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I welcome all comments from readers (wiseguy35@hotmail.com).

For Sharon

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"What do you think?"

Sharon stood in front of the mirror, looking at the reflection of Joel behind her.

Joel stared thoughtfully at her Renaissance Fair costume, letting his eyes linger on the bust until he could feel that knowing smile forming on her face. "I'd say it depends on what look you're going for -- maiden or wench?"

Sharon hefted her breasts, which threatened to pop out of the top of her bodice at any sudden movement. "Wench, of course."

His arms encircled her and he kissed that special spot on her neck that always made her want to purr. "Then I think you've got it exactly."

There was rain in the forecast, so they brought their cloaks. It turned out to be a wise move -- no sooner had the first show ended than the sky opened and drenched everything and everyone all over the fairgrounds. A twenty-minute downpour gave way to a more-or-less constant drizzle. People slogged through the muck in a slow, steady stream until only the die-hard RenFest fans remained, gathered under the awning of the tavern in the middle of the grounds, drinking beer and singing bawdy songs.

Eventually even the tavern had to close. Sharon and Joel held on to each other for support as they steered unsteadily toward the grassy parking area.

"You realize we're in no condition to drive," Sharon noted as Joel fumbled in his leather belt pouch for his keys.

"True, M'lady," he agreed, putting his key into the lock.

"You also realize that you're unlocking the back door, right?"

Joel looked at the key in his hand. "So I am," he said, and opened the rear door of his SUV with a flourish. "Trust me. I have a plan."

"Oh, really?" Sharon eyed him in mock suspicion as she climbed into the back seat. Joel followed, closing the door behind him. "All right," she challenged, "now that we're in the back seat and nobody's driving, what's your plan?"

"It's a subtle plan," he assured her. "Step one involves getting us out of these wet clothes."

"I see. And how will we stay warm without dry clothes to put on?"

"That," he replied with a wink, "is Step Two."

A few minutes later, Sharon lay naked across the bench seat of the SUV, clutching her cloak to her breast, moaning softly as an equally naked Joel explored her sex with his tongue. The cloak was for privacy, in case another high-clearance vehicle passed by in the field. That concern became less and less important as Joel worked his magic underneath it. Soon Sharon's mind was too focused on the impending orgasm to care what a passer-by might see. She squealed and arched her back as the first wave hit and let the sensations fill her mind.

Joel rose as Sharon's breathing slowed, kissing his way up her belly to the valley between her breasts. An eager hand reached inside the cloak and found him, guiding him into the channel he had prepared. He worked slowly, establishing a rhythm and then gradually increasing it, until his control left him and he came.

Some time later, Sharon ran her fingers through her lover's hair. "Joel?"

"Hmmm?"

"What's Step Three?"

* * *

Joel kissed Sharon again, tasting the remnants of hollandaise sauce on her lips. "Happy birthday, love."

"You've said that already," she reminded him gently.

He nuzzled closer to her on the couch in his living room. "How about 'I love you,' then?"

She smiled. "You can say that as often as you want."

He patted her stomach gently. "Are you okay in here?"

"That's what the nurses tell me," she said, shrugging. "Lose some weight, get some exercise, quit complaining."

Joel growled. "I have one more present for you, if you're feeling up to it."

She eyed him suspiciously. "Been holding back, have you?"

"I have," he confessed, producing a small gift bag from beside the couch. "But only with the best of intentions. I didn't think you'd want me to give you this in front of your parents."

Curious, she reached into the bag and removed a plastic and nylon harness. "Okay, I'm stumped," she admitted, studying the thing. "What the heck is it?"

Joel grinned. "A little something I picked up at a specialty store. Stand up and allow me to demonstrate?"

Backing off the couch, he slid his hands up Sharon's skirt. She gave him a questioning look, but didn't resist as he pulled off her panties. Then he took the gift and put her feet through it, guiding it up her legs all the way.

"What is this?" she asked, feeling the smooth plastic against her most sensitive area. "Some kind of sex toy?"

"It's a butterfly," Joel explained as he reached beside the couch and produced a tiny plastic box, "with a wireless remote. Now all I have to do is press this little button and ..."

In a matter of seconds, Sharon's face went from curiosity to shock to rapture. Her legs buckled and deposited her back on the couch as the business end of the butterfly vibrated against her. Instinctively one hand flew to her groin, but pressing against the vibrator intensified the sensations.

"Let me," Joel said, moving her hand aside and sliding one of his own up her skirt. "How's this?" He shifted the plastic nub slightly, bringing it close to her button. Sharon gasped and moaned loudly. "I'll take that as a positive answer."

"Turn it off," she grunted, "and get up here."

"Off?" he teased. "But you haven't experienced the other speed setting yet. Here, try high speed." He flipped another switch on the remote and the vibration intensified. Sharon's objections turned to verbal mush as her body shuddered its way to her first climax of the night.

* * *

Their muscles ached as Sharon and Joel plopped down their suitcases in the hotel room.

"Here at last," Joel sighed as he flopped onto the bed. Sharon followed suit gingerly, wincing a little at the pain in her abdomen as she stretched out flat.

"Remind me never to fly that airline again," she groaned. "How many connections was that?"

"Three," he replied. "You'd think with the number of airlines out there, somebody would go from Baltimore to Little Rock in less than three hops."

"You'd think. Then again, maybe nobody goes to the Little Rock Sci Fi convention."

"Except us," he noted.

"To see the entire cast of *Farscape*," Sharon declared, "I'd fly to Pago Pago. I wonder how many hops that is?"

"I don't even want to think about it." Joel rolled off the bed and started stripping off clothing. "A hot shower sounds good, to loosen up the stiff muscles. Care to join me?"

Sharon smiled. "Won't that make something else stiff?"

He grinned back. "Some things are more fun that way."

For fun, she stuck out her tongue at him. "You go get started."

When she hadn't joined him after ten minutes, Joel decided she wasn't going to and turned off the water. He went back into the bedroom area wrapped in a towel to find Sharon asleep on her side of the bed. Looking down at her peaceful face, he forgave her immediately and snuggled in beside her for a nap.

A strange dream, in which a series of small, furry creatures kept climbing on him and rubbing up against his groin, flowed through his mind. It grew more vivid with each retelling, until the physical sensation was so realistic it woke him up.

"What the ...?"

Joel woke up on his back. The towel from his waist was gone, and there was, in fact, something soft and furry rubbing up and down on his fully erect penis.

"Surprise," Sharon sang softly. She was kneeling beside the bed, working him with her right hand, which was covered in a thick, soft glove of some kind of fur. He reached for her, but she took his hand and held it. "It's okay," she told him. "I'm not feeling up to a whole lot myself, but I've been waiting for the perfect opportunity to use this on you. Just relax and enjoy it."

It did feel good, he had to admit -- like thousands of tiny little fingers massaging his shaft and scrotum all at the same time. He closed his eyes and let the tingling spread over him. Without his realizing it, his hips started to move up and down on their own. Sharon recognized the sign and grinned at him. Her hand squeezed down harder on his post and rubbed the fur against the top. Joel's eyes flew open and found hers just as his member erupted. The pleasure explosion filled his mind so that he was only dimly aware of the warm goo landing on his stomach.

"How was that?" she asked when his breathing had slowed to normal.

"Unreal," he replied. Then, looking at his belly, he added, "But I need another shower now."

She winked. "Last one in is a rotten egg."

* * *

"So what's the verdict?"

They were sitting in their favorite restaurant waiting for dinner to arrive. Sharon took a sip of iced tea before responding.

"Well," she said with mock pride, "I'm officially an enigma. They don't know what's wrong with me, but they can at least agree something *is* wrong. That's progress, sort of."

"So what happens now?"

"Now we have dinner and don't worry about it."

Joel frowned. "Come on, hon."

She shrugged. "What else is there to do right now? In a few days I'll have an MRI, and depending on how that looks maybe a biopsy after that. And then we see what those turn up."

He nodded. "The waiting is the worst part, isn't it?"

Her hand found his under the table and squeezed. "Some days are easier than others. Tonight, I think I want to rent a couple of videos, take them back to your place, and make love on the sofa instead of watching them."

He squeezed back. "I'm there."

* * *

Logs crackled in the fireplace at Joel's apartment. He and Sharon sat on bean bag chairs in front of the fireplace, an open bottle of wine and two glasses ready at hand.

Joel was meticulously opening a gift wrapped in shiny paper and tied in a bow. Sharon laughed at him. "You're so careful," she chided him. "Nobody else I've ever known takes so much care not to harm wrapping that's going to get thrown away anyway."

"You took care in wrapping it," he countered. "Why shouldn't I show the same respect?"

"Because the suspense is driving me nuts. Just open it."

Laughing, he ripped the paper open savagely. Inside was a plain gift box, and inside that was a dozen brushed chrome picture frames woven together in a geometric pattern. Each frame contained a snapshot of Sharon and Joel -- in Little Rock, in Las Vegas, at his house, at her parents' house. His face and hers smiled back at him from a dozen angles.

Sharon smiled as she watched his face. "Merry Christmas, love."

Joel brushed back a happy tear and handed Sharon her gift. "Merry Christmas to you, too."

She tore open the wrapping to reveal a silvery gray box with a lid. She opened the lid and pulled out a Styrofoam head wearing a wig. "Oh, my god!" she squealed. "It looks exactly like my real hair! How did you do that?"

He grinned. "I pulled a bunch of it from your hairbrush, then sent it to this custom wigmaker with a picture of you. The rest was easy."

She reached over and kissed him deeply. "Thank you."

Placing the wig back in its box, she ran her fingers through the deep pile rug. "I've always wanted to make love in front of a fireplace on a bearskin rug. What's this made of?"

"Wool, nylon, and polyester. And probably lots of flame-retardant stuff, too."

Her arms encircled him and she kissed him again. "Close enough."

* * *

Joel held Sharon's hand gently against his cheek. He ignored the beeping of the monitors and the *hooooosh* of the respirator. After 42 days, he was as

used to them as Sharon's mother, who'd shared the bedside vigil with him since the day after Christmas.

"It won't be much longer now," Mom had said. Sharon's blood pressure was 44/22, having been dropping slowly for hours. The nurses had been coming in to check on them more frequently, fighting back tears themselves.

The steady, rhythmic beeping turned into an alarm. Sharon's blood pressure dropped to zero as her heart stopped.

"Goodbye, Sharon," he sobbed into her hand. "I love you."

-wg
4/17/03

In loving memory of my little sister, Sharon (1972-2003). In real life there was no Joel ... but there should have been.