

A Kiss at Midnight



Four Holiday Shorts
Lisabet Sarai

A Kiss at Midnight:

Four Romantic Holiday Shorts

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Festival of Lights

"Did you remember to buy them, Leah?"

"The extra box of candles? Of course, what do you think? In thirty-six years of marriage, Abe, when have I ever disobeyed you?"

"Well, I seem to recall that just last week you 'forgot' to call the plumber like I told you to..."

"Come on, you know what I mean. I always obey you when you give me an order in that special tone of voice..."

"Like when I say, on your knees, slave?"

"Exactly."

"On your knees, slave."

"Just let me finish these dishes, okay?"

"Leah, I want you on your knees. Don't make me tell you again."

"Yes, Master, alright. Here I am, soapy hands and all. Now what?"

"How about unzipping me and using those slippery fingers to make me hard?"

"Is that a suggestion or an order, Master?"

"Don't be cheeky, Leah, or you'll be sorry."

"Yes, Sir, whatever you say. How's this?"

"Mmm. Very nice. Yes, indeed... Oh, yes! All those years kneading the challah dough have given you such wonderfully strong fingers, Leah!"

"Thank you, Master. I love to please you."

"You do, my zaftig little slave, you do. But that's enough for now. Here, let me help you up. Now go get the candles and meet me in the bedroom. I'll expect to find you naked."

"Of course, Abe. I can hardly wait. Remember how difficult it used to be, when the kids were at home? The gag had practical as well as symbolic value back then! I was glad they could come to dinner tonight - wasn't the kugel good, though! - but I was happy to see them leave. So that we could be alone for our own little celebration."

"Leah, if you don't be quiet and follow my instructions, I'll take up your suggestion about the gag."

"Sorry, Master. I..."

"Leah!"

"Okay, okay. I'm going."

"That's right, slave. Spread your legs wide and put your arms over your head. There. Is that too tight?"

"No, Master."

"Can you move? Don't speak, just nod or shake your head. Wriggle around a bit for me. Yes, that looks good. I love the way your breasts bounce when you squirm and struggle. In fact, you look good enough to eat..."

"Oh, Master! Ooh...!"

"You're tastier than any kugel, Leah. My own private Chanukah dinner!"

"*Oy, veysamir*, Abe! Oh, your tongue, your mouth, I can't stand it...!"

"Well, then, perhaps I should stop."

"No, no, don't stop!"

"I will do as I wish, slave. I am the Master here, do not forget that. Now, where are the matches?"

"Next to the candles, Sir."

"I think that I will blindfold you. That way, you won't know where the wax will fall next."

"Whatever you say, Sir."

"There you are. Can you see anything?"

"No, Sir."

"And the ropes are still comfortable? Good. I'll start with just one candle..."

"Ow!"

"It hurts, doesn't it, Leah? Especially on such a sensitive part of your body. But the burning fades. The heat travels through you. You feel it here, between your legs, don't you? Hot and wet."

"Ooh... ouch!"

"Your thighs are so smooth, so white. You should see the purple drops of wax, solidifying on that creamy background. I think I need another candle, another color, for contrast. Here's a turquoise one. Let me use them together, here perhaps..."

"Oh, please, Master!"

"You like this? I'll just drizzle some more on your belly. It's rather like decorating a cake...!"

"Oh, oh, that hurts...!"

"But not as much as here, no? The molten colors flow together so nicely in the deep valley between your breasts...!"

"Oh, Sir, oh, please, I can't bear it...!"

"Nonsense, slave. You've taken much more pain than this. Paraffin melts at a very low temperature, compared to a smoldering cigarette, or a white-hot brand... You do remember your safe word, don't you?"

"Yes, Master."

"Tell me what it is. I know you're not ready to use it, but I want to make sure you remember, for later."

"*L'chaim.*"

"Right. Good. Let me see. How about a red one? Red as your pussy lips, peeking out from your curls. Lovely."

"Ooh...umm."

"I must say, Leah, all evidence suggests that you are enjoying this."

"Mmm ... ow, that's not fair!"

"Fair? That's what this is about. Pleasure and pain. You don't know which to expect, do you? Pretty soon, you won't be able to tell them apart."

"Abe..."

"Slave, you will address me respectfully, or not at all!"

"I'm sorry, Master."

"That's better. Now, the real problem here is that I don't have enough hands. I can't bathe you in molten wax and play with your pussy at the same time. Wait, I have an idea..."

"Master...?"

"Be silent, slave. Be still. I'll be right back."

"Here we are. Recognize the jingle?"

"The clamps."

"Exactly. But tonight we'll use them for a mini-menorah."

"Argh...ooh"

"Hush. You know the way this works. First the bite, then the thrills radiating through you. There, those seem stable. Now I'll just stick a candle into the space between between the metal and your flesh -

light them - and voila! Leah the candelabra! Fabulous! As the candles burn down, one of your nipples will be coated in green wax, the other in orange. Just imagine, Leah!"

"Sir..."

"Yes, slave?"

"Perhaps you might also want to anchor one in my navel?"

"You kinky little slut! I thought that you couldn't bear the pain!"

"I'd do anything to please you, Master..."

"Hmmp. Well, I'll give it a try. Yes, that will do nicely. Now, you mustn't move around too much, or you'll spatter the wax all over you."

"Oh, that's... ow!"

"See what I mean? Writhing around that way will only make you sorry."

"Oh! Oh, Master! Ow, ooh, your fingers, the wax, I'm so confused!"

"I wish that you could see yourself, Leah. Your face is flushed. Your nipples are huge. Your skin is criss-crossed with multi-colored rivulets of paraffin. Meanwhile, there are rivulets of a different kind flowing out of your cunt."

"Uh, umm, argh...!"

"Don't thrash so, you'll only make it worse."

"I can't help it! Ah, ouch, Abe, you know it makes me crazy when you stick your finger into my behind..."

"How about two fingers, slave?"

"Aiee - ow - oh, God, God, I'm coming - oh, Master..."

"Or how about another candle, here...."

"Aieee.....!!!!"

"God, Leah, I was afraid that you'd set the house on fire!"

"Well, it was your idea, Abe. Anyway, you told me yourself that Chanukah candles don't burn very hot."

"They were hot enough."

"Yes, I guess that's true. Here, come give me a kiss, Abe, and tell me that I've pleased you."

"You please me, Leah. Every day, but especially on holidays."

"Can I have a bit more wine?"

"Of course, dear. Here's to us, an old married couple just enjoying each other's company."

"Indeed. To us. *L'chaim*. To life."

Easy

For G.T.

Sleet was the worst. He huddled under the awning of the shuttered refreshment kiosk, shivering as a gray veil swallowed the skeleton trees across the lake. It wouldn't take more than ten minutes for sleet to soak through his sweatshirt and the two sweaters he wore underneath. Then the wet clothing would freeze against his skin. The icy slush pooled at the curbs would leak into his battered shoes on his way back. Bally was a top brand, but the miles he had walked in the last six months had worn through the soles. Besides, even the best leather was never any good in winter weather.

He remembered his down ski parka – Columbia! – how toasty warm he had felt as he swooped down the black diamond trails up at Killington. Gone, like so many other things. If he had only realized what was happening, he might have planned a bit, held on to what was really important. It has happened so gradually, though. Plus it had violated all that he had believed and trusted. It had been inconceivable that he would find himself in this situation: jobless, homeless, broke and alone. On Christmas Eve, yet.

He had a Harvard MBA, for God's sake. Who would have thought that his plum product manager position at a top hi-tech, his BMW, his four bedroom colonial, his wife, his kids, his life, could all melt away like snow on a steam-tunnel manhole?

In the distance, the clock in City Hall tower struck three. Two and a half more hours and he could return to the shelter. He clenched his hands inside the canvas work gloves he had found discarded on trash pickup day last week, trying to reduce the surface area. His fingers were already numb. His feet were blocks of ice too. He had to get inside, somewhere. The temperature dropped as dusk approached.

He had two quarters and a dime hidden under his layers of rags, but he had already had his coffee today. He had made it last for two hours, while the Burger King staff glared at his bedraggled form slumped in the corner. Tough. He was a paying customer.

Cloud-colored ice skinned the lake where he used to take his daughter canoeing. Not strong enough yet for skating. He could start walking across. He knew the surface would crack long before he reached the boathouse on the opposite shore. It would be so easy. The lake was deeper than you'd expect.

The ice would freeze over his entry point. They wouldn't find him, not for days or even weeks. No one visited the park in the winter. That's why he came. The cops didn't hassle him here and he didn't have to suffer the looks of pity and disgust he got on the street.

Easy, yes. So tempting. Everything else was so difficult now, a daily struggle to survive. Why should he bother? Who, after all, would care?

He'd thought he was so clever, hiding his affairs, but his wife eventually lost patience. She took the kids out west, leaving him with the huge, empty house and an equally enormous alimony payment. Then came the downsizing—hell, how many “personnel reduction strategies” had he helped to plan? The bottom dropped out of real estate, but the mortgage had to be paid. No one, he discovered, wanted to hire a manager in his fifties, no matter how stellar his credentials.

His sigh hung in a white cloud before him. He had pawned his Rolex early on, but he guessed that about ten minutes had passed since the clock chimes. He closed his eyes, unutterably weary, longing for his cot in the shelter. It was hard to sleep there in the dorm, with the bums raving around him all night, but right now he would have given anything to be able to collapse onto the thin mattress and pull the rough blanket around his ears.

“Good afternoon, sir.”

He started, the youthful voice pulling him from his drowsy stupor.

“Ah—um—good afternoon.” She was a beacon of color in the monochrome landscape, with pink cheeks, copper curls and a long, holly-green coat. A matching green ribbon held her fiery hair away from her face. She was young, certainly no more than twenty, with a freshness that made her seem old-fashioned. That coat reminded him of one his mother used to wear in the fifties, shaped like the letter A with those funny sleeves—raglan sleeves, they were called. He felt irrationally pleased that he could remember. His mother's coat had been a sober brown, though. This woman's garment was so bright it made him blink.

She stepped closer, out of the sleet, joining him under the overhang. “Wintery weather,” she commented, smiling up at him. Her eyes were the same startling hue as her coat. Her lips formed a perfect bow. Even in the chill air, he caught a hint of her scent, cool and fresh like evergreens in snow.

He was suddenly aware of his own funky smell, his ragged clothing and his three days of stubble. He searched the girl's face for the inevitable sympathy or scorn. He found neither. Instead, inexplicably, he recognized desire.

His cock stirred inside his sweatpants. Was it possible? Exhausted and underfed, he hadn't been

horny in months.

She took his hand in her own small, bare fingers. “I know someplace warmer. Come with me.”

She drew him along the slippery path that circled the lake. Needles of sleet pricked his cheeks. His sweatshirt grew wetter with each step. In her cashmere coat and patent-leather boots, the woman seemed not to notice the weather.

Another spot of color grew before them. A Japanese-style bridge, rust-red, arched over the narrowest point in the hourglass-shaped lake. The trail crossed the bridge. He had never noticed the stairway leading down the bank. There was a ledge underneath, bordering the water, making a snug private space. He had to crouch down to follow her inside. The bridge swept upward, just over their heads.

“We're out of the wind here,” she told him, her voice like bells. “Let's sit down.” She slipped the coat off her shoulders and spread it over the dry stone.

He couldn't believe his eyes. Under the festive-hued coat, she was naked. Her skin was a creamy peach tone. The buds tipping her sweet, small breasts were a deeper rose. A ginger tangle at the apex of her thighs hid her sex. She looked like an innocent angel. Her smile as she reached for his zipper, though, hinted of lascivious delights.

“Wait—I can't...” His erection thickened by the second as she worked at his jeans but his shame was stronger than his lust. “Please, I haven't had a shower in a week. I smell...”

“I don't care,” she murmured, peeling the denim away from his hips and starting work on the sweatpants underneath. “I like the way you smell.” She gripped his rod. Her flesh was hot against his chilled skin.

“But why...?” His protests grew weaker as she pumped her hand up and down his length. “Who...?”

She stopped him with a peppermint flavored kiss. “Because I want you. Now. I can't wait.” He surrendered, sinking back onto the soft wool, entwined in her arms.

After that, there was nothing but glorious warmth, luscious wetness, tightness coiling in his groin and then expanding into utter relief. *I must be dreaming*, he thought, as she wrapped her thighs around his waist and drew him deeper. *Maybe I'm dying*.

He didn't care. She offered him her fire and he accepted her gift. He forgot everything except her satin skin, her cushioned hollows, her scent of fir trees by the ocean. There was no past, no future, only an eternal present.

They drifted together, passion cresting and receding and peaking again, lost in the ancient rhythms of the flesh. Finally, even their bodies melted away. All that remained was joy.

The chimes woke him, five strokes that reached him through some kind of fog. Darkness had fallen. Shadows filled the cozy nook under the bridge. Even in the gloom, though, he could tell that he was alone.

His limp, sticky cock hung outside his pants. As he noticed, he realized how cold he was, not just his penis but his whole body.

A dream, he thought. Still, shreds of joy clung to him. A dream like that was far better than waking life. Perhaps he could recreate the dream tonight, in his dormitory bed. He closed his eyes, summoning her emerald eyes and plump lips. Yes. He would not forget.

He needed to hurry, though. The shelter opened in a half hour and beds were allocated on a first-come, first-serve basis. He zipped up and then pressed against the ledge to lever himself onto his hands and knees.

He felt the plush softness of cashmere beneath his palms.

It was too dark to see, but he knew it was her coat. But if she had left her coat here, did that mean that she was wandering naked in the park in these frigid temperatures? Was she crazier than the old coots at the shelter?

I've got to find her, he thought, gathering the warm garment in his arms and crawling out from under the bridge.

The sleet has stopped. The December air was a knife in his lungs, clean and sharp. He peered into the darkness, seeking the slight, pale form of a nude woman.

A cluster of stars was born. To his right, twinkling points of brightness twined through the tree branches. Another tree leaped into light down the path. One by one the black winter skeletons transformed into fairytale shapes as the city turned on the holiday decorations.

Finally, surrounded by glory, he understood. He swung the coat over his shoulders and wrapped himself in its warm, pine-scented folds. Another gift, to remind him how precious life is. Even his life.

He headed for the street, humming an old carol under his breath. He had only twenty minutes to get to the shelter, but he wasn't worried. It would be easy.

Snow Bound

"Where ya goin', Elsie? To a funeral?" Bert cracked up at his own joke. He pointed his beer-laden fist at her, drawing his cronies' attention to the formal black outfit she'd chosen for the party. They snickered at her obvious discomfort. She hated it when he called her Elsie. Made her sound like a cow or something.

Turning her back on her ex, Ellen headed for the bar. Okay, maybe she looked slightly ridiculous, or at least out of place, in her velvet gown and rhinestone earrings, but it was New Year's Eve, for heaven sakes. Everyone else in Alicia's vast Soho loft wore jeans. So what? She'd always loved dressing up, and what better occasion than tonight?

Too bad that everyone she knew was Bert's friend, too. She'd broken up with Bert more than six months ago, but she was still forced to see him constantly, if she wanted any social life at all. She needed to meet some new people. That was rough, though, with her sixty-hour-a-week work schedule. She picked up an open bottle of champagne and poured herself another glass. Staring at bubbles rising through the golden liquid, she wondered how to get out of her social rut.

"Mind if I have some?" An unfamiliar male voice cut into her reverie. Ellen looked up to find a stranger holding out his goblet. He had pale skin, jet black hair, plump lips as red as strawberries, and the most gorgeous tuxedo Ellen had ever seen - inky dark satin that gleamed in the dim light, a snowy expanse of ruffled shirt, and a scarlet cummerbund. It fit his lean, muscled body perfectly, too.

"Of course," Ellen replied, a bit flustered at being faced with such a vision. "I didn't mean to hog it. Here, let me...." She filled his empty crystal flute - at least Alicia had pulled out her good glassware for the occasion - admiring the strong looking fingers that held the delicate stem.

"Happy New Year," the stranger said with a melting smile, clicking glasses.

"The same to you," Ellen replied. They sipped their champagne in silence. Ellen felt as though similar bubbles were cavorting in her chest. "I'm Ellen," she blurted out as the silence lengthened. "I work with Alicia."

"Very pleased to meet you, Ellen." The impeccably attired stranger took her hand. For an instant Ellen thought he intended to bring it to his lips. At the last moment, he merely gave it a firm squeeze. "Sean. I just joined the IT department. Night shift."

"Ah, that explains why I haven't seen you around the office. I'm sure that I would have noticed

someone like you!" Ellen realized after she closed her mouth that she must sound like total bimbo. She blushed to the roots of her blond hair.

"Someone like me?" Sean raised one eyebrow, a twinkle in his blue eyes.

"Well - you know, so debonair and sophisticated... I mean, there aren't too many guys who would be could wear a tuxedo like that - so comfortably, I mean, as though you were born in it...oh, dear, I'm being terribly silly. I'm just impressed, to be honest. Most of these guys - outside of work, they're such slobs..."

She gestured toward the other end of the loft, where Bert and his buddies gyrated to the beat of AC/DC. Topping their baggy jeans, they wore football jerseys, faded flannel, or stretched out hoodies.

"I must say that you look lovely," Sean told her. "The black velvet makes your hair glow like spun gold. And your eyes remind me of emeralds."

"Gee - um - thank you." Ellen was dumbfounded. Men just didn't say things like that these days.

"Dance with me," Sean insisted. Ellen was about to refuse - she hated heavy metal - when the strains of a Strauss waltz reached her ears.

"What...?"

"Come on. Don't disappoint me." Graceful and confident, he folded her into his arms. They swooped across the floor of the loft, wings on their feet, while the music swelled around them.

Ellen felt completely comfortable in the embrace of this stranger. She looked up into his smiling eyes. "This is wonderful. But where did the music come from?"

Sean shrugged. "The plot required it."

His cool hand rested on her bare back. Then he moved it a bit lower. A little shiver ran up Ellen's spine. Who was this elegant stranger? Could she really trust him?

She gazed up at his pale, composed features. "Are you a vampire?" she asked suddenly.

Sean started, then laughed. "A vampire? Why in the world would you ask that?"

"Well, you have that kind of style, old-fashioned, polite, as though you'd been born a long time ago. And your skin is so white..."

"The consequences of spending my nights pounding out code in a cubicle and my days sleeping," he replied, obviously amused. He opened his mouth to divulge a set of perfectly aligned, normal teeth. "See? No fangs at all."

The Strauss ended and was replaced by Mozart. Sean continued to guide her, leading unobtrusively but firmly. She snuggled against him, enjoying the feel of his satiny tux under her finger

tips. It all felt like a dream, or maybe a fairy tale, with Ellen as Cinderella.

"It's almost midnight," Alicia called from the bar, where she was opening more champagne.

Midnight. The gateway to a new year. Dimly she heard Bert leading the count down. "Five. Four. Three. Two. One." Everything but the dance and her partner seemed unreal.

Sean pulled her closer. His breath warmed her ear. "Happy New Year, Ellen," he whispered. Then he leaned down and kissed her.

For the first second or two, the kiss was almost chaste. His lips were gentle, as though asking a silent question. She gave him a wordless answer. Gaining confidence, he gathered her to his chest while his tongue invaded her mouth..

He tasted of champagne and faintly, fish, probably the smoked salmon canapés. Delicious. The kiss went on and on, growing fiercer and more feverish by the instant. His fingers dug into her hips like claws. Her nipples tightened under the stretchy velvet, until they were as hard as the stones dangling from her earlobes. The swollen bulk pressing against her belly told her that he was as aroused as she was.

Oh God! She was intoxicated, floating on a bubbly cloud, drinking him in. Cries of "Happy New Year" rang around them. Someone started singing "Auld Lang Syne". Ellen ignored everyone, lost in the most ecstatic kiss she'd ever experienced.

"It's starting to snow," someone called. "Perfect for New Year's!"

Sean abruptly broke their embrace. He looked anxiously out the floor-to-ceiling windows, where a few white flakes drifted lazily down onto the city. "Sorry," he mumbled, pushing her away. "Gotta go." He headed for the door.

"What? Wait! Where are you going? Sean?" Ellen nearly lost her balance. By the time she recovered, the tuxedo-clad gentleman who had stolen her breath and her heart had already vanished. She ran out to the empty landing and listened for his footsteps on the stairs. All she could hear was the wail of a distant siren.

Damn. She should have gotten his card, his number... She knew his first name, though, and the fact that he worked as Matheson, Fortuner and Todd just as she did. It shouldn't be too hard to find him.

She wandered back into the party, feeling more alone than ever. Midnight had come and gone but Alicia's guests didn't seem in any mood to go home. The music was louder and more raucous than before. Almost everyone was dancing, except for Alicia, who was in a clinch with her fiancé Paul.

Ellen found herself longing for her cozy apartment and her cat Franklin. For her, the party was over. Not wanting to disturb the hostess, she dug her coat and scarf out of the pile on the bed and headed downstairs.

The snow fell more heavily now. A quarter inch had already accumulated on the pavement. Her heels sank into the white blanket but it wasn't yet deep enough to make its way into her shoes. Ellen headed for the subway two blocks away, reminding herself that it might be slippery.

"Elsie! Wait a minute!" Someone grabbed her arm and whirled her around. "Where d'ya think you're going, bitch?"

Bert was clearly drunk. His face was red and his eyes watered from the cold. He had rushed after her without bothering with a jacket.

Ellen spoke slowly and deliberately, knowing from experience how hostile her ex could get when he'd had too many beers. "I'm headed home. I'm tired."

"Yeah? I'll bet you're going to meet that fancy boy somewhere. That guy you were smooching with, the one dressed up like a maitre'd. "

"I'm going home, Bert. But in any case, it's none of your business." Ellen disengaged herself from his strong grip. "Good night and Happy New Year." She started toward the corner.

"Not so fast, baby!" He snatched her coat and yanked her back. Ellen slipped on the pavement, smacking into his hard body. "You haven't given me a New Year's kiss yet." He brought his face close to hers. Ellen almost choked as the beer fumes enveloped her.

"I don't want to kiss you, Bert." Pressing her hands against his chest, she tried to push him away, but he held her tight. "I'm not your girlfriend anymore."

"You're mine," he replied, his voice thick. "You'll always be mine, baby. That's why I don't want you kissing no tuxedo-wearing fairy..." He forced his mouth down on hers. When she tried to protest, he plunged his tongue inside.

He tasted disgusting, the sour dregs of many beers mingling with onions from the pizza. He slobbered all over her, smearing her lipstick across her cheeks. Ellen struggled to free herself without success. Finally she just went limp and let him kiss her. It would be over soon enough.

Then she felt his cold hand sliding up under her skirt.

"No!" she cried.

"I know you missed me babe," Bert muttered, burying his face in her neck and giving her a hickie while she squirmed in his iron grip. "I'm gonna give you what you need."

All at once, someone or something rammed into them like a freight train, forcing them apart. Ellen landed on her butt in the snow. The impact dazed her and drove the breath from her lungs.

She gulped in huge mouthfuls of the frigid January air. What happened? Where was Bert?

When she saw the answer, she didn't believe it.

Her ex stood up against a wall, across the street. Actually, he wasn't standing; he was being held in place, his feet dangling, by a six foot tall black and white penguin. The binary-hued bird slapped his flipper back and forth across Bert's terrified face. Every now and again the penguin would raise one of its splayed pink feet and give Bert a vicious kick in the groin.

Ellen's former boyfriend groaned and twisted, trying to free himself from the penguin's clutches. His struggles only earned him more ferocious slaps.

"Lemme go! Please! I give up! I'll leave her alone. I promise...don't kill me...ow!" The penguin halted the beating and peered into Bert's face. Apparently satisfied, he let go of his victim. Bert crumpled to the ground.

The feathered vigilante loomed over Bert's cringing form.

"Don't hurt him anymore," Ellen cried. "Let him go."

The avian avenger turned in her direction, fixing her with its beady blank eyes. Ellen had the strangest sense of familiarity. Meanwhile, as soon as he saw that the bird's attention was elsewhere, Bert scrambled to a crouch and limped off in the direction of Alicia's building.

Ellen tried without success to rise to her feet. They kept sliding out from under her. Snowflakes swirled around her, settling on her eyelashes and blurring her vision. The next time she could see clearly, the oversized fowl had disappeared.

Too much champagne? she wondered. She didn't feel drunk. In any case, she had bigger problems than a giant penguin. Cold moisture seeped through her coat. Her toes grew numb. She shivered uncontrollably. The snow had stopped, but the temperature must be dropping. When a final attempt to get up failed, she worked herself onto her hands and knees. She'd crawl to the subway if she had to.

"Ellen! Let me help you!"

She recognized the voice. Relief flooded through her. "Sean! I was looking for you..."

"You'll catch your death from exposure," he replied. "Let's get you to some place warm." With his assistance, she managed to make it to a standing position. Leaning on his muscular arm, she allowed him to lead her to a twenty-four hour diner around the corner, where he ordered coffee for both

of them.

Ellen cupped her hands around the mug, feeling the blood return to her fingers. Sean sat across from her, looking as sleek and elegant as he had at the party. He was not wearing a coat.

"Why did you leave so abruptly?" she asked. Her delight at seeing him again made it hard for her to be angry.

Sean stared into his cup. "I had to," he answered finally.

"Why? Tell me. You can trust me."

"Really, you don't want to know."

"I do. I want to know everything about you, Sean. I feel so close to you already." She reached across the table to capture his hand. "I want to get closer."

"No...it's not possible."

The pain she saw in his eyes made Ellen's heart ache too. "Anything's possible. This is a romance." She squeezed his cool hand. "Please..."

Sean just shook his head. "No. It's forbidden."

They sat in silence. The waitress topped up their mugs. Still neither of them spoke.

"How about this?" Ellen broke the silence. "If I guess correctly, will you tell me?"

Sean gazed at her, a flicker of hope animating his face.

"It was you, wasn't it. The penguin."

Sean nodded slowly. "How did you know?" he whispered.

"I'm not sure. I just felt that I knew the bird, somehow... plus he was protecting me, the way I know you would..."

"Oh, Ellen!" He took her hand in both of his. "It's such a nightmare..."

"Tell me," she murmured. She glanced around the coffee shop. They were the only customers. The stocky Latina waitress was watching television. "Tell me, my darling."

Sean took a deep breath then let it out slowly. "I was cursed," he began. "By an Inuit shaman. I was doing graduate research in ecology near the North Pole. Somehow I desecrated a site considered sacred. The curse was my punishment."

Ellen sat quietly, waiting for him to continue.

"The shaman decreed that whenever the snow began to fall, I'd take the shape of a penguin."

"Um, I thought that penguins lived at the South Pole."

Sean shrugged. "You expect black magic to be logical?"

"So back at the party, when it started to snow..."

"I had to get out of there before it was too late. I didn't want you to see me change. I didn't want you to see me - like that..."

"But...I did..."

"I couldn't let that bastard take advantage of you. I had to do something! Oh, Ellen! I've been so lonely. I hate my miserable existence. I've even thought of - of taking my own life. But tonight, for the first time, when I met you..."

"I know, Sean. I felt it too." Ellen released his hand and sat back in the booth. "You're not alone any more. I'll help you to free yourself from this horror." She placed three dollars on the table under her mug. Then she stood and offered him her hand.

"Come home with me, darling. I want more of your swoon-inducing kisses."

"Are you sure... knowing what I am? What if the snow starts again?"

"I'll deal with it. We'll deal with it together. I love you, Sean. There's nothing that can keep us apart, not even an Eskimo curse or a giant bird. Let's go."

Like the gentleman that he was, Sean helped her on with her coat. He brushed his lips across her damp hair. "I love you too, Ellen. Thank you for trusting me."

Joy swelled in Ellen's breast. Everything would be all right. After all her pain, the universe had smiled. She had found her soul mate.

"There's just one thing."

"What is it, darling?"

"Is there an all-night grocery near here? I think we should pick up some canned herring on the way home."

A Kiss at Midnight

It wasn't deliberate, or what she'd expected.

Laura had actually planned to leave around eleven. She had to work tomorrow; hospitals didn't close for New Year's Day. The one glass of wine she allowed herself was long gone. She was exhausted from last night's shift. Her jaw ached from the constant smiling. She really didn't want to hear any more about Jill's and Howie's upcoming trip to Jamaica, or Martha's promotion, or Reese's engagement. All that Laura had to look forward to was curling up in the new quilt Mom has sent for Christmas, with a paperback mystery and her plump tabby Morris for company.

She'd made moves toward the bedroom where the coats were piled, but Gretch had intercepted her and begged her to stay. Gretchen was her best friend. Laura felt guilty refusing. She accepted a plastic glass of champagne and stood by the window, watching the drifting snow. Most of Gretchen's guests huddled around the TV, counting down with the broadcaster in Times Square.

Huge flakes swirled lazily like feathers from giant down pillow. She hoped that she'd be able to get a cab. Without thinking, she sipped at the effervescent liquid in her hand. It was chill and sweet on her tongue.

"Five. Four. Three. Two. One..." came the chant from the rest of the crowd. Laura barely heard them.

She felt his presence behind her an instant before he laid a firm hand on her shoulder and turned her around. She had a confused impression of worn plaid flannel and tousled brown hair as he gathered her to his chest and brought his face to hers.

His mouth was silky and strong and tasted like champagne. His brazen tongue played along the seam of her closed lips, teasing her into opening. A rush of heat flooded her when he entered, turning her earlobes and her nipples to burning coals. The air seemed to leave her lungs, sucked out by his energetic kiss. She staggered against him, suddenly dizzy. He held her closer, one bold hand cupping her buttocks while the other supported her under her arms.

He delved deeper, fanning the flames that whipped through her body. Between her legs, under her tights, she was melting. His scent rose around her, cherry pipe tobacco and old-fashioned lavender cologne. She ventured a tentative hand up his back and felt solid muscle move beneath his shirt. His fingertips grazed the side of her breast. A spark shot from her nipples down to her sex. She gasped into his mouth and he swallowed the small sound, kissing her harder.

Laura lost herself in the velvet darkness behind her closed eyelids. She didn't want to break the spell. She relaxed into his arms, letting him explore her body as though they were completely alone. Rigidness pressed against her belly, kindling a drunken sense of triumph. He was as aroused as she was.

The kiss lasted for hours. One moment he nibbled delicately at her lips. The next, he forced her wide and plundered her mouth, grinding his thigh against her crotch all the while. Champagne bubbles had found their way into her blood. She felt bouyant, giggly, light as air.

Finally he released her. "Happy New Year," the stranger murmured into her ear, nuzzling her throat wetly. Laura gazed up at dark eyes brimming with laughter and intelligence. She realized that she was trembling.

"Do I know you?" His face was vaguely familiar, but the rich baritone voice was completely new.

"You do now," he said with a grin. He raised his champagne glass to her in a silent toast, then took a sip. "I'm Dan. Gretchen's brother. And you're Laura, right?"

"Um--right." Laura felt her cheeks burn with embarrassment. "Did Gretchen put you up to this?" She forced herself to move away from him, even though what she really wanted was to throw herself back into his arms.

"Put me up to what?" Dan raised his eyebrows in mock innocence. "It's midnight on New Year's. You're supposed to kiss the person standing next to you."

Laura looked around. Sure enough, lots of couples were locked in heated embraces. She would have sworn that Dan's kiss had taken hours, but clearly it was only moments after midnight.

"Hm--well--thank you." Her still-taut nipples pressed against her sweater. She was sure that Dan could see them. She took another step backward and was acutely aware of how damp her panties had become. "I've got to go home now. Happy New Year."

"Wait!" He grabbed her hand. His strength was obvious. Laura wished she could melt into the floor. "Don't go yet. It's early." He searched her face and she saw doubt in his eyes for the first time. "Unless there's someone waiting for you...someone else...a lover..."

Laura's resistance fluttered away like the snowflakes outside. "No, there's no one waiting for me--except my cat. I don't have a lover."

Dan's relief was obvious. He circled her waist and pulled her against him. "Now you do."

His lips claimed hers once more. Laura knew it was going to be a good year.

About the Author

I became addicted to words at an early age. I began reading when I was four. I wrote my first story at five years old and my first poem at seven. Since then, I've written plays, tutorials, scholarly articles, marketing brochures, software specifications, self-help books, press releases, a five-hundred page dissertation, and of course, **lots** of erotica and erotic romance – nearly fifty single author titles, plus dozens of short stories in various erotic anthologies, including the Lambda winner *Where the Girls Are* and the IPPIE Best Erotic Book of 2011, *Carnal Machines*. My gay scifi erotic romance *Quarantine* won a Rainbow Awards 2012 Honorable Mention.

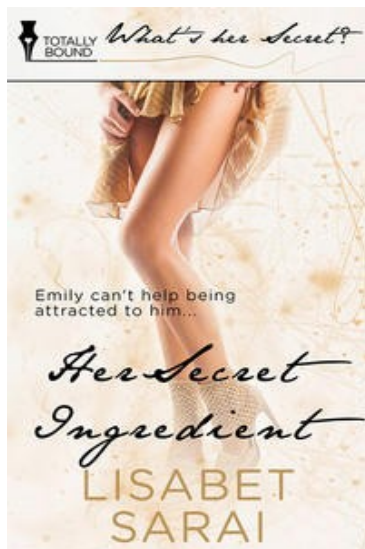


In addition to writing, I also edit erotica and erotic romance. My editing credits include the ground breaking anthology *Sacred Exchange*, which explores the spiritual aspects of BDSM relationships, the massive collection *Cream: The Best of the Erotica Readers and Writers Association*, the charity anthology *Coming Together: In Vein*, a collection of vampire tales that benefits Doctors Without Borders, and six volumes of the *Coming Together: Presents* series of single author charitable erotica books. You'll also find me writing the newsletter and occasional articles for the Erotica Readers and Writers Association (www.erotica-readers.com) and monthly reviews for Erotica Revealed (www.eroticarevealed.com).

I've always loved traveling; my husband seduced me in a Burmese restaurant by telling me tales of his foreign adventures. Since then I have visited every continent except Australia, although I still have a long travel wish list. Currently I live with him and our two exceptional felines in Southeast Asia, where I pursue an alternative career that is completely unrelated to my creative writing.

For more information about me and my writing, visit my website (<http://www.lisabetsarai.com>) or my blog Beyond Romance (<http://lisabetsarai.blogspot.com>)

Recent Releases



Stir in a pinch to stir up his passion

When the Tastes of France food channel offers Mei Lee “Emily” Wong a series of guest spots, she jumps at the opportunity to take her culinary career to a whole new level. Ultimately, she wants a show of her own, but first she has to prove herself to Michelin-starred network founder and effective dictator, Etienne Duvalier. A legend in the world of classic French cuisine as well as a domineering perfectionist, Etienne is sceptical about the culinary abilities of a woman from Hong Kong. To make things more difficult, the master chef is also so gorgeous that Emily can't help being attracted to him.

Emily tries to solve both problems by spiking her luscious profiteroles with an ancient Oriental aphrodisiac. Unfortunately, Harry Sanborne, the low-key, bespectacled producer for Emily's show, samples the delicacies she intends for Etienne's consumption. His powerful reaction to her secret ingredient comes as a pleasant

surprise to them both. Harry turns out to be far more impressive in bed than on the set. However, he can't do nearly as much to advance her ambitions as Etienne. Emily tries once more to tempt the exacting M. Duvalier with her special cooking as well as her feminine charms. The outrageous results threaten to end her TV career forever - until Harry steps in to save her reputation and claim her heart.

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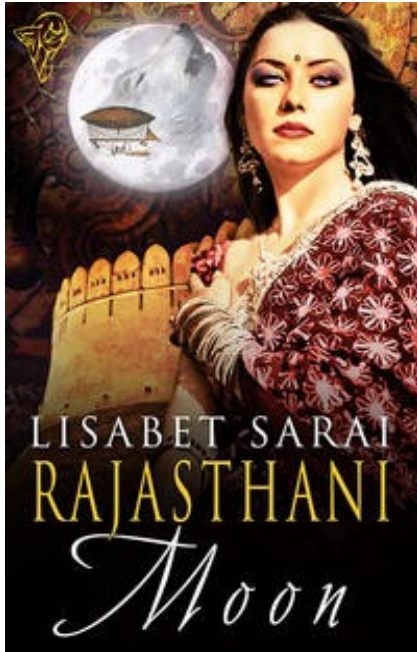
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More Recent Releases



Neither kink nor curse can stop a woman with a mission.

Cecily Harrowsmith, secret agent extraordinaire, is a woman on a mission. When the remote Indian kingdom of Rajasthan refused to remit its taxes to the Empire, Her Majesty imposed an embargo. Deprived of the energy-rich mineral viridium, essential for modern technology and development, Rajasthan was expected to quickly give in and resume its payments. Yet after three years, the rebellious principality still has not knuckled under. Cecily undertakes the difficult journey to that rugged, arid land in order to determine just how it has managed to survive, and if possible to convince the country to return to the Empire's embrace. Instead, she's taken captive by a brigand, who turns out to be the ruler's half-brother Pratan, and delivered into the hands of the sexy but sadistic Rajah Amir, who expertly mingles torture and delight in his interrogation of the voluptuous interloper.

Cursed before birth by Amir's jealous mother, Pratan changes to a ravening wolf whenever the moon is full. Cecily uncovers the counter-spell that can reverse the effects of the former queen's hex and tries to trade that information for her freedom. Drawn to the fierce wolf-man and sympathising with his suffering, she volunteers to serve as the sacrifice required by the ritual—offering her body to the beast. In return, the Rajah reveal Rajasthan's amazing secret source of energy. In the face of almost impossible odds, Cecily has accomplished the task entrusted to her by the Empire. But can she really bear to leave the virile half-brothers and their colourful land behind and return to the constraints of her life in England?

Review Snippet

This book really took me far and wide. At first you have a kidnapping fantasy with rip roaring sex that honestly left me breathless. Then you have a ménage with kinky toys that made me crunch ice. (A lot). Then you add a paranormal twist and I couldn't decide what I enjoyed more. It all worked. Every part of it. The hero was alpha male all the way, but had a soft side too and that made me fall for him too. The heroine was brave and adventurous and embraced every experience that came her way. I loved that. The action was amazing and the sex scenes sizzled through my e-reader. The other thing about this book was the steampunk elements that added spice to an already fun plot. Gadgets that tie you up by oral command, collars that kill and more await in this fast paced and stimulating read. ~ *Thistledown from Long and Short Reviews*

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