple if they're just boring or

dumb, or if they're cunning and someone I need to watch out for. I like knowing what I'm getting."

"Oh, you think you're getting me?" A flash of anger crosses her face.

"That's not what I meant," I soothe. "I've seen a lot of game playing, and you're not that person. Next time you're at my place, listen to the voice mail on my home answering machine. I've only ever given the number to a handful of people: you, Leo, Lauren, and my parents. I only ever listen to the recordings because my mother occasionally forgets and uses that number. But you'd be surprised at how many women call and leave messages for me on an unlisted number that they shouldn't have at all. I've changed the number since my last ex. So I keep a list of who's called on that line so I know to never, ever go out with them."

"Wow. How many a week?"

"Between five and ten, usually with one or two repeats."

"You must be encouraging them somehow," Kate accuses.

"By occasionally going out to dinner alone? By occasionally handing out my business card that doesn't have that number on it? By being obviously rich, successful, and single?" I bat my eyelashes. "I can't help that I'm cute," I mug.

"Okay," she says.

"Okay?"

"I'll go back with you to your place, if only because I want to hear these messages. No promises on the rest."

"Fair enough." Not the answer I'd prefer and not how I'd hoped to get her to agree to come to my place, but it's something we can proceed from - and that's the important part.

#

We're in the car enroute to my place when I broach the subject. "So, what are all the hoops that people are supposed to jump through before they decide they love someone?"

She looks surprised by my question. "What?"

"You said there are other things that need to happen first. What are those things?"

"Are you serious?"

"Katie, you spend all your days working around the 'supposed tos' in the legal system, so I'm curious what your 'supposed to' list contains. And why."

"You sound disappointed that I have a list."

"No, I'm just surprised that you have a list. You. A list. One of these things is not like the other."

"I don't know..."

"Mmm?"

"Look, I keep hearing that you're supposed to do this, and you're supposed to do that, and ... I don't know."

I stop the car at a red light and look at her. "How long did you and Justin know each other before you said you loved each other?"

She looks down. "Two weeks? Three? We married about six weeks after we met. Maybe seven. You know how I am with calendars."

I squeak, "Six weeks?"

She looks out the window. "Uh huh."

"And you think we don't know each other well enough."

"Well, Justin and I had a lot of sex," she blurts out, then flushes crimson. She opens her mouth to say something, thinks better of it, and closes her mouth.

I tease her, "Well, Katie, if that's how you insist on getting to know a guy-"

She doesn't say anything. My attempt at humor has fallen flat, leaving it more awkward than it was before.

The light turns green, so I concentrate on driving the two remaining blocks, wondering how I'm going to get past this awkward phase of the evening. An idea comes to mind and I have to suppress the smile. As I pull into my parking space, I note that Kate is still bright red.

I turn the car off and say to her, "I didn't mean to embarrass you."

"No, I did that all by myself." I get out and open her car door, helping her out of the car.

She lets me hold her in the elevator, but is still awkward, so I don't press for a kiss. I don't want to be That Guy. When we get to my door, I unlock it and let her enter first.

Kate steps in confidently, flicking on the light like it's her own place. I hang our coats, toss my wallet in the hand-made leather-lined bowl on the foyer table, and lead Katie into my living room.

I cue music on my phone, then plug it into my stereo system.

"What *are* you doing?"

"You'll know in a few seconds," I say. I lean over for the remote and turn the stereo components on, then start shuffling until the music starts.

"Getting to know you," I sing along, doing a soft shoe around Kate, singing along with the lyrics.

I slide across the floor on my knees, singing, "Getting to hope you like me." I end the line looking up at her, mugging for her, and she chuckles.

I continue dancing, pulling her along during the second verse. After a moment's hesitation, she joins in. She chuckles louder and louder. At the end of the song, she's singing and dancing in my arms.

The song stops and I hold her, both of us breathing heavily, her petite frame in that wicked yellow dress panting against me. A drop of sweat falls from my brow onto one of her breasts. I use the distraction to lean in for a kiss.

The kiss is long and slow and sweaty and hot, and she still tastes like expensive chocolate.

When we finally break apart for a deeper breath, she pokes a finger at my sternum. "You promised to show me something." I don't know what she's referring to. I've made two offers, but no promises that I'm aware of.

I tilt my head.

"Your answering machine," she clarifies. "This I gotta hear."

I lead her into my small home office and sit on the desk. Six messages, the machine blinks.

Kate presses play.

Ay, There's the Rub

by Autumn Rayne

"Hello, my baby. It's your mother." Kate looks at me and smiles as she lifts a hand to my face to pinch my cheek. I playfully push her away. "I found a box of your stuff. A few CDs...What's this?" I can hear a noise in the background, and I know Mom was digging through the box while she was on the phone. "Oh, there are also some love notes you wrote to Carrie when you were in high school. I don't understand why you didn't give them to her. Ben, these are so sweet! Carrie was such a nice girl. And pretty, too. Look at this! Oh, well, I guess you can't actually see it. It's a picture of you when you were...oh, maybe fifteen? Sixteen? I don't know, but you're wearing your blue shirt, the one you used to wear when you worked at that pizza place. Remember that?" Kate starts to giggle. "You had the cutest little mustache, barely there but you were proud of what little facial hair you could grow." Kate laughs harder, batting away my hands as I reach for the button to skip to the next message.

"Stop it," she smiles. "I want to hear the rest."

"It took a while for that little bit of fuzz on your chin to come in as a full beard, too. But, like I always used to tell you, it's all part of becoming a big boy."

"Oh my god," I mumble, burying my face in my hands.

"Anyway, call me and let me know what I should do with this stuff." The message ends with a beep.

"Throw it away!" I yell at the phone, much to Kate's delight.

"I so need to get my hands on that picture."

"No, you really don't." She offers me a fake pout and pushes the button to play the second message.

"Hey, Benny. It's me, Beth." I frown. How the hell did she get this number? "I'm moving back to San Francisco and I thought you could take me out to dinner." Kate raises an eyebrow.

"Ex," I say, shaking my head. "Never again."

"But she sounds so sweet and innocent," Kate smiles.

"Yeah," I laugh nervously. "'Sweet and innocent' are not the words I would use. Beth is the reason I changed the number."

"Oh." She nods her understanding. "Crazy?"

"A basket-full." Her attention returns to the machine as it beeps to signal the end of the message. She presses the button again.

"Greetings from Alcatraz," the voice purrs. "It's Lydia. I have been eyebrow deep in cases and could really use a night to...well, I was going to say 'let off some steam' but if I recall correctly, the steam just seems to follow us. Especially when we're in the back of your car." Lydia sighs. "It really is too bad that you bought the Aston Martin. There's no room in the back seat for our kind of fun." Kate looks at me at this point, a small frown of confusion knitting her brow. "Oh, well. Maybe we can go on another tour of Alcatraz. And I do remember what I said to you a few weeks ago, but I promise not to leave you handcuffed to the cell. This time." The message ends and Kate tilts her head to the side. I don't like the way she is looking at me.

"So, Lydia? Is she an ex-girlfriend, too?" I wince inwardly. This isn't really going as smoothly as I had planned. I had not anticipated actually having to answer any questions about these crazy women.

"Not...not exactly."

"Not exactly," Kate repeats as she crosses her arms, nicely framing her barely covered chest. "You talked to her a few weeks ago?"

"I spoke to Lydia because she was opposing counsel." She takes a moment to think, then nods her head as the recollection dawns.

"The baseball player that was going to sue Reed and Reed..." I nod. "She was..." I nod again. "Hmm. So do you frequently speak to opposing counsel about handcuffing you to a cell at Alcatraz? I thought you weren't leading on these women."

"I'm not," I assure her.

"So if she's not an ex, what, exactly is she?"

"Uh...um...well..." Yes, Ladies and Gentlemen, the articulate litigator is making an encore appearance.

"Sexual conquest?" she offers, raising her eyebrow. My wince is very much visible now.

"Not...not exactly."

"Not exactly."

"'Conquest' is not really the...right...word."

"What is the right word?"

"I...I...Uh..."

"I'm waiting, Benedict," she says, impatiently tapping her foot.

"Okay, maybe 'conquest' is the right word. But-" Kate doesn't give me a chance to say more. She rolls her eyes, loudly sighing her irritation, and pushes the button for the fourth message.

"Benedict, call your mother. It's been two days since I left you a message. This box of stuff won't take care of itself."

"Call your mother, Benedict," she sneers, stabbing the button.

"Hello, Mr. Grogan. Uh, Ben," the woman laughs lightly. "This is Victoria Connors. Victoria. Actually, call me Vicki." Oh hell. Kate mouths the name and her eyes widen as she figures out who Victoria Connors is.

"Connors? Judge Connors?" she screams at me.

"I can explain," I say quickly, holding up my hands as though the action will stop any tantrums.

"I had such a wonderful time listening to your arguments in the Golden Gate Jumper case. I would love to discuss it further. Over dinner, perhaps? I'll cook for you again." I drop my eyes to the floor as Judge Connors leaves her number and provocatively requests that I return her call.

"I'll cook for you...again?" Kate laughs a disbelieving, almost disgusted laugh. "Go ahead," she says, motioning towards me with her hand.

"Go ahead and...what?" I point to the answering machine. "Call her?"

"No!" She slaps my arm. "You said you could explain. So explain." I open my mouth and realize that explaining Judge Connors means bringing up Justin. Damn it. I close my mouth and smile uneasily. "Nice, Ben." Kate leaves the room, heading towards the front door. "Dinner with the judge, discussing a case." She lifts her hands as she stalks through the living room, making air quotes.

"Katie, please." I trot along behind her, quickly stepping around her to block the path to the door.

"Is that how you got Beth into bed?"

"No, well, kind of, but-"

"What about Lydia? Were you discussing a case with *her*?" I place my hands on her shoulders.

"Katie-"

"Don't lie to me, Ben," she orders, shrugging my hands away.

"No, that is not how I got Lydia into bed." I pause for a moment. I know I'm going to regret the words that are going to come out of my mouth. "That's how she got *me* into bed."

"Oh my god." She shakes her head and walks around me, stopping just short of the door. As she turns to me, she points a finger in my direction. "That night... that night you came back to the office looking for your keys..."

"The night you almost bludgeoned me to death with your saxophone?"

"Yes, that night. You were drunk."

"Drunk-ish," I remind her.

"You said that your presence at Judge Connors house was, and I'm quoting here," she says with a smart ass smirk, "'the longest story ever'." I nod. "Well, Mr. Grogan, the night is young and I could use a good story."

"I didn't say it was a good story." Kate moves closer to me, playing with the buttons on my shirt again.

"Please, Ben?" she begs, batting the lashes around her large, brown eyes. She steps into me, pressing her body against mine, and I lose all ability to think rationally.

"Katie," I breathe. She smiles, not a friendly smile, mind you, and suddenly I feel like the goat fed to the T-rex in that dinosaur movie. She takes my hand, leading me out of the office and into the living room. As she sits on the middle cushion of the couch, she pulls me down onto the cushion to her left.

"Judge Connors," she says slowly.

"Judge Connors." She lifts an eyebrow, prompting me to start the story. "All right," I sigh. "Justin and I had an agreement on a plea bargain for the Golden Gate Jumper. Until we met with the judge. Turns out that she believed our agreement was too harsh. Since that's what I told Justin before agreeing to his terms, I decided to retract and see how I could play Judge Connors."

"How you could *play* her."

"Not like that. I thought I could get the plea dropped to more favorable terms for my client." Kate nods, so I continue. "Well, she asked that Justin and I read a few cases and discuss our deal. She said she had a full schedule and asked us to meet her at her house, after hours."

"You *and* Justin?"

"Yes. When we got there, she had this elaborate dinner made for us. We spent the evening discussing our view points over the cases she asked us to read." I shrugged. "Long story short, turns out that she likes smart men who debate well." Kate tips her head to the side, pondering the information I have given her. I lift my hands. "End of story. I swear." I can't read her face, I don't know if she believes me.

"So you and Justin were...your debating was...sex. For her." Interesting that Kate draws the same conclusion as Lauren. Is this a woman thing? Or did I miss some kind of sign along the way?

"Yeah. I guess," I answer. "And I wasn't going back into the house for my keys. Hence, my late night trip to Reed and Reed." Kate remains silent for a moment, absently wrapping the end of a strand of hair around her finger.

"Is Beth a lawyer?" she asks.

"What?"

"Is Beth a lawyer?"

"Yes." Kate shifts her position on the couch, leaning slightly closer to me.

"So Beth, your ex, is a lawyer. Lydia, your conquest, is a lawyer. And then there's the judge." I frown, not sure where she is heading with this thought.

"That's quite a pattern, Benedict."

"I don't get out much," I shrug sheepishly.

"How did you manage to leave your keys at the judge's house?"

"I don't know. They must have fallen out of my coat pocket."

"Are you sure you didn't go back into the house to..." She lifts her fingers to make another set of air quotes. "Get your keys?" I smirk slightly.

"Are you implying that I did something less than honorable with...Her Honor?"

"I'm simply wondering what happened while you were waiting for the cab that Justin called for you. How do I know that you didn't go back to get your keys." She smiles as she repeats her joke.

"I didn't go back to..." Wait a minute. What? I lean back slightly, eyeing Kate as though she is foreign to me because, honestly, right now I don't know who I am dealing with. "How did you know that Justin called a cab for me?"

"Um, well, you said the two of you left the house and he called a cab because you didn't have your keys."

"No, I did *not* say that."

"So if you a-are not leading on these ladies, why is it that they go to the trouble to find your unlisted number? There has to be something you're not telling me." I shake my head, refusing to let her change the subject.

"I think there's something *you* are not telling me, Katie. How did you know that Justin called the cab?" She stands and moves to the middle of the room.

"Maybe...maybe you told me that while you were digging through your office looking for your spare set of keys." She turns and looks nervously at me.

"Unbelievable," I mutter slowly, standing and moving towards her. "Do you already know this story?" She smiles slightly and shrugs ever so briefly. "Did Justin tell you?" I ask, narrowing my eyes.

"He might have...might have mentioned something about it." I cross my arms, wondering just when that conversation happened, and what, if anything else, may have transpired. "Oh, it was nothing like that," she says quickly, as though she can read my thoughts. "We had a quick lunch together a couple of days after it

happened. It was a funny story." She smiles widely, but this time, her infectious giddiness is not contracted.

"You've been playing me," I accuse.

"It's your fault. You said you like to know what you're getting and I took that as a challenge."

"To deceive me?"

"You make it sound a lot less funny."

"It's not funny." I move back to the couch, sitting heavily.

"Oh, Ben," she laughs as she joins me. "It really was."

"No, Katie, it wasn't." I shift my eyes to the floor, searching for the right words. "I was trying in earnest to..."

"Ben..."

"...give you something in the way of..."

"Ben..."

"...this getting to know each other thing that you..."

"Ben!"

"What?" I turn to my right to find Kate just inches from my face. It takes me just a moment longer to register the fact that she is leaning over me and her hand is rubbing my leg, making its way up the inside of my thigh.

"Shut up," she whispers, pressing her mouth to mine.

The Importance of Being Earnest

by Desina

The part of me that was angry with her mere moments ago was smart enough to realize that my anger was now moot.

I smile. "Mmm?"

She pulls away for a moment to whisper, "Do. Everything." She watches me, waiting for my understanding.

I realize that I'd been misreading Kate since we first met. She'd wanted more, she was just used to pushing people away. Everyone away.

Just like I do.

It's how we protect ourselves.

She leans forward again to kiss me, so I reach for her and pull her down onto me. Her hand settles onto my thigh for balance as she rests her other hand on my shoulder, her yellow dress straining at the hem, highlighting her amazing curves.

I return her kiss, feeling her lips soften as she sighs into my lips. I run the fingertips of one hand gently along the deep neckline of her dress until I hear her breathing catch. When my fingers reach her cleavage, she gasps. I repeat with the other hand, starting from her cleavage, tracing the edge of the dress back to her neck. A soft moan escapes her mouth. Running my hands down her body, I slide her dress up a few inches. Kate, free from the tightness of the dress, settles onto my lap then wraps her hands around my neck.

"Benny," she whispers.

"Mmmm?" I ask, and she places my hands at the dress's hem. She reaches up and tugs her dress upward. I help her slip the dress off, my hands caressing soft skin and black lace as they glide over her thighs, the curves of her ass, and, finally, her back.

As much as I've imagined this moment, it's nothing like I'd expected, her dark honey-colored skin so soft and so close. I trace the bottom of her ribcage with the back of a finger, and her breathing hitches. I run my fingers delicately over her, watching the muscles ripple underneath, watching her breathing change, watching her become more aroused. She whimpers softly, craving more.

Her nipples poke at her black lace bra, and my thumbs slide upward to tease them. She smiles knowingly and reaches around, unfastening her bra. I take the straps and slide them slowly off her shoulders, setting each of her breasts free. Kate's got the faintest tan line from a rather daring bikini top, which makes me wonder where she wears her suit and what it looks like. After setting her bra next to us, I trace the tan line with my fingers. She raises an eyebrow flirtatiously, then flings her bra onto the couch. Kate leans in, nestling a nipple into my waiting mouth. At some point, I'd just started staring, and she chuckles knowingly at my expression.

I tease one breast with my hand and the other with my tongue. She leans into me slightly and laces her fingers through my hair. Her skin warms underneath my touch and her breathing becomes shallower. A soft moan escapes her mouth as her fingers rake through my hair, sending chills down my body.

I slide my right hand between her legs, moving her panties aside, sliding a finger slowly into her warm, wet, depths.

She releases my hair suddenly, and I look up. She smiles down at me, moves my invading hand, shimmies her black lace panties down her legs as far as she can, then looks into my eyes. "Take me." There's a moment of sadness in her eyes,

fear from times before when she wanted me and I refused, but then her confidence takes over, knowing I won't refuse her this time. Not now.

I smile at her. She straightens up and leans up against me, her abdomen against my face. I take her hint, scrunching down to adjust my height to hers, kissing and licking my way down to her moist, beckoning folds as she writhes. I slide my finger back where it belongs, stroking her slowly as I tease her with my tongue.

She wraps her hands around my head, sighing softly. I slide my left hand up to recapture her breast, slipping a second finger into her, finding the right spot that makes her moan. She alternates between pressing forward for more pressure on my tongue and pressing backward for more pressure on my fingers, and I tease her by making her pick and choose.

She moans in frustration then nudges me forward, closing the gap between my mouth and hand. My left hand rolls her hardened nipple in my fingers as my tongue circles her clit. Her breathing changes again as she thrusts against my tongue over and over, my fingers pressing against her in the reverse part of her thrusting.

She tenses up, and her body feels like a live wire. I press a tidge more with my fingers, and she starts to quiver in anticipation. I smile as I feel her start to come apart, her hands guiding my face to increase pressure on her clit.

"That feels so-" She's too distracted to finish her sentence. Her breath stops, then starts again, then she throws back her head and moans, "Bennnnnnnn" as she convulses around me. I slide my left hand around her to support her as her orgasm keeps going, waves of contractions around my fingers as Kate writhes against my tongue as my fingers continue penetrating her, backing off ever so slightly on the pressure when she becomes too sensitive.

I bring her down from her orgasmic high slowly, and she slides back into my lap as I slide my fingers out of her. She looks into my eyes, brushing my hair away from my face. I return the gesture, then hold her close.

"I always knew you could do that well," she said. She looks down at my shirt, covered with her juices, and laughs. "I did kinda make a mess, though."

I smile, but don't say anything, choosing instead to kiss her tenderly before scooping her up in my arms and standing. Kate squeals with delight as I carry her into my bedroom, removing her dangling panties before setting her gently on my bed.

"Wow, I really did make a mess, didn't I?" she asks.

She pulls me toward her and unbuttons my shirt, which I then pull off and toss into the corner while she tackles my belt. I coil it up, setting it on the nightstand. Kate's already got me half unzipped, and I groan relief when she pulls my jeans down far enough that my cock is no longer painfully bound within.

"Mmmhmm," I reply, removing my jeans, shoes, and socks. I stand before her in my navy silk boxers.

She strokes my cock through the silk a few times, then slides my boxers down so she can grab me. I'm about to slide my boxers off when she leans forward, grabbing my cock with her right hand, and slides it slowly into her mouth.

I touch her head reverently as she takes me inside her, knowing exactly how to use that tongue of hers. I'm momentarily struck with envy over how much her ex must have experienced her skilled tongue, then I remember she's blowing me, not him.

Just thinking about her here, spending the night, knowing what will come later is enough to send me over that precipice.

"Katie," I whisper, pulling away to avoid coming in her mouth without her okay. She reaches her left hand around, grabbing my ass, pulling me forward. She

knows what's happening, and she wants it. She wants me. I relax and give into her, stroking her wild hair as the waves of pleasure overtake me.

I pause, looking down at her, and she withdraws slowly, carefully licking me clean. She looks up, eyes relaxed. I gently push her back onto the bed and slide next to her, wrapping my arms around her.

I smile, wondering if the time is right.

"What?" she asks, her eyes seeking over my face, trying to figure out what I'm thinking.

"May I speak now?" I tease.

Katie grabs a pillow from behind her head and thwaps me.

#

We both awaken uncharacteristically late Saturday morning. I'd lost count of her orgasms somewhere in the middle of the night, and I'd had several myself.

Kate turns toward me, putting a hand on my bare chest. Her hair spills over her face, and I brush the wild wavy strands of her hair back with my fingers.

"Why didn't you ever give Carrie the letters you wrote?"

I sigh. I never told my mother the whole truth. It was easier to lie and say I'd never sent them. "I did."

Her brow creases in puzzlement. "So how come your mother has them?"

I look at her, not wanting to answer. It's a painful moment from my past.

"Oh," she says softly. But it's not an unpleasant sound, not a rejection, not what I feared at all.

I sigh. "One day, Carrie brought me all the letters I'd written her. She told me she had a boyfriend, whom she later married, and she had to give them back."

Kate reaches up and strokes my hair. "No woman saves love letters unless she cares, Ben."

I pull back slightly and stare at her. I had been so humiliated by the rejection, I'd never thought about why Carrie might have kept the letters. I only had focused on why she'd returned them to me. If anything, now I was more confused than before.

"Remember the football player client of yours? Who sent Lauren flowers?"

"Yeah?"

"What did she do with the flowers?"

"Threw them in the-" I say, then I get Kate's point. "Oh."

She chuckled. "You're really no good at this, are you?"

"Huh?"

"Seducing women." She flushes, then clarifies hastily, "You're great once you get into the sack. But getting here? Not your strong suit."

Kate's more correct than I'm willing to admit. My fingers trace the curve of her shoulder, then follow the curve of her side down to her waist. "Since I am here..."

She laughs. "Are you going to let me read those letters?"

"You mean, when I visit my parents?"

"Yeah. Soon, right?"

"Tomorrow evening. I go every Sunday for dinner unless I'm out of town on a case." My meandering fingers have teased her side into slight goose bumps, but she's not letting me off the hook.

"I'm coming with you."

I stiffen, for this has often been the kiss of death for my budding relationships. Yet, I sense it's important to Kate, especially given that her parents have both died. "You can come with me on one condition."

"What's that?"

"You stay with me the entire weekend. You want to get to know me? See it all."

She swallows hard and doesn't answer for a full minute.

I lift an eyebrow in inquiry.

"Okay," she concedes.

"Don't sound so enthusiastic," I snark.

"It's not that," she says, tracing a finger lazily across my chest. "Not you, I mean." She sighs.

I wait.

"One of the things I've really begun to look forward to on weekends is quiet time. And, while I obviously enjoy your company, it's not something you're best known for."

"Okay. Why 'began to look forward to'?"

"Because I never got that kind of time with Justin. There were always places to be seen, people to meet, his large family to spend time with..."

"Did you feel bowled over?"

"Yeah. And sometimes I feel that with you, too. Especially when you push."

I frown. "Essential job skill, I'm afraid."

"Tell me about it. I can be that way too."

"I hadn't noticed," I deadpan.

She laughs and shoves me back onto the bed. "I'll show you pushy."

And so she did.

#

Sunday morning, we stop by Lauren's when she'll be out so we can get Katie some fresh clothes for later.

"So what should I wear to meet your folks?" She holds up a dressy blouse and slacks, ones that would be perfect for the office.

"More casual, Katie."

"I thought we were going out to dinner." She bites her lip.

"We are."

"But?" She's pressing again, and I resist the urge to get defensive.

"Katie, my dad's a plumber. They don't do dress up except for their anniversary."

"What are you going to wear?"

"A polo shirt and jeans." And, well. She'll find out about the car later.

"And your \$1500 reindeer loafers?"

"Uh, no."

"So what shoes *are* you going to wear, Benny?"

"My trainers probably, why?"

"I want to know what shoes to wear."

I sigh. There's no way around this one. I have to give her time to really figure out what to wear and to go shopping if she wants. If she doesn't feel as comfortable as possible, she won't want to go again. "And then I'm going to put on my bowling shoes."

She looks at me in surprise. "You're going bowling?"

I clear my throat. "My folks and I go every Sunday night. You're welcome to bowl with us."

"You. Go bowling."

I resist the fifteen rude retorts that come to mind. "I do."

She sits back and laughs. "This I gotta see."

I smile at her and raise an eyebrow in curiosity.

She looks at me for a moment, then asks, "Who wins?"

I look down. "I, uh, I always let my mother win."

Kate laughs so hard she starts coughing. "Oh, I can't miss seeing this. I'm so going bowling with you and your folks."

So help me, I'm terrified.

Picking Up the Spare

by Autumn Rayne

I pull my phone out of my pocket and send Kate a text. *Any time now...*

Her response is quick and I nearly fumble the phone as I read it. *Can't come out now. Naked.*

I slip the phone back into my pocket and take a deep breath. Somewhere in that hallway, behind one of those wooden doors, is Kate, naked. And I want nothing more than to enter that small changing room and...

And help her decide which outfit to buy.

I turn to my left, spotting a middle-aged sales clerk a couple of racks away from me. She keeps looking at me out of the corner of her eyes and, if I'm not mistaken, there is a hint of a smile across her lips. She turns away from me and continues to tidy the display table of jeans. I look at the stack of jeans and my attention shifts back to the dressing rooms. I'm curious as to what Kate is trying on. She wears dresses and dress pants with fancy blouses at the office. I have never really seen her do 'casual'.

And the 'I-heart-Lake-Tahoe' hoodie doesn't really count.

Though, it was nice...especially when it was wet and clinging to her body...

I hear a quiet laugh and I look at the sales clerk again. There is a full smile on her face now. She sets down a pair of jeans and makes her way over to me.

"You're a wonderful man," she says, patting my arm. "Waiting for your girl. She's a very lucky woman." I smile politely and nod as she walks away. As soon as she is out of sight, I pull my phone out of my pocket again. *Will you please hurry?*

Kate answers my text, though not with one of her own. I hear Kate clear her throat and when I raise my eyes from my phone's screen, she is standing at the entrance of the hallway. She puts up her arms, resting her hands at shoulder height along the frame of the doorway.

"Hi-ya, Benny." My jaw hits the floor. The dark pair of blue jeans she is wearing hug her so nicely. The loops of the white crocheted top are small and feminine, but big enough to offer an exquisite peek at the black tank top she's wearing underneath.

"H-Hi," I stammer. Okay, so Kate does casual...very nicely.

#

I pull my Aston Martin into my parking space and kill the engine. I look at Kate as I remove the keys from the ignition. There is a cute frown of confusion across her forehead.

"Why are we here?" she asks.

"I have to get one more thing before we go to dinner with my parents," I answer. I open the door and motion for her to get out of the car. "Wait here." She cocks her head to the side as she leans her back against the passenger door, but she remains quiet. As I jog through the parking garage, I can't help but wonder what Kate will make of what she is about to see. I imagine there will be several snarky comments thrown in my direction. I stop next to an old, beat up red Honda and slip the key into the lock. Sitting in the driver's seat, I look around the faded interior. "Yep. I'll get snarky," I mutter. I start the engine and drive back to Kate.

"What's this?" she asks as I step out of the Honda.

"My car."

"Very funny, Benedict," she laughs. "Who did you steal this from?"

"I didn't steal it from anyone," I shrug. "This is mine."

"This...is *your* car?" She tilts her head to the side and starts to giggle. "How old is this thing?"

"Just hop in, Katie." I rest my arms on the frame about the driver's door and wait for her laughing fit to end.

"Come one," she coos. "I really want to know." As she takes a few steps to the side, I find myself suddenly intrigued by the look on her face. "It's what...a '90?" She leans the fronts of her legs against the side of the car and bends forward slightly. "Or a '91?" My eyes drop to her hands, which are now seductively caressing the hood of my vehicle.

"It's...uh...it's an '87," I answer. This is not the snark I had in mind.

"Nineteen eighty-seven," she purrs. It's difficult, but I manage to lift my eyes from her 'wax on, wax off' technique. And I find Kate's face much more intriguing.

"We should get...get going, Katie." She smiles impishly and slowly pushes her hands from the side of the car to the middle of the hood. "Don't...don't do that?"

"What's the matter, Benny? Afraid I'm going to pop the hood?"

"Get in the car, Katie." She pouts, but obliges. As I slip into the driver's seat and snap my seatbelt into place, I look at her, expectance written all over her face. "What?"

"So what's with the Cloak and Dagger act?"

"There's no Cloak and Dagger act."

"Sure there is. This," she says, motioning around the cab with her hands. "This isn't you."

"My dad is a plumber, Katie, remember? And Mom works at the library." I shrug. "They don't make much. I don't like to flaunt my money." She swats a hand at my shoulder and her bout of giggles starts up again.

"Liar! You so like to flaunt your money, Mr. I Like Nice Things."

"Okay. I don't like to flaunt my money in front of my parents," I correct. Clients and women? A completely different story. "Can we go now?" She nods and fastens her seatbelt.

"You are one surprise inside another," Kate says. She leans over the console and places a soft kiss on my cheek. "And I like surprises."

#

"Sit here, Kate," my mom says, pulling out the chair next to the seat she has chosen.

"O-okay. Thank you." As Mom and Kate settle themselves, Dad and I take the chairs on the other side of the table. Mom asking Kate to sit next to her is...curious. Not in a bad way, though. Mom has always been nice to the few women to whom I have introduced her. But, being a parent, there has always been a need to assess. This usually means that said woman never sits or stands next to Mom, giving Mom a chance to observe behavior. *"People can put on quite a show,"* she used to say. *"What better way to see a girl's true colors than to watch her when she doesn't know she's being watched."* I still maintain that whole theory is very stalker-ish.

However, Mom has yet to do this with Kate. In fact, there was no awkward introductions as we met my parents in the parking lot. Mom gave Kate a big hug and took her arm, practically dragging her into the building.

"I hope you don't mind that we are eating here at the bowling alley, Kate," Mom says. "I just had a craving for good pizza." She leans over and gently elbows Kate's arm. "Doesn't hurt that owner always gives us a free pitcher of beer,

either." Kate smiles widely and the women share a laugh. Yes, my mother, the quiet librarian, is quite the partier when in the mood.

The service here is fast; we are at the table only ten minutes before our pizza and beer arrive. But halfway through my second slice of pizza and I'm no longer hungry. Mom insists on telling Kate every Baby-Benny story she can think of. Oh, the first few are cute, of course. These stories are, after all, about me. It's the one she's *currently* telling, the one that makes me pray she'll hit her head and forget, that makes me drop my slice of pizza on my plate in defeat.

"Ben was maybe six at the time. He came out of his bedroom with his favorite blanky—"

"Mother," I whine. She shoots me a stern look and continues.

"Favorite blanky," she says pointedly, "wrapped around his shoulders." She laughs and puts a hand on Kate's arm. "He runs through the living room, screaming 'it's a bird, it's a plane'. And then he jumps up on the sofa..." My mother is laughing so hard right now, she's crying. "When he turns around and looks at me, he says 'it's Superman'. And that's when I notice he doesn't have any clothes on!" I put my elbows on the table and bury my face in my hands. Dad pats my shoulder, trying to comfort me through this torture. "No socks, no little white briefs! Nothing!"

"Okay, ha ha," I mutter. "Are the two of you finished cackling now?"

"If we're all done eating, we should grab a lane," Dad says.

"Yes. Please," I say.

"Well, I think I want to change things up a little bit tonight," Mom announces. She wipes the napkin over her mouth and sets it in the middle of her plate.

"What do you mean?" I ask.

"I want to bowl." I look at Dad, who appears to be just as confused as I feel.

"I thought that was the plan, Mom."

"Oh, Honey." She leans forward, tapping a finger on the table. "I want to *bowl*. Really bowl." She laughs almost evilly as she leans back in the chair. "I'm on to the two of you; have been for years. All this time I've been throwing my game, hoping to score low enough that you would get sick of letting me win. But tonight...tonight I am bringing my A game and I am going to win for real." She takes Kate's hand. "Girls against boys. Ready?" she asks Kate. Kate looks at me and offers a vicious smile.

"Game on," she agrees.

#

"Dad?" I whisper as Mom readies herself in front of our lane. "What the hell is she talking about?"

"I don't know," he shrugs. "She used to bowl a lot in high school, but I've never known her to be any good." I watch curiously as Mom heaves the red and gold bowling ball down the lane. Dad and I stand, almost in slow motion, our eyes following the ball. It is headed for the gutter but at the last possible moment, it hooks to the left and nails the lot just behind the head pin.

Strike.

Mom turns around and does a victory dance that should completely embarrass me, but I'm too dumbfounded by what I have just witnessed to care about humiliation. She trots back to the chairs and stands in front of me. She has to grab my chin and force my attention down to her because I am still staring at the big red LCD 'x' over the end of our lane.

"Your turn, Sweet Pea."

"Yeah. Okay." I flick my eyes back to the lane. "Okay." Confusion makes way for determination and I step up to the line. The ball rolls off my fingers, perfectly sliding across the oiled wood, and finds the sweet spot. I turn to the group, smiling triumphantly. "Strike," I say as I pass Kate. "You're up, Katrinka." She smirks and heads to the ball return. I can't help feeling extremely confident about

this competition, even with Mom's surprise talent, as Kate takes two steps to her right, then two to her left, then one to her right. She clearly doesn't know where to stand. And the way she's holding the ball? Sheesh. I tap Dad's arm. "Ten bucks she uses both hands and rolls from between her legs." He laughs until Mom gives us 'the look'. I watch Kate as she rubs a hand over the ball and then slips her fingers into the holes. An odd feeling starts building in my stomach and I think, without really thinking, that I'm about to be schooled. I hear the familiar sounds of clunking pins and the red 'x' appears above the lane.

"Yes! Go, Kate!" Mom yells, clapping her hands as she jumps up and down. Kate gives her a high-five and struts towards me.

"Oh, did I forget to mention that I played league in high school?" she asks with an innocence that, frankly, should be banned from her arsenal.

We continue through the game, Mom and Kate pulling strike after strike. Dad and I are holding our own with two spares each, but there is no way we're going to win. So I decide to play the only way left to play.

Dirty.

Kate steps into place, taking a deep breath as she focuses on the pins. I jump from my chair and move behind her.

"Gotcha!" I yell, grabbing her waist and scaring the hell out of her. The ball rolls into the gutter just two feet passed the line.

"Benedict Yancy!" I freeze, as does everyone else in the bowling alley. I open my mouth to say...something, anything, but a young man two lanes from us says it for me.

"Dude!" he yells. "You just got middle-named by your mother *and* your girlfriend!"