



SUMMARY: A brother uses his gained powers to transform his baby brother and give him a new life and new career.

THE READINESS IS ALL

by Valerie Hope

James threw his head back in frustration again, seemingly profaning the last piercingly beautiful chords as they dissolved away into air and memory. Through the draped tangle of tuxedos and floor-length formals he could see Erin MacArthur on the front row, accepting with grace the whispered congratulations of the sopranos and altos. He couldn't fault Erin. She had a voice from heaven and worked ceaselessly to refine and train it, and had the inborn natural ability for musicality and the sensitivity that transferred music from notes on a page to the soul-wrenching, piercing sweetness of the solo she'd just finished singing. James sat on the back row, his reedy baritone adding pieces to the chords which supported her. He knew that those chords were important, that all the members of the choir were necessary and vital to making the ephemeral music that drew the audiences in and held them, the sounds caressing tears from their souls.

James had always tried to be cavalier and distant from the emotional side of music like his fellows at the school, but he remembered with fondness the days when he was a bespectacled boy soprano, singing Evensong in the chapel. In his childhood, it had been acceptable to lose himself in the harmonies and melodies, singing for the pure joy of making music as unashamed tears streaked his young face. He'd grown away from that, coming into manhood and being relegated to the back row and the bass clef. There had been a great camaraderie in singing the low notes with his friends, of taking the men's parts and laying the base of the chorale that everything else was built on. He became adjusted to the callous distance that the rest of the men gave to the music, playing along at first only to fit in and later because it was second nature.

Then the University Master Chorale had picked up Erin MacArthur. Her pure, clarion voice was untainted with the wide vibrato or full mellowness of age. It rang pure and sweet, like a flute, with a breathy tone that made her, despite her plainness, the most beautiful creature on Earth to James. It made him long for the days when he allowed himself to be lost in the tune. And his frustration mounted, knowing that biology had relegated him to the bottom of the chord. Never again would he be able to sing those flowing, pure melodies that hung in the air like the afterimages of bright light.

The concert ended hauntingly, with Bach's *Crucifixus* from the Mass in B Minor. The final chord, the only major chord in the piece signifying the ending of Christ's suffering as he surrendered his soul to death, hung in the air so fragile that the audience was afraid to clap lest they break the magic that had been woven.

Finally, the applause trickled out of the spellbound crowd and built to a roar. The Master Chorale was on their annual summer tour and James was singing four concerts a week. Their crowds were huge, as the Chorale was world-famous, and the members of the choir were

busily earning next year's budget. Ordinarily, James would have been burnt-out on singing by now, but the music never seemed to lose its luster since Erin had joined them. James had another reason for looking forward to the Washington, D.C. show than its simply being another chance for him to hear Erin's perfect soprano. From the first D.C. concert since he'd joined, James knew there would be a standing ovation. And, like every other performance there, the first one of the audience on his feet was James' older brother, Johnny.

Johnny was an immense bear of a man, all covered with thick curly hair and a full black beard. His beefy forearms pounded his thick hands together as tears streaked the wind-burnt cheeks under the familiar smiling green eyes. No shame in those tears. As the most-decorated soldier in the China War eleven years ago, Johnny Murphy felt he didn't have to explain himself to anyone.

Johnny and James were of a height, but the elder Murphy son was much thicker and wider of shoulder than James. Both had the thick black beards and light brown hair of their father, Liam Murphy. Their father and mother were both taken from them early in life by the accidental detonation of a truckload of surrendered IRA explosives beside their bus in Derry city. Johnny had been just old enough to work and see to James' education and keeping clothes on the rapidly growing boy. Four years later, just after James' eleventh birthday, Johnny and James had gone across the ocean to America to live with their uncle in Atlanta. U.S. Citizenship came soon after. Johnny joined the military as soon as he turned eighteen and used his enlistment bonus to enroll James in the Michaelson Academy and had begun his music career. James sang and practiced for himself, but the concern that he might let his big brother down had pushed him through some of the bleaker patches when quitting might have been an option. Now, here he was with the internationally-acclaimed, prestigious Master Chorale, touring the world and singing the most beautiful music the world had ever produced. He hoped Johnny was as proud of his accomplishments as he was.

James hurried back to the dressing rooms amidst the usual rounds of compliments and congratulations and quickly changed from his tuxedo into a sweater and khakis. His brother was at the door before James had finished combing his hair.

"You look more like Da every time I see you," his brother boomed around a crooked smile. James rushed him, arms wide, and lost himself in the fortress-like grip of his brother's embrace.

"Good to see you again, Johnny-bear," James said, using his childhood nickname. "How've you been lately? Life in the country agreeing with you?" Johnny had retired from the military shortly after the war with a Congressional Medal of Honor and four bullets in his left leg. He still walked with a limp when the weather was rainy. Now Johnny had a nice house just outside Gaithersburg with a huge garden and taught martial arts three times a week to inner-city children as a hobby.

"Couldn't be better. Sometimes, in the early spring when there's still a chill in the air, you could look out on the hills through my bedroom window and swear it's County Antrim like when we were boys. Someday I'll hold you to the promise you made to come and visit."

"You ready to eat?" James asked him.

"Always," Johnny replied. "There's someone I'd like to speak to first."

Johnny plowed into the milling mass of now-casually clad choir members, nodding and shaking hands with the few he knew obliquely through James, until he finally stopped in front of Erin, who was pulling her hair back into a loose horse-tail.

"I just wanted to tell you that you've the most angelic voice I've ever heard," Johnny told her. "Your solo on *The Blue Bird* had me teary-eyed before I even knew what was happening to me."

Erin smiled an automatic smile, the kind most talented performers cultivate early in their careers. "Thank you very much. Have we met?"

"You might have seen me here last year. I'm John, James Murphy's brother."

Erin looked a bit taken aback. "I didn't know James had a brother."

James cut in. "Sure you did. Everybody knows Johnny."

Erin looked at James strangely, then covered with a saccharine smile. "Oh, *this* James! I thought you meant the other one! I'm terribly sorry." James looked away as Johnny's smile became a bit forced. They both knew there was no other James in the choir. The conversation devolved into pleasantries before Erin found an excuse to be elsewhere.

Johnny waited patiently while the choir director gave his charges the run-down on the next day's itinerary and strict introductions to get some sleep. The brothers then rushed through the reception given by Washington University and then were out the door and off to dinner. The steaks were excellent, the wine even better, then a night-cap at an out-of-the-way little brew pub across the Potomac. They ended the night walking lazily on the mall, looking at the placid reflection of the Washington Monument in the reflecting pool.

"Seems a shame," Johnny mused.

"What does?"

"That lady, Erin. A voice like that and she's not even decent enough to know who's in that bloody choir with her. Seems like a voice like that should be attached to a better person."

James smiled. "She is a bit of a prima donna."

Johnny made a cutting motion with his hand. "Doesn't excuse her behavior. I can't understand why she thinks she's so damn much better than everyone else. You're the better musician."

"I wouldn't go that far, Johnny..."

"I would. I remember hearing you sing when you were nothing but a little bit," Johnny smiled. "You could sing higher than her back then. God, what a voice. I remember when you got your first solo, back in the church in Éire. *O Little Town of Bethlehem*. There wasn't a person in the place that didn't get chill-bumps hearing you sing that. You put your whole heart into it. Your Erin MacArthur Nose-in-the-Air may have a beautiful voice, but she can't lay her soul bare in front of everyone like you can."

James could never hold anything back from his brother. As they walked towards the Lincoln Memorial and the Wall, he told Johnny everything about how he'd been feeling the past months, how much he missed the old days when singing had been something different for

him. It was a venting, lancing a boil inside himself that had been hurting him for some time. It felt good to let it out, to let someone else know his troubles for a time.

Johnny was silent for a while. "It's the front row you miss, then, is it?"

James chuckled. "No, Johnny. I miss sending my voice up into the rafters, singing the high notes that hang in the air long after the music's stopped. I miss nobody caring when I get all emotional about what I'm doing. Not having to explain away my tears."

"You're a good man. You don't have to explain yourself to anybody."

James' eyes were a bit damp and his voice was thick. "Johnny, you know how different it was when you were in the Army. I'm not just myself. I'm a part of something, a unit. I have to fit with them, to be one of them, or the whole thing falls apart."

"So that's why you forgive that woman her behavior."

"And why I put up with that braying ass of a section leader. Because I have to be one of them or the music won't come. I may be the only one there who can look past his ego to see that, but I see it. And the music's the most important thing. Not me."

Johnny looked at his brother intently. "What you told me. It really hurts you, doesn't it?"

"Yeah. But it's not as important as the music."

"I don't want you to hurt, James."

James patted his brother's shoulder. "I know you don't."

"All my life, I've tried to give you whatever you needed to be whatever you wanted. I don't know if you know, but you're my best friend, Jimmy. I've never been much good at anything except busting heads. But you - you have that voice and that talent and that love for what you're doing. I worked as hard as I could to send you where you had to go to develop all that, because I wanted you to become the next Pavarotti so I could point and say, 'that's my little brother up there.'"

"You did great, Johnny."

Johnny held up a hand, cutting off any further words from his brother. "You were how I lived my life, Jimmy-boy. When I was over in China, getting my ass shot off, I'd wonder where you were, what you were practicing today, whether you were in rehearsal thinking about your brother over there fighting for the American right to cheap Taiwanese labor."

"All the time."

"I'd always wonder if there was anything more that I could give. You're a good man, Jimmy, you'd never just come out and ask me for anything. I wondered for a while if there was something you needed badly that you were too kind to come ask your brother for."

"What are you talking about?"

"You want the old days back. I can't give 'em to you. But I might be able to give you something just as good, if you wanted. Only if you wanted."

"What is it?"

Johnny explained as James' eyes bugged. Johnny was his brother and, James knew after it had been mentioned, his best friend in the whole world. But a part of him thought Johnny had lost his mind, living out in the country after that horrible war. It seemed so simple. Johnny talked about his solution as if it were the most common thing in the world.

"You don't believe me," Johnny said at length.

"You've never lied to me in your life," James said. "It just seems so outlandish."

"Only if you think the way the rest of the world says you should."

James turned to face his brother, walking backwards so Johnny wouldn't have to stop. James knew how his brother's leg hurt him if he had to stand for any length of time. "I'd have to think about it long and hard, John. It's not a decision I could make overnight."

"Maybe it is, and you just don't know it," Johnny said. "I'll be up late. If you need to talk, call me at home anytime."

James hugged his brother. "I'll see you tomorrow, before I leave, whatever happens." He pushed away from the embrace and walked through the street-lit night towards the hotel.

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Johnny knelt on the hard cobbles at the base of the China War Veteran's Memorial. The fountain gave a serene peace to the scene. John's thick fingers traced names inscribed around the base of the pedestal. So many names. So many wasted lives. In a small trench somewhere in Jaingxi Province outside of Nanking, Johnny Murphy had sworn to the heavens that if he could make just one life better, one life more livable, then the horrors of that war would not stain his soul.

He hoped that life could be his brother's.

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James sat up in his bed, listening through the wall over his roommate's soft snores. In the other room, two of the altos were singing quietly as they prepared themselves for bed. It was popular music, maybe Melissa Ethridge. But it was so heartfelt. The dim sounds got into him and made him long to sing along. The need for release became almost sexual.

He fumbled for the phone. Maybe Johnny had been right. Maybe it was a decision he could make overnight after all.

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Johnny led his little brother through the house and into his prized garden outside. Their feet crunched softly in the gravel of the path, disturbing the night's stillness. Both men were nervous but determined. The *katana* on John's shoulder slapped against his back as he walked - his limp was troublesome tonight. That meant rain.

"I'd been studying the Tao since before I enlisted," John was telling James. "I was lucky to have had the man I did teach me the martial arts. He made me learn the thinking behind everything as well as just the moves and balance.

"Y'see, the world is moved by two forces. *Yin* and *yang*. It wasn't until I got to China that I realized the reasons why I'd always had trouble fitting *yin-yang* cosmology with real life. The

Chinese thought that *yin* was the female force of the cosmos and *yang* the male. But it didn't fit. *Yang* stood for positive movement, building and creating while *yin* stood for negativity.

"There I was watching all these men with guns and bombs and tanks, and it hit me. *Yin* is the male force, the drive for destruction and loss. *Yang* creates. The only beings who can truly create are women. The Chinese had it all backwards."

"What does this mean for me?" James asked.

"You're a man. A creature of *yin*. But the Tao is equal parts of both. Tao is real forgiving so long as there's balance. I'm going to pull the *yin* from you and give it back to Tao, taking *yang* to replace the balance in you."

They were in the garden proper. All the things which Johnny had spent so long helping to grow. It seemed poetic to James, the thing he'd worked hardest to help grow, would stand here at the last.

"I'm in balance. My *yin*, my destructiveness, is balanced out by my *yang*, my need to help and protect. You're not in balance at all, little brother. That's why you hurt inside. The *yin* is what's hurting you, so I'm going to take it away."

Trusting his brother wholly, and hoping beyond hope that Tao, or God or Allah or Buddha could truly pull this off, James followed his brother's instructions and stripped down. His brother helped him wash himself in the small clear pond in the garden's center.

John centered his *chi*, his inner life-force, to the task at hand. Stretching his senses, he broke the world down into its parts, its elements of water, fire, wind, wood and metal and the *yin* and *yang* forces that motivated them and bound them together under Tao. He forced himself to forget the beautiful spirit that was his brother and concentrate on the orderly stack of elements and forces that went to make him up. Reaching in, he took a spiritual hold on the *yin* flowing through his brother and channeled it out, rendering it back to the Tao that granted it. Then, casting his perceptions into the great cosmos, he tapped into the force of *yang* that drove the universe. The call of *yang* to the *yin* in John's soul was intoxicating and it was a constant battle for John to keep his head. This was for his brother. He channeled the immense flow of *yang* through the world into his brother. In the tangible world, John heard James gasp in shock as healing energy flowed into him. No more was his soul at odds with his being. The painful rifts between what James was and what he longed to be were closed and sealed.

John unsheathed the sword at his back. It caught the moonlight across its wickedly graceful polished surface.

"Now, with this sword which is the center of all I shall set you free," he intoned as he'd been taught by his *sifu* in the years he'd stayed in China. "Made of metal, shaped in fire, quenched in water, cooled in air, and set in wood, the sword is all things."

John raised all of his weight onto the ball of one foot as the blade went straight into the air over his head. A slight shift of weight, a flexing of enormous battle-hardened shoulders, and the *katana* descended through a deadly arc that cut the air with an audible *whoosh*. The tip of the blade cut a vertical gash along James' body from between his collarbones to just below his navel, but it was so sharp James did not feel a thing. No blood issued from the shallow cut.

John sheathed the sword and leaned heavily against a stone bench. The working with the primal driving forces of the universe and the game leg took its toll, and John breathed an exhausted sigh that seemed to almost deflate him with weariness.

"It's over, James. You can come out," he said to the motionless figure of his brother.

The expression on James' face never changed as his hands reached forward to explore the cut along his chest. The long fingers moved jerkily and without much dexterity as they traced the wound. Finding it at last, James dug his fingers into the wound and pulled his hands apart, ripping the skin wide as if it were a piece of clothing. A pair of firm, smallish breasts popped through the wound. Another pull and the wound parted to expose a set of narrow, creamy shoulders dusted with light freckles. One lissome, willowy arm came free, exposing a slender and delicate hand graced with long fingernails. The other came free and together they pushed down the shell that was James Murphy to bring a tight, flat stomach and narrow waist into the moonlight. As soon as the slender delta of the pubic mound found its way free, two long pale legs stepped out of the old skin and got their balance on dainty feet. The smooth rounded bum wiggled girlishly as the figure got its equilibrium.

Johnny smiled, closed his eyes, and thanked his faith in Tao. The tiny girl's hands reached up to the head that had been James' and lifted. A spill of curly reddish locks broke free to hang just below the smooth shoulders. The face was delicate, with a long aquiline nose and a wide, expressive mouth. The cheekbones were high, like their mothers', and the strong chin and high brow were all from their father. But the sea-green eyes held a gaze that could have only been James.

"You're all right, James?" John asked.

The voice was shaky and quavering. "Am I?"

"I can't say you look more and more like Da anymore. You're mother's spitting image."

The girl's smile was bright and expressive. She tottered about a bit, exploring the complicated series of movements it took to move a woman's body. Nothing seemed to balance right. James could not take big steps anymore and the strange pulling of the breasts made his step become more fluid and less up-and-down, which James quickly discovered was quite painful.

"Do you have what you need?" Johnny asked.

The girl shrugged.

"Try and see."

The girl looked apprehensive for a moment, then cleared her throat a few times. She parted her lips and began to breathily vocalize a quiet melody. John could barely hear it.

"Aw, c'mon, Jimmy-boy. You can do better than that. Give it some lung, for God's sake."

The crystalline soprano launched into *Dúlamán*, a silly nonsense song about seaweed that their mother had sung to both of them in their youths. The voice was dusky but light, with a breathy quality that made it piercingly sweet while at the same time mature and full of emotion. John tapped his foot along with the catchy tune. They were both laughing joyously by

the time John had regained the strength to stand. His brother - his sister, now - lent him a slender arm for support as John went back to the house to retrieve his pistol.

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The police lights cast an eerie illumination on the scene. The officers were canvassing the area checking for witnesses, but it wasn't looking good. The body had been found early that morning, shot seven times. All the money, jewelry and credit cards were missing. Such a bitter waste, that a man's life totaled up to a load that was probably in a pawn-shop window by now.

"Officer Foster, the brother and sister are here to I.D. the victim," the coroner said.

Foster walked across the crime scene to the hulking brother and the slender, gorgeous sister. They both carried neutral expressions. Poor folks were probably in shock after being called first thing in the morning to be told their brother had been murdered.

"I'm Don Foster. You're the family?"

The big man nodded. "John Murphy. This is my sister Sara."

"Waitaminnit. John Murphy? *The* John Murphy, the Congressional Medal of Honor winner?"

"Yeah. Can I see my brother?"

Foster kicked himself silently for forgetting his place. "I'm sorry, sir, of course you can. I have to warn you, though. It's not very pretty. Whoever did this shot him and then cut him up pretty badly."

"I can handle it," John said. He hugged his sister tight. Foster found himself wishing he could've met Sara Murphy under different circumstances. She was a beauty.

The coroner pulled back the sheet, covering the face as soon as John could say, "That's Jimmy."

"I'm terribly sorry for your loss, Mr. and Ms. Murphy," the coroner said dolefully.

"We'll get whoever did this," Foster promised. It sounded hollow to everyone.

"Will there be an autopsy?" the sister asked in an innocent voice.

The coroner coughed. "I don't think so. The cause of death is very obvious."

John sighed in relief. He didn't know how he was going to explain how his late younger brother came to be stuffed with PVC pipe, water, and about \$100 worth of steaks.

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"Dammit, Johnny, I don't want to go through all that again," Sara complained. "I've been through school already and I'm past that now."

John sat by his now-sister's bedside. "There has to be a balance. You've gotten what you needed and wanted to make you whole again. Now you have to pay Tao back for what you took from it."

Sara raked a hand through her long, curly hair. "How the hell am I gonna pay for school?"

John smiled. "When you were born, mother and Da started a bank account for me with a fifty pounds. You never knew about it. I managed to feed a little cash into the account every now and again as we grew up just in case something happened. There's about 50,000 pounds in there now. I think it should cover the costs of buying a new identity and still have some left for school."

Tears welled in his new sister's eyes. "But you've already given me so much."

John shrugged. "I'm your brother. I promised Da I'd take care of you."

"And so you have," Sara breathed, hugging him tight. "So you have."

* * *

The brother and sister went out early the next day into the city. John contacted some old buddies at the Pentagon who called in favors. Soon Sara Bridget Murphy had an Irish birth certificate, a set of citizenship papers, a social security number, several credit cards and a full bachelor of arts transcript from the University of Virginia. John transferred the title of his old Corolla to his sister and then took her to the local mall to fit her out with new "gear" as he called it. Sara was mortified at first, wandering around the lingerie aisles in the stores wondering for all the world whether she was a B-cup or a C-cup. John proved invaluable for his knack in finding very helpful sales staff who didn't ask many questions. He also gave her a hellishly hard time the whole day.

Sara found herself beginning to enjoy the day. John was so stable and secure in himself that nobody seemed to find it odd that this huge bear of a man with a limp was having a grand "Girls' Day Out" with his sister. They tried on hats together and laughed as they hadn't since their parents were alive. John became scandalous in his penchant for selecting the naughtiest, most revealing item in the store and giving it to Sara to try on. She shocked him back by buying some of the racier items.

Sara decided that if she intended to get back into performance any time soon, she would have to get used to walking around in heels, something she'd dreaded as soon as the small details of her transformation began to sink in. She bought a pair of elegant three-inch pumps and tottered around the mall like a walking accident, clinging to her brother's arm to keep from going face-down. It took around two hours for her to get the knack of it (she still had trouble negotiating stairs and corners) and was soon pushing her brother around the mall in a borrowed wheelchair once his bad leg finally gave out on him. John sat by cracking jokes at her lack of clue as she had a full facial and makeover and they finally even got the vacuous make-up counter woman tickled.

Soon the guest room of John's house was full, the chest-of-drawers stuffed with every conceivable style of panty and bra, stockings with garters and hose, shirts, blouses and tank-tops, skirts and jeans and shorts. The closet was stuffed with dresses and the floor of the small walk-in covered in pumps, flats, sandals and sneakers. The bathroom counter was littered with cosmetics and applicators, perfumes and paints, and the shower loaded with moisturizers, shampoos, conditioners and depilatories. John had gallantly picked up the tab everywhere they went and it must have cost him a small mint.

John knocked on her door as she was tying her long hair back with a bandanna. He crept in carefully, peeking around the door, as any brother would entering a sister's inner

sanctum. "Sara, you've got a doctor's appointment at three o'clock this afternoon to get everything checked out."

"I feel fine," she told him.

"Just a precaution," John said. "Besides, I want you to talk to him anyway, make sure you know everything you might need to know about being a woman." He set a bag on the bed and retreated quickly. Sara could almost swear her brother had been blushing. Sara peeked in the bag. In it were an assortment of tampons, panty-shields and other feminine hygiene products. She also found a few pamphlets printed for teenage girls explaining the menstrual cycle and the use of all the products her brother had bought for her. There was also a box of condoms. At first Sara was outraged, but it soon calmed. She was an attractive girl; she'd drawn eyes all day at the mall. And the "magic" John had performed had not just altered her body, it had given him the mind and soul of a woman as well. Several times that morning she had discovered herself letting her eye wander over several handsome young men out shopping and wondering about things that would have brought up stomach acid during her days as a man. She smiled, wrinkling her nose as she did so. Her damn brother thought of everything!

The doctor's visit was bad - Sara had no idea what was involved in a gynecological check-up or a mammogram. She sulked in Johnny's car, trying to ignore the various aches and pains in her most intimate areas. Her brother gave her a look of purest sympathy and rubbed her shoulder as they drove.

"Bad, was it?"

"I think that constitutes any pay-back I need to make to Tao," Sara harrumphed.

John smiled lopsidedly. "Not quite like having to turn your head and cough, I guess."

"You get your tits squashed flat between two metal plates and then tell me how you feel. And whoever designed that damn machine made it so there was a really sharp corner poking me right in the damned ribs the whole time. This must be the part they never tell you."

"I'm sorry, Sara love." It hadn't taken Johnny long to come up with a nickname for her and Sara had to admit it sent waves of warmth and love through her every time he said it. "But I thought it was pretty necessary."

"I suppose it was. Besides, after all the things they stuck up your mickey after you got shot you probably have a better idea than most about what that was like." John had begun urinating blood from the hydrostatic shock of being shot in the thigh shortly after the surgery. He had detailed the medieval instruments they'd used on him in the hospital to find the problems in a letter that had made James blanch completely white. But if Johnny could come to keep his sense of humor through all of that, then Sara could keep hers through a simple gynecological exam.

John smiled. "How about we get a pint downtown and try to forget our respective tortures?"

* * *

James had been in The Capitol Pub many times before with his brother. But Sara got carded. She ordered and excused herself, proud of herself for weaving through the crowd so expertly on her heels. She pushed on the door to the restroom and was about to go in when someone cleared their throat noisily behind her.

"Beg pardon, miss. But I don't think that's the one you want."

Sara looked up and saw "Gentlemen" printed clearly on the dark wood of the door. She blushed immediately. "Oh my God," she breathed. "Thank you so much. I don't know where my mind is today."

As she crossed the small foyer to the door marked "Ladies," she noticed the man who had warned her draping a lingering gaze over her breasts and derrière. Sara growled under her breath (even that was somehow musical) and wondered if she'd ever get wholly used to being a woman. Even the prospect of being in a ladies' room brought a small thrill of forbidden pleasure, even though she now had every right to be there. She collected herself rapidly as the warm rush flowed from her. She blotted herself dry and fixed her appearance in the mirror before rejoining her brother outside in the bar. When she returned, a tall, angular man was sitting next to John, chatting amiably.

John's eyes brightened. "Curt, this is my sister, Sara. Sara, this is Curtis Lieberman, a buddy from the Army. He was in my unit for a couple weeks in Nanking before he got transferred out."

Sara shook his hand. "Nice grip," Curtis commented, smiling. "You shake hands like a guy, did you know that?"

John flushed as Sara groped for a suitable cover. "I get that a lot. When you're raised by a brother like Johnny you learn to do a lot of things like a guy. I can still kick his butt in football."

John *ahem*-ed with mock offense. "Sure, after I came home with a game leg."

"You play football? Really?" Curt said with a little disbelief.

"Football," John snorted. "Real football. Not that pointless American excuse for a brawl."

"I keep forgetting I'm drinking with a couple of micks."

Sara nursed a half-pint of lager as the two men caught up. She used to be able to swill pints of beer with her brother, but since she'd become a young woman she'd found her capacity for food and drink more than halved. And her alcohol tolerance seemed to be non-existent. She found herself studying Curt's face over the rim of her glass, tracing with her eyes the hard solid lines of his jaw and the chiseled quality of his severe cheekbones. He had sparkling blue eyes and a mischievous lock of dark hair that found its way into his face at the most inopportune moments, causing him to smile a lopsided grin that something in Sara found irresistible. She suppressed a light shudder at the thought of leaning her smooth cheek against those impossibly wide shoulders and playing her slender fingers across the well-defined expanse of chest. The desires caused alarm in the part of her that was still James, the part of her that had yet to accept her new femininity.

Johnny seemed to sense her alarm and nonchalantly looked at his watch. "Curt, I'd love to sit up all night talking, but I need to take Sara home. She's been practicing like a demon for those Master Chorale auditions and she needs an early start tomorrow."

Curt threw a ten-dollar bill onto the table-top and stood. "Johnny, it's been great seeing you again. Here's my card -" he threw down a business card atop the money "-call me sometime next week and we'll catch the Redskins game. Sara, do you go in for American football, or are you as stubborn as your brother? I'd love it if you could come."

Sara made a noncommittal answer, looking to John for some kind of salvation.

"Next week may be kinda tight," John said. "But I'll call. At the very least we can have a beer."

Curtis left after a round of handshakes and Sara seemed to collapse visibly with a sigh.

"I was afraid something like that might happen," John said quietly. "Sure he's a handsome devil, isn't he? Don't be afraid, girl. It's only natural you'd be attracted to him."

"It's hard to get used to."

"Sure it is. It's like puberty all over again. You remember when girls stopped being dumb and started getting interesting? Now it's the other way around for you. Don't fight it. Sara, you're a woman now with urges and desires. I'm surprised you haven't done more fooling around with your new body anyway. If I'd woken up as a woman, I wouldn't be able to keep my hands off of myself. And if you have to pick a guy, you could do much worse than Curt."

Sara rubbed the bridge of her nose, pushing up the lightweight and fashionable eyeglasses John had gotten for her in the "Glasses in an Hour" store in the mall. "Damn, I'm confused."

"I've never had a sister before, but I could give you the advice I'd have given you as your brother," John said, polishing off his pint. "I say go out with Curt. See how it feels. Get comfortable. Then, if you like how it's working, get him drunk and screw him into the bed-springs. If you don't, have him take you home and then play with the shower massager for a couple hours."

"Johnny!" Sara said in mock outrage, then snorted laughter. Although her body and attitudes were now woman, she still had a man's sensibilities. "I have to admit, I am curious. And he is gorgeous. Has he, y'know, been around a lot?"

"Couldn't tell you. I do know he's faithful. During the war, whenever the rest of us would go to town to get laid, he'd always stay at the bars and never touch the prostitutes because of his girlfriend back home. He came back afterwards to find out she'd married some computer geek in California. As far as I know he's only been with one woman since then and it didn't work out."

"I didn't know there were any men left who were like that."

"Don't start that crap," Johnny warned. "We were like that. Promise me something, Sara. Promise me you won't ever get into that 'all men are pigs' stuff. I hate that. I work so hard to not be like that, and every time I hear a woman say that kind of stuff, it really upsets hell out of me. It makes me feel like everything I do isn't appreciated."

Sara gave her brother's thick arm a squeeze. "You're right. I promise."

"Did I ever tell you I always wanted a sister?" John asked.

"No. You never did."

"You know, I never did think to ask you. I know this is what you needed, in your soul, or Tao would have never let it happen. But do you like how things have turned out? Do you like being a girl?"

Sara thought a moment. "I still haven't gotten used to it all. There's so many little things that I never expected. Like crossing my legs at the knee else I shoot the beaver to the whole

room. Not ordering the sixteen-ounce sirloin out of habit when I know good and well I can only eat half. Not flopping face-down on the couch if I've had a tough day or I squash my chest. Menstrual cramps."

"That didn't answer my question."

"Johnny, I can't tell you what a wonderful thing it is to know that I can have a baby. To look in the mirror first thing in the morning and consider what I see there to be beautiful. I am happy. You did good. I love being a girl. Now that it's happened, I know that it's all I ever really wanted."

John sighed. "I'm glad. I was worried you'd end up resenting this in the end."

"I love you, Johnny-bear. You've given me a shot at the life I dreamed about as a kid."

"I love you too. And so long as you're happy, I'm happy."

Sara hugged her brother, thinking how much John needed a woman in his life that wasn't his sister. Now that she knew firsthand what a consummate gentleman Johnny was, she realized that he was going shamefully to waste.

* * *

The Redskins-49'ers game was incomprehensible to Sara's Irish sensibilities, just a bunch of big guys slamming into one another. How could they call it football when only one player per team ever used his feet? But Curt seemed to enjoy it immensely, howling delight whenever anyone in a Redskins uniform did something he considered worthwhile. But it was fun to be in a crowd of so many people who were there to cheer on their favorite team. She especially liked the three near-naked men on the front row who had painted themselves maroon and gold in hopes of getting their pictures on television.

"Enjoying yourself?" Curt asked.

"I wish I understood what was going on down there."

Curt launched into a patient (and utterly meaningless) description of the intricacies of American football. To Sara's vast amusement, most of the men in adjacent seats joined in the explanation, interjecting their own special knowledge into the lesson. Sara was surprised to find out that most men had played football in school and had an in-depth knowledge of either offense or defense.

At least by the fourth quarter she had a reasonable understanding of the carnage on the field to get some enjoyment out of it. There was more strategy involved than she'd given it credit for. By the end of the game she had gotten quite absorbed by the way a defense was supposed to work.

"I never expected things to be so complicated," she mentioned to Curt as they made their way down to the parking lot. "I still don't understand what the hell pass interference is, though."

Curt snorted laughter. "Y'know something? Neither do I."

"Someday I'll take you to see my kind of football. I think you'd really enjoy that."

"Does this mean you want to see me again?" he asked.

Sara gave him a shy smile that barely wrinkled her slender nose. "Yes, it does."

To her ultimate surprise, Curt fell on his knees and loudly thanked heaven for his good fortune. Sara blushed red from breasts to scalp and tried to look as if she were just an innocent passerby.

"If you don't get up, you can forget another date," she warned.

"Was that coming on too strong?" Curt asked.

* * *

Over the next two weeks, Sara and Curt went out on several occasions, everything from movies or a quick beer after work to elegant dinners and dancing at four-star restaurants. They were quite comfortable together - Sara's basically male sensibilities let them discuss anything openly, without taboo. They learned from one another.

They were walking along the Mall to go "see Abe," as John put it, one of Sara's favorite diversions. She loved the peace and solemnity of the Lincoln Memorial, the great Emancipator looking so lonely and tired on his high stone seat. As they were walking beside the pool, Curt's cellular phone rang. He answered and passed the thing to Sara, saying, "It's for you. It's Johnny."

Sara put the phone to her ear. "Johnny?"

"Sara love, I wish I could tell you in person but this news can't wait."

"What is it? What's the matter?" she asked.

"A letter came for you today from the Master Chorale. You made it. You're in the choir again." Johnny's voice was practically effervescent with joy and happiness for his sister. "First soprano!"

Sara stopped dead. "You're kidding. You're not kidding. You're not kidding!" She began to jump up and down in excitement. "I really made it?"

"You're back where you belong, Sara love! Three years of school and you're back on tour!"

Sara jumped and threw her arms around Curt's neck. "I made it! I'm in the Chorale!" she chanted in pure delight. Curt's strong arms closed around her. "Congratulations," he said.

Her eyes met his while in the background Johnny was saying something congratulatory on the phone. Curt's kiss was timid but gained strength quickly, until Sara's soft lips were crushed against her teeth by the force and passion. He set her back on the ground a short eternity later, panting and a bit dizzy. She put the phone to her ear in a happy stupor.

"Sara love?" Johnny asked. Something told Sara her brother knew what had just happened.

"I'm here."

"I guess I'll see you tomorrow morning?"

Sara broke the connection with a whispered "I love you" to her dear brother.

* * *

Curt lay her full length on the queen-size mattress, stretching beside her and running his hands through her red locks as he kissed her lips. Sara tangled her hands in his silky dark hair, her breath coming in deep, sensual waves. Her bones felt slightly liquid. Curt moved to her long swan's neck, finding the "magic spot" that all women have that causes their head to roll back and expose the length of their throat to kisses. Her hands began kneading the firm muscles of his shoulders through his shirt. Curt's hand slid down her body from armpit to thigh, leaving a trail of tingling like a boat's wake. His other hand was under her and began lightly massaging the muscles of her delicate neck.

Sara began lightly scratching his neck and shoulders with her long fingernails. Curt stretched like a cat and Sara wouldn't have been at all surprised to hear him purr. Sara felt a deep warmth from the thought of giving her lover pleasure.

Curt spent what seemed like hours kissing her neck and shoulders as she ran her hands down his back and through his hair. She freed the buttons on his shirt and pushed it over his broad back, exposing several Special Forces tattoos on his shoulders and upper arms. His skin was smooth and warm, inviting caresses. Her fingers danced across the interplay of muscles in his back as his hands found the buttons of her blouse. He parted it to her waist, pushing down one of the straps of her lacy white brassiere and resumed his ministrations to her shoulders and neck. Sara took his hand in hers and placed its warm weight against one of her pert breasts. He massaged it gently, bringing the nipple to a fiery hardness against the silky material of the bra. Sara moaned deep in her throat.

"You're incredible," Curt said in a hoarse lover's whisper. "I've dreamed of this."

"Me too," she told him honestly.

Curt popped one of her breasts free of its confinement and lowered his head to the erect nipple. He traced all around it with his tongue, kissing the sensitive underside of her breast before taking this nipple between his teeth gently and teasing the tip with his tongue. Passion expanded in waves from the contact, making Sara's breath catch in her throat. Her embrace of him tightened as he exposed both of her breasts and began moving from nipple to nipple, kissing his way across her chest.

Curt kicked off his shoes as she began unbuttoning his faded jeans. She ran her soft hand down the front of his jockeys, feeling the semi-erect cock underneath begin to take on a delicious rigidity and a length. His hands found her buttocks and he rolled, pulling her on top of him. She gazed at his beautiful face through the muted light formed by the curtain of her hair.

"I've never done this before," she confessed.

"You're doing fine," he told her, bringing a smile.

"I'm a little nervous."

"We don't have to do anything you're not comfortable with. You can put on the brakes any time you think things are going too fast. I promise I'll never hurt you."

She sucked her breath through a tender *ohh*, caressing his face. "You're such a sweet man."

"I try."

"No, you don't. That's why I like you. You're just that way naturally."

"Would you think me any less sweet if I mentioned what amazing things you do to an otherwise uneventful pair of jeans?" he jibed. At her confused look, he added, "You are the most beautiful woman I've ever met. You're funny, intelligent, stubborn and strong. And to top it off you have an unbelievable body. I couldn't help thinking the first time I met you that you had the greatest ass on record."

"I wouldn't have taken you for an ass man."

"I'm not. I'm a Sara Murphy man."

She kissed him strongly and the tempo of the encounter rose a little. As he ran his hands around her ass and back she began, unconsciously at first to grind her pelvis against his thigh as she kissed her way down his chest and began to tease his tiny male nipples with her tongue. Once she had them coated with saliva she blew on them gently, making her lover's body rigid with sensation.

"I'm partial to your body, too," she told him between the kisses she was lavishing on his navel.

"This is a very informal gathering," he told her. "Don't you think we're both a bit overdressed?"

Sara giggled and rolled off of him, tugging on the waistband of his jeans. He slid out of them as he unbuttoned hers. She kicked off her flats and lay there beside him in her panties, caressing his slightly rounded stomach while he played with her hair.

"Are you comfortable?" he asked.

"I'm in heaven."

"Sara, I want to make love with you."

Sara thought back to her days as a man, the brief sweaty encounters he'd had in his adolescence. No woman had ever made him feel this way, even the ones he believed himself in love with. The fulfillment and the languid, slow passion of a woman's desires were a bath to his soul. This is the way she'd always wanted to feel. This is the way she wanted it to be forever.

"Curt, I think I'm falling in love with you."

He gathered her in his arms and embraced her in a hug that made her ribs creak. "I never thought I'd hear a woman say that again to me," he told her. "Sara, I think I've loved you since the moment I saw you. I've never known a woman who makes me feel the way you do."

She buried her nose in the hollow of his neck. "Make love to me."

He rolled over on top of her and began kissing her like she'd never dreamed of being kissed, as a man or a woman either one. He reached over onto the bedside table and grabbed a remote control, punching buttons in the direction of the stereo. As Sara lay in passionate bliss, the sounds of Anúna, the Irish choir she'd loved since they first began recording, filled the room with their beautiful layered harmonies. His hands roamed lower and lower across her flat belly, teasing her inner thighs for a sweet torture of instants before he covered her sex with the warmth of his palm. Shocks of desire and sexual electricity shot through her. In her excitement to get things arranged for her new life, Sara had not even thought to explore her new body. The sensations of being aroused as a woman were making her pant. She felt a new

desire, one she'd had no experience of before, the need to be penetrated, to surround a man with her body and take him deep inside her most intimate places. A sheen of sweat glistened on her pale skin as her body temperature rose in response to Curt's ministrations.

She slipped a hand beneath the waistband of his briefs and pushed them down to his knees, exposing a thick veined column of a penis, its circumcised head glistening with his natural lubrication. She wrapped her tiny porcelain hand around the thick shaft and, kissing her way down, brought her mouth to it. She dropped a lingering wet kiss on the very tip, savoring the salty taste of the pre-ejaculate as she massaged his balls and stomach with her hands. Curt moaned in ecstasy. Bringing up what she remembered liking as a man, Sara began to move her head up and down with a twisting motion, lubricating more and more of her lover's cock with her tongue. She took as much of the shaft into her throat as she could and began to pump her mouth up and down, pumping her hand at the base. Curt balled one hand into the sheet and the other tangled tightly in her soft curls, his face screwed up in the expression of near-pain that denoted ecstasy. His hand began to rub her crotch through her panties faster and harder until she had to slow him down with a cautionary hand before he began to make her sore.

Her lover was nearing orgasm as he began thrusting upwards into her mouth. With what Sara knew firsthand was a Herculean effort, he pulled her head up from him gently.

"Not yet," he said, his voice thick with lust. "I want this to last." He gently took her french-cut panties down with gentle hands and, rising to his knees, lifted one of her slender legs and began to kiss the inside of her knee. He teased his tongue in small circles up her inner thigh and then to her crotch, spending some time licking and kissing her asshole while kneading the soft flesh of her buttocks. He seemed to kiss everywhere but where she really wanted him to and she knew he was doing it on purpose, driving her crazy with need.

"Don't tease anymore," she begged. "You know what I want."

Curt smiled a wicked little grin. "Say please."

As an answer she grabbed his hair and pushed his face between her legs. He opened his mouth and covered her entire vulva, his hot breath and teasing tongue causing Sara to tangle her hands in his hair until she thought she might rip it out. Then gently, slowly, he used his nimble fingers to part her labia and gently probe her now dripping-wet furrow.

Sara's eyes rolled back into her head. No experience of man could ever compare to this. Every time his tongue flicked across the bud of her clitoris she was filled with a pleasure that she felt to the roots of her hair. Even the sheets under her back felt sensual and erotic. Unable to contain it, Sara began squealing and crying out, tossing her head back and forth. Soon her fingers were tangled in her own hair and her eyes were screwed shut as she yelped her pleasure.

"My God," Curt commented, panting. "Your whole damn body is an erogenous zone."

Sara said nothing. Her body shuddered uncontrollably as her orgasm overflowed its bounds and spilled through her, leaving a numbing warmth behind the unbelievable relief. She was not prepared for afterwards, having only had sexual experience as a man. Instead of the lethargy which she expected after orgasm, there were a few seconds of extreme sensitivity and then a return to the level of arousal she had before. She was ready for more and it astonished

her. She pulled his face to hers, licking the honey-salty taste of her fluids from his chin and lips.

"I need you inside me," she told him.

"You get on top," Curt instructed. "You're still a virgin and you should do the driving." He reached into a bedside drawer and handed her a bottle of Astroglide lubricant. "Get us both nice and slippery. This might hurt you a bit." He opened a condom and rolled it down his penis.

She straddled his thighs, enjoying the expressions on her lover's face as she coated his latex-covered cock with the super-slick lubricant. Then she gave her own vagina a liberal coating and moved over him on her knees until the proud head of his dick was pressing slightly between her labia. She moved backwards a bit until the barest bit entered the tight ring of muscles around her opening.

"I've heard there's two ways to go about this," he said. "One is to move slowly, getting used to it as you go and basically increasing pressure on the cherry until it splits."

"And the other?"

"Just have a seat."

Sara giggled. "If it's gonna hurt, I think I prefer the latter. Like when you have to take off a band-aid. Get it all over with at once."

Curt gave her a look of mock-hurt. "That was an exquisite metaphor for our lovemaking."

There was a playful mood between them, so Sara seized a wild hair and decided to make a game out of her own defloration. The passion building in her middle made it impossible for her to not do this.

"One for the money..." she chanted as the beautiful music built on the stereo behind her. She wiggled her ass back and forth a bit, making Curt laugh as well as gasp with pleasure.

"...two for the show..." God, how she wanted this man, this beautiful perfect man.

"...three to get ready..." There was no part of herself that she didn't want Curt to know.

"...and four to go!"

There was an instant of sharp pain, like a cut, as her hymen compressed and split before this invasion, and a skidding roughness over some of her deepest spots that hadn't been lubricated well. She felt a warm, sticky wetness - her virgin's blood - rush between her legs before Curt's balls slapped soundly into the crack of her ass and she was filled. Her head flung itself back and her mouth opened in a yawning gasp of the most intense pleasure she'd ever known. There was so much sensation that her brain couldn't even process it all.

"Oh my God," she gasped.

Curt pulled her close. She felt as small as an infant on his chest, her arms and legs wrapped tightly around him and her insides filled to bursting with his shaft. Tears leaked from her eyes both from the sting of the penetration and the sacred loveliness of the moment. Her heart seemed about to swell from her chest and shatter her into a million happy pieces.

"Hold still a moment, love," Curt whispered, stroking her hair. "Get used to the feeling."

"I hope I never get used to this feeling," she amended.

After a wonderful moment of just laying atop him full of his cock, Sara began to inch her way forward a bit. The lubricated friction sent shudders of heaven up her spine and her arms broke out in goose-flesh. Curt responded by setting a gentle rhythm which set her mind on fire.

"I love you so much, Curt," she breathed. Curt could say nothing, he was so full of emotion.

After she'd gotten accustomed to having a penis inside her, Curt rolled atop her, gazing down at her face with a look that spoke volumes. It seemed he was trying to memorize every curve and contour, every shading and highlight of her face. His thrusts deepened, going from nearly withdrawn to his cock-head coming to rest against her cervix. Once again she could not contain her pleasure and began to gasp and squeal with every thrust.

His arms surrounded her again. "Sara, Sara, Sara," he chanted breathily. "I love you."

She embraced him with arms and legs. His strength, his solidity, made her breathless. Her love was growing, expanding so fast that she hated herself for not being able to express it in words suitable enough to give as a gift to her lover. Tears leaked unashamedly from her eyes and Curt only hugged her tighter. The moment was as bitterly beautiful as the music that played softly in the background.

Curt made long, slow, lazy love to this beautiful woman for nearly a half hour. By that time, her sore and abused inner tissues had reconciled to the inherent brutality of sex and the pain had gone from the lovemaking. The painful perfection of the moment had faded a bit and love slowly moved aside to give way for passion.

Curt's strokes became faster and deeper. Sara's tender embraces now became an urgent clawing on his shoulders and ass. Sweat replaced tears. Lovemaking and its beauty surrendered its spot to fucking and its demanding need for release.

Sara began grinding her clitoris against Curt's pelvic bone as he thrust and she felt the explosion building as it had when he'd eaten her pussy earlier. Curt's dick seemed harder than before and he started to emphasize his deepest thrusts with a tiny grunt of passion.

She came explosively and then again before the first one was even over. Then Curt's head flew back and he cried out his own climax. Sara felt the reservoir on the condom fill out and Curt rolled to one side, cradling her as his breathing slowly changed from panting to his normal deep breaths.

"That was wonderful," he told her. She hummed assent, snuggling into his arms.

"You'd better run to the bathroom, love," she said. "I expect you need to pee and I don't want you having to get up in the middle of the night. I want to wake up just like this."

He marveled. "How did you know I'd need to pee?"

"You just ran Elmer's glue through a tube used to acidic water. You need to clean it out or you'll wake up with your plumbing all stuck shut. Now shoo and get back to me quick."

"For a virg-I mean, ex-virgin, you sure know a lot about men and their dicks."

"Johnny told me all about everything."

"I'll have to remember to thank him." He hopped from the bed and dashed into the bathroom. Sara let the music wash over her body and soul and fell asleep in her lover's arms until morning.

* * *

Sara couldn't think about anything but Curt for the next week. He was a wonderfully responsive lover, never adverse to trying anything. Sometimes they'd make love with a minimum of foreplay, just attacking one another. Sometimes there was no sex at all, just hour after hour of erotic foreplay and massage. She would suck his cock in the car in rush-hour traffic. One night she lay back for him with a vibrator humming in her ass, letting him saw away at her while she gave head to a foam rubber penis. Other times she would dress in trashy outfits and dance for him while he masturbated to her performance. But most nights it was the way she loved it most, a slow and tender current of intense passion and need. Sara began to think fondly of being the mother of their children, lovely little white-picket-fence little girl dreams of wedding dresses and perfect little infants at her breast.

But she could not ignore the call of the music, the reason she'd become a woman in the first place. She had discussed it with Curt at length. They would be together for the entirety of her three years in graduate school (which wouldn't pose a problem since James had done all the work before) and Curt had no apprehension about living apart for a three-month tour every year after that. Sara did not worry about his faithfulness during her absence. Her brother's story about Curt's behavior during the war assured her that she would be his only lover.

John was thrilled about the match and blessed it by renting the truck when Sara and Curt decided to move in together. They took a small rental house near John's property in Gaithersburg and commuted to work and school in D.C. Their life settled into a routine that all of them loved to shatter. Curt would send her flowers out of the clear blue just because he was thinking about her. John would barge in with rented movies and pizza at just the right times. Sara would come home early without telling her lover and spend hours cooking extravagant meals. They would clear the mess afterwards and make love on the dining room table.

But Sara despaired over her brother's lack of a mate. She was so happy and full with Curt, having an outlet for her love and desire. Her brother had no such luxury. He gave all of himself and his love to his sister and her boyfriend until it seemed that there was nothing left for John Murphy. She tried to broach the subject with her brother and he wouldn't have any of it. He insisted that he was content and wanted for nothing. But she and Curt both saw his eyes as he worked in his precious garden. They could both tell that John tended those plants because he wanted someone to share them with.

* * *

The choral director stood among the crumpled boxes of music and addressed the gathered Master Chorale. The singers were all in jeans and sweatshirts for the first rehearsal of the season.

"Folks, I'd like to welcome everyone back that I recognize. I hope everyone had a nice holiday. As you may have noticed, there are some new faces this year and some that are missing. We lost Annie Miller, David Hawkins, Melissa Sharpe and Frank Strickland to other

choirs. But in the bass section we've added Howard D'Angelo and in the sopranos, Sara Murphy-Lieberman. Sara is the younger sister of James Murphy, the performer who was with us three years ago and was so tragically murdered. Howard, Sara, welcome to the family."

There was polite applause and assorted introductions. The director clapped for attention and everyone moved to their respective chairs, marked by the names on the folders of music sitting there. Sara found her place and was surprised to see Erin MacArthur take a seat next to her and introduce herself.

"It's a relief to know we have another high soprano here," Erin said. "I was worried I'd have to take it all on myself. By the way, I want to tell you how very sorry I am about your brother. He was a doll. I've really missed him."

Sara was taken aback. "You were friends?"

"Not really. He was very shy and every time I tried to strike up a conversation, he'd find some excuse to be someplace else. But he was so sweet. Did you know he used to lean against the wall outside my practice room and listen to me sing? He'd stand there with these fat tears in his eyes and listen. I've never had anyone pay me a compliment like that before, the way he let my singing just wash over him."

Sara got a lump in her throat. "I knew that. I mean, he told me."

"He talked about me?"

"Occasionally." Sara was amazed at the look of hope in Erin's eyes. "You liked him?"

"I hardly knew him," Erin sighed. "But I wish I'd been able to."

The director clapped for attention again. "Let's start off with something we all know, *Rejoice in the Lamb*. Sara, why don't you take the solo and let us all hear what you can do."

The music swelled around her. Sara opened her heart, poured it out and sang. Chill bumps spread over everyone in the choir, including the conductor. He lowered his hands.

"That was gorgeous. Between you and Erin there won't be a dry eye in the house," he told them. "Now let's move on to the Duruflé *Ubi Caritas*. C'mon people, we have a lot of work to do before the first concert."

* * *

Erin's car was in the shop so Sara gave her a lift downtown after rehearsal. On the way they chatted about the choir and music in general. Soon the conversation shifted back to James. It was plain that Erin considered James as the one that got away. The part of Sara that was still a man lowered its head in shame. Tao extracted its payment in cruel ways sometimes.

"I've never known a man who got so into music like him," Erin concluded.

"You should meet my brother Johnny," Sara commented offhand, her mind still in turmoil.

"I think I have," Erin replied. "Isn't he a big, broad man with a beard and a limp?"

"That's Johnny-bear."

"Johnny-bear?"

"I've called him that since I was a little girl back in Ireland."

"He struck me as the teddy-bear type. I'm afraid the one time I met him I was a little rude, but I'd hit the muscle relaxers a little hard for my bad back that night and was too loopy to know up from down. Of course, since James passed away I haven't seen your brother since."

"You'll be seeing more of him now that I'm in the Chorale."

"That's good. He was a handsome man, that teddy bear brother of yours."

"It's hard to believe sometimes that Johnny was the most decorated soldier in the China War."

Erin gasped. "You're kidding."

"Two Soldier's Medals, three Bronze Stars, the Distinguished Service Cross, the Silver Star for Valor, two Presidential Unit Citations, and a Purple Heart," Sara said with pride. "Oh, yeah. And that Congressional Medal of Honor thing."

"Wow," Erin said, her blue eyes sparkling. "He sounds like an interesting man."

"For a big brother," Sara said. "I should introduce you again sometime."

The intention behind Erin's eyes was unmistakable - it was the same look she got when she thought too long about her husband Curt.

"I'd like that a lot," Erin told her.

Sara's grin was the portrait of innocence. "Do you like gardening?"

* * *

"I thought she was a perfect bitch," John reiterated stubbornly. "She was awful to you."

"She was high on muscle relaxers! It could have happened to anyone."

John sighed heavily. "Sara, don't go trying to fix me up. James knew how I hated that, so should you."

Sara placed her hands firmly on her hips. "How long has it been, Johnny?"

"What does that matter?"

"How long?"

John stared into the air to the side of Sara's face. "I don't know. Twelve years or so. It's not important to me, so I don't really count the minutes as they pass. Sorry."

"All I'm doing is inviting her to your birthday party, Johnny. You don't even have to talk to her. But I think you'll end up wanting to."

John levered himself out of his chair on mighty arms - his leg had been deteriorating fast over the year and a half since she had married Curt and he was having trouble teaching to kids or working in his garden. The effect on his mood had not been pleasant. John had become a shy and reserved, almost reticent, man over the last year. Sara tried desperately to stop her brother's retreat into himself and was having miserable luck. An idea struck her, all at once.

"Why can't you just use the same Tao magic you used on me to heal yourself?"

"It doesn't work like that," John said. "You can't just call the power of the cosmos up on the phone and ask it to come over. Besides, I can't heal myself. Someone else would have to do it."

"Don't you know somebody who..."

"If I asked for healing, it would defeat the purpose of the philosophy. It has to be a gift, something I was willing to live without if not offered. If I wanted it, Tao would turn her back on me."

Her brother limped into his study, shutting the door to indicate that the conversation was over. Sara mulled over what her brother had told her. So it wasn't a matter of concentration or magic or ancient mysticism after all. All Johnny needed was someone willing to give to him.

* * *

The cake was an inferno. Although her brother was only four years her senior, Sara decided that it would better remind John of how old he was acting if she lit more than sixty candles on the cake. All her brother had asked for on his birthday was that no one sang that interminable "Happy Birthday" song to him all day, so the guests settled for a nice round of applause instead.

"Nice bonfire, Johnny," Curt laughed. "Are you really that old?"

"Feels like it lately," John replied, not totally without humor. "So where are the dancing girls?"

"The cake pops open when you blow out the candles," Sara told him.

John took a deep breath and blew out the candles.

"Did you make a wish?" Curt asked.

"No," John replied. "I gave up on that a long time ago."

Sara caught the look of sympathy on Erin's face from the corner of her eye. Erin spent the duration of the present-opening ceremonies sidling closer and closer to John. After opening all his gifts and thanking those that gave them, the fifteen or so guests began to trickle away and head back to their own lives. Soon only Curt, Sara, John and Erin remained. John stood stiffly and began to sort through the party carnage, a large garbage bag trailing behind. He lightly sang a tune in Irish as he busied himself. As he bent over, he grimaced and clutched his leg, stumbling backwards into a chair.

Sara rushed in from where she and her husband had been washing dishes. John's face was screwed into a mask of pain and his breath came in a rasp.

"What's wrong? What happened?" she asked.

"It's all right. It'll pass," John panted. "It only takes a minute."

"Johnny, what's wrong? Do we need to go to the emergency room?"

Her brother's breathing had eased a little. "No, no. I'm fine, *mo caílin*. No worries."

Curt took his friend's arm. "You all right, Johnny?"

"Gimme a second and I'll be good to go."

Sara looked at her husband frantically. Curt hugged her tight and reassured her. "He's fine. This used to happen all the time after we got back from the war. Johnny got creased across the thighs with a Chinese PPS-43. The medics were able to get all the slugs out but one."

"There's still a bullet in your leg?" Erin asked, unable to restrain herself.

"It was real close to the big artery in my thigh," John said. "The medics didn't even want to try and get it out in the field. Before I could be evac-ed to a surgery we got hit hard by Chinese Airborne. I had to fight from my stretcher. The wounded soldiers were the only ones who could really get much of a defense together. We held out in the hills for five weeks before we were relieved. By that time the bone had grown over the slug and it couldn't be gotten out unless I was in a real hospital.

"It never bothered me at all until the leg started to get stiff. Every once in a while the bullet rubs up against the big nerve in my thigh and I get what you just saw. It goes away as soon as I get weight off of my leg and sit for a little while."

"Why didn't you get it removed once you were home?" Sara asked.

"Because it was fine. It didn't bother me, like I said, until my leg started to stiffen up."

"We're calling the hospital first thing tomorrow," Sara declared.

"I hate hospitals," her brother grumped.

"And I hate seeing a brother in pain," Sara said pointedly. "Just like you, Johnny."

Johnny sat silently. "Whatever. Happy fucking birthday."

Curt sputtered laughter. "You're getting to be a sour old fart, Johnny."

"You marry my sister and all of a sudden you're Mr. Sunshine," Johnny shot back. "Before you met her you were as gloomy as I ever hoped to be."

"Amazing what a woman can do," Sara said with a meaningful cut of her eyes to Erin.

John was back on his feet quickly. Erin pitched in with the clean-up to spare John having to bend too much and the room was restored to tidiness in a short time. John ended by wiping the table and the bar while Erin sat, watching him curiously.

"This bar is beautiful," she said. "Is this oak?"

"Red poplar, actually. I built it myself right after I bought the house."

She ran a hand along the edge of the bar. "Nice work. How did you get the grain to match up like this? Jesus, you must have spent hours choosing your wood."

John smiled. "Yeah. The men at the mill got real sick of seeing me. Do you still get to work with wood much? You know an awful lot about it."

"Dad was a carpenter in Kentucky. After Mama passed away and my brother left for school, we were all the family there was left. We spent a lot of time together. Where did you learn carpentry?"

"I worked as a joiner for seven years in Ireland while James and Sara were in school. Our parents died when Sara was still in a cradle. I quit school and worked so Jimmy and Sara could get their educations. Then we came to America to live with relatives and I found out how hard it is to get into college here. So I had to join the Army so Jimmy and Sara could get into decent schools."

"You didn't go to college?"

"Not and keep those two going. Maybe someday I'll go. Someday."

Erin looked around at the splendid house. "You haven't done too badly for yourself."

"A captain's pension with combat bonuses amounts to quite a bit. Besides, I don't have a lot to spend money on besides Sara anymore."

Erin mistook his intent. "I'm terribly sorry about James. He was a sweet man."

For a moment John thought about reminding her of her treatment of James the night he'd first met her. But she sounded sincere about her sorrow. He shrugged. "I miss him, but I have it on good authority that he's very happy now."

"What good authority?" Erin asked.

"I asked him, he told me."

Erin smiled. "I wish I could have had that attitude when I lost my father. I cried for weeks."

"It's just a matter of perspective. As far as I'm concerned, James didn't die. He just moved on to something better, some world where no one coughs or talks through his music and brothers don't come home from wars in ambulances. He's around me every day, he keeps me company."

"That's beautiful."

"It's all a matter of forgetting how he died and remembering how he lived. That's the key to immortality, you know. Living a life that's memorable."

"How can you be so cavalier about something like death? Aren't you afraid of dying?"

"If it be now, 'tis not to come; if it be not to come, it will be now; if it be not now, yet it will come: the readiness is all," John replied, his voice a raspy hiss dripping with the rawest emotion.

The pause that stretched between them bordered on the uncomfortable. "You are one hell of an interesting man, John Murphy," Erin said at last, revealing a small little-girl smile.

"And you've the voice of an angel," John retorted. "To each his or her own."

"Would you like to have dinner with me sometime?" she asked, blushing.

John stood, stiffly. "I don't know if that would be a good idea."

"Why not?"

John smiled. "I'm old enough to be your father, for one thing."

"It's dinner, not a lifetime," Erin shot back.

"Ah, I see," John said. "I give you a moment of intensity, you immediately ask me out. That's pretty transparent, Ms. MacArthur. I doubt seriously your asking had anything to do with dinner."

"It's Ms. MacArthur now. Lovely."

"Erin, then. Look, you're a sweet woman and I'll admit to having grown a bit fond of you tonight. But I have real trouble excusing your treatment of my brother. Whether or not you were strung out on muscle relaxers or how bloody shy Jimmy was, it doesn't excuse anything. A heart that could do that to someone who so obviously worshipped you is not a heart worth getting close to."

Erin's face fell. "Who are you to judge me?"

There was a long silence, then: "I'm John Murphy."

Erin stood. "Maybe I'd better go."

"Maybe you had."

Erin got almost to the door when it occurred to her to turn and deliver some dramatic exit line. She whirled on her heel, upset and ready to deliver some devastating soliloquy which would take this unassailable man to his knees, something that would have him up nights examining himself and wondering where it all went wrong. After a week or so, it would be a very Sad and Humble Tigger that called her, beginning the conversation with "I've been thinking about what you said..."

Her eyes met his and her mind was a blank. She stuttered something incomprehensible.

John seemed to soften. "Exit lines are the toughest, aren't they?"

Erin stifled a chuckle. "I'm sorry about the way I treated James. I can't take it back. But that was nearly five years ago. I've grown up since then, whether you believe it or not."

John sighed. "And I've been attacking anything that dared sully a memory of my brother like a rabid dog," he admitted. "I misjudged you terribly. I'm sorry."

Erin stood fixed, unsure whether or not to go to him or not. "Dinner sometime?"

John shrugged. "I wasn't sure you'd still want to."

"My treat. Come on. Live a little. We can have a blast listening to all the people talking about the young tramp running around town with the dirty old man."

"Sure," he said. "Sounds like fun."

"Thursday, around six?"

"I'll have to meet you. I have a class to teach."

Erin crossed the room and hugged him. "Happy birthday, John. See you Thursday." She left before she said something to tip her hand and give away some of her feminine mystery. But somehow she got the impression that John Murphy could read everything she felt anyway.

* * *

They dated for the rest of the winter and spring, right until the Chorale began preparations for its summer tour. Two days before they boarded a plane for Cologne and their cathedral concert, Erin cornered Sara near the foot of the stage, looking wistfully at John, who was talking with an old friend of James' some distance away. John never missed a stage rehearsal and Erin loved seeing him sitting alone in the audience, head thrown back with a rapturous look on his face reminiscent of his late brother. John was walking with the assistance of a cane now, his leg getting worse as his refusal to see a doctor increased.

Sara placed a hand on her friend's shoulder to recapture her attention. "What was so important that you wanted to tell me?" she asked Erin.

"I wanted to ask your advice."

"Fire away."

Erin lowered her voice. "I've been seeing John for eight months. I really like your brother."

"I'm glad."

Erin coughed. "Actually, that's not quite right. Sara, I think I'm in love with your brother."

Sara smiled. "That's wonderful."

"But he's so damn distant sometimes. I have no idea how he feels about me. God, I feel like I'm in sixth grade again, asking a friend if she knows how a boy feels about me. Next thing I know I'll send John a note saying 'If you like me check this box.'"

"Why don't you just ask him?"

"The time never seems right."

"So what do you want to do?" Sara asked simply. She could cut to the root of a problem quickly, just like a man. Erin was constantly amazed at how aggressively Sara attacked problems.

"What do I want to do? Now, I'd kinda like to jump your brother's bones."

Sara giggled. "Really?"

"Are you kidding? He's the sexiest man I've ever met. I've been dreaming about taking him into my bed for months. Jesus, I've actually started masturbating again. I haven't done that since high school. John has quite an effect on me, I've found out."

"So you're having trouble finding the right time to tell and show John how you feel."

"Bull's-eye."

Sara turned Erin aside, away from John. "Sounds like you need to orchestrate a perfect evening."

* * *

John wiggled a thick finger beneath his collar. His neck was razor-burned from trimming his beard and he'd changed since his tuxedo was last tailored. Sara was behind him, making all the minute adjustments to his clothing that apparently only women could see.

"I hate this damn monkey-suit."

Sara gave his lapels a stiff tug. "Shut up, Johnny. Cary Grant never bitched about tuxedos."

"I'm not Cary Grant."

"No, but you look like a young Sean Connery. You're gorgeous. Erin's going to flip."

John mumbled something incomprehensible.

"Ease up, Johnny," Sara urged. "Erin has to do this formal thing so she can stay in the running for the feature soloist gig with the New York Philharmonic. The least you can do is be the handsome war hero on her arm."

"She doesn't need me."

"Maybe she does and you just don't know it."

"Have you always been this insightful, or did women's intuition come with the package too?"

"I won't tell you. Feminine mystique *did* come with the transformation."

John chuckled. "Erin's just been acting weird lately. She's wanting something from me that I don't know whether or not I want to give. I'm getting old, Sara-love. I don't feel like getting involved with anyone again, not now. I just want to ease gently into my old age without complications."

"You once told me life is a series of complications," Sara retorted. "I don't plan to sit by and watch you turn into some old homebody. For Christ's sake, Johnny, you're only forty. Your life's not gonna end anytime soon. You can count on thirty or forty more good, full years."

John's shoulders slumped. "Try to understand, Sara. I'm tired. I just want to be in my garden and forget I ever was a part of this world. I have you and Curt to look forward to. Someday I'll be an uncle and that's all I'll ever need."

Sara sighed. "Are you sure?"

"I know my own mind."

"Don't you ever consider there might be more?"

"I don't want more. I have everything I need."

Sara turned John face-to-face with her. "I don't believe you. You saw me through some of the darkest hours of my life and helped me through with something miraculous. Judas' Priest, Johnny! I have a husband and we're discussing babies! You let me into a life that I didn't even know existed, and now you expect me to stand here and let you dig yourself into the same miserable hole that I did?"

"I'm not miserable."

"That's just what I told everybody, too. It stands to reason that maybe you might be sad and miserable and not even know it. You're not invincible, you know."

John stood straight. Sara thought she had gotten used to the difference in their sizes her transformation had brought about, but she never remembered her brother being this huge before. That moment she fully believed that the man before her had the blood of eighty-seven

Chinese soldiers on his hands. All the emotion drained from her brother's eyes and she was terrified.

"I examine myself every night, dammit, and I don't need you to tell me what I feel," John said in a hoarse, cold whisper. "I know myself inside and out. I don't mean to lord this over you, Sara or Jimmy or whoever you are in your heart now, but you weren't there in that mud, in those trenches. You never tore the throat out of a Chinese soldier with a boot knife because you were out of ammunition and the bastard was gonna frag the supplies. You never spent weeks under enemy artillery, wondering if you'd ever get to watch the news or drink Scotch ever again. It puts a special emphasis on peace, let me tell you. I came home and found my peace. I still wake up hearing those 300 millimeter rockets screaming in, tasting the mud as I hit the deck and I hold tight to this peace I found."

"And you're afraid that if you let go for a moment it will all go away?" Sara asked.

"Yes. I'm terrified of it."

Sara was stung by the bluntness of her brother's admission. "You're right. I never saw war. When I was a boy I remembered being so proud of you in your uniform, wishing I could march away and do great things like you did. But you talked me into exploring other things. And I found something better than glory, better than drugs or sex or belonging or anything. And it puts a special emphasis on peace, one that you don't know either. I stand up there on a stage and bare my soul, and I can feel the music heal people. I can feel it heal you. You've never sung before people, Johnny. You don't know either. All these people from all these different places sit there in front of me and the instant I sing none of the differences matter anymore. Afterwards they go back to their lives and their problems and prejudices, but there, in front of me, I make it all go away. Peace is something you create."

Johnny's icy exterior cracked, and he smiled his father's smile. "You've a woman's soul, sure."

Sara smiled. "I always did. At least now I have a woman's body to go with it."

"I don't want to get involved with your friend."

"Take some of your own advice, then," Sara said. "See how it feels. Get comfortable. Then, if you like how it's working, get her drunk and screw her into the bed-springs. If you don't, have her take you home and then play with the shower massager for a couple hours."

* * *

Erin mentally ran down the list Sara had given her, hoping she hadn't forgotten anything. She'd worn her hair up and had given it a slight auburn wash (in accordance with John's weakness for redheaded women and long hair worn up). She wore an emerald green floor-length (John's favorite color, according to Sara) and all her jewelry was silver with semi-precious stones (Sara said John hated the way gold looked against pale skin like hers and had a special passion for amethysts and garnets). She'd made reservations for a five-star Italian restaurant (again, John's favorite) and made sure that she had the CD changer in the car stocked high with Chieftains and Mary Black. If everything on Sara's list was correct, then John Murphy didn't stand a rat's-ass chance in hell of resisting her.

He met her at the restaurant. The figure he cut in the tuxedo, holding the silver-tipped walking stick he'd made for himself made her knees go a little weak. He handed her a huge bouquet of fresh white roses.

"From the garden," he told her. "You look beautiful."

"Thank you," she replied. "I've never seen you look so handsome." *Unless it might be tomorrow morning, waking up beside you,* she thought. "Are you hungry?"

"Famished," he said. "How'd you know I liked Italian food?"

"Well, Sara told me, but seeing you tear through that plate of manicotti on your birthday really gave it away for me," she laughed. "John, I want to thank you for coming with me tonight. I know you hate these snooty formal affairs, but I'm scared stiff and your being here tonight is a real lifesaver."

"Least I could do," he said, pulling her chair out for her. "I've enjoyed the last couple months."

"So have I."

The dinner was spectacular, and Erin had to laugh at the look of utter bliss on John's face as he ate. Sara was dead on - Italian food was to John as Kryptonite was to Superman. She took him to the gala, and a transformation came over the imposing man in the tux. Suddenly Erin was standing next to the king of the room, the nationally-acclaimed Congressional Medal of Honor recipient and war hero. He worked the room like a pro, charming all the big-wigs with a disarming combination of savoir-faire, innocence, and plain old intimidation. Erin felt like a princess as she clung to his arm, even managing to coax him onto the dance floor when the chamber orchestra began a slower waltz. He was forced to dance slowly, because of his leg, but the feeling of being in his arms was absolutely intoxicating.

Before the night was done she'd been offered a contract to sing as featured soloist with the New York Philharmonic *and* the Boston Pops due to John's smoothness. She looked at the man in awe. With a few well-placed smiles and handshakes, a few spirited descriptions of Erin's singing and some ego-stroking, he'd managed to make her about \$220,000 in a few short hours.

He opened the door for her as the valet brought her car around, then hobbled around to fall heavily into the passenger seat of her new Camry. "I loathe that war-hero shit," he grumped.

"But you carry it well," Erin told him.

"It's like being rewarded for killing. If it had been other circumstances, they'd call me a mass murderer and I'd have long since been executed. Instead, they gave me medals and the President shook my hand," he said, a faraway look in his expressive eyes. "It's not right."

Erin started the engine. "John, thank you."

"For what?" he seemed genuinely surprised that she was in the car.

"For tonight. For being here for me."

Erin's heart fluttered like a caged bird at the smile John gave her. "My pleasure."

"Would you like to come to my apartment for a night-cap?" she asked.

"I think I'd better not," he said. "My leg is really acting up tonight. I just want to get out of this torture suit, play some music and put my feet up. Thank you anyway."

John's more impressed by honesty and directness than anything else, Sara had told her when they planned this night. "John?" Erin asked, not believing what she was going to say.

"Hm?"

No turning back now, Erin thought. "If you're not interested in a drink, do you think you might like to come by my apartment and sleep with me?"

John's eyes widened momentarily. "I'm not sure that's..."

"Or if you just want to go home, I can come to your place and make love to you there."

John belly-laughed. "You certainly are direct."

"I'm serious, John. I want you like I've never wanted any man before. Tomorrow I'm leaving for tour. I don't want to go without showing you how I feel about you."

He traced the contour of her cheek with a work-roughened finger. "I don't know what to say."

She took his hand and pressed it against her cheek. "Say yes."

* * *

Erin backed through John's front door, tangled in a frantic kiss that seemed to last for hours. She'd almost wrecked her new car twice on the way as John's lips caressed her shoulder and neck. By the time she screeched into his driveway she was nearly insane with passion. Curbing her instinct to attack him, she tried to get him into the bedroom as fast as she could while still allowing for his limp, removing his clothing with every step.

Even with the onset of middle age, John had a fantastic body. He kept himself in remarkable shape and hardly ate anything other than fruits and vegetables, so his hairy chest was stretched taut over a massive set of pectorals and a well-defined six-pack of abdominals. His arms bore many Special Forces tattoos, the typical skulls and daggers and fire that the military favored. But she was surprised to see a tattoo of a lone white rose on one massively muscled shoulder. She kissed it, running her hands through his thick black hair.

"Why a white rose?" she asked breathlessly.

John spoke into the hollow of her neck. "A red rose means romance. Black roses mean death. A white rose stands for hope," he explained. "It was a very long war, and I wanted something permanent to remind me of James and Sara."

Everything the man said made Erin fall for him more. She gathered him into her arms and, despite his injuries, he carried her into his bedroom, easing her down onto the mattress beneath him.

"You're sure you want this," he asked gently.

She embraced him tightly. "More than anything else in my whole life."

He lowered his considerable weight onto her gently and it felt wonderful. As her hands explored his back, she found scar after scar, shiny in the moonlight. She remembered Sara telling her that John still woke up nights from the horror of his dreams. Erin hoped that she

could help him forget that awful war, hoped that someday she might be able to take his nightmares away.

She never imagined that his huge hands and thick fingers could so delicately free her from the dress she'd worn. As he carefully laid the garment across the back of a chair, he gazed down at her lying on the bed in a corselette and black thong panties, her silken lace-top stockings held up by a lacy garter belt. He knelt stiffly at the end of the bed and removed her heels, kissing her ankles and working his slow way up her thighs. Erin was on fire inside, filled with need and desire. After an agonizingly long stretch of minutes his mouth reached her panties. He nuzzled her crotch with a gentle but firm kiss. To John, even Erin's mewling yelps of pleasure were somehow musical.

The teasing in the car had served its purpose well. From her actions, John could tell that Erin did not need the long stretch of gentle, feather-light touches and kisses that usually preceded lovemaking for a woman. She was easily far gone enough that the gentle touch was not enough and she was ready for the rougher treatment that would drive her over the edge. He pulled her underwear down over her stockings and caressed the smooth, damp fire between her thighs. She moaned deep in her throat and ground her head into the bedcovers, her hair forming a pillow of curls around her face. John could only stare. There was no beauty like the face of an aroused woman. He'd found out in the war that even the homeliest creature, when she closed her eyes with desire, could become radiant. Erin was so exquisite at that moment that John was ashamed to look, afraid his vision might somehow profane the perfection.

He fumbled a bit with the push-up bra with his free hand, making such a cock-up of the job that Erin chuckled and assisted. Her smooth breasts were covered with the flush of her excitement and rose and fell enticingly with her accelerated breathing. John lay on his side next to her, leaving one hand between her legs and using the other to excite her nipples into hard little points. He kissed her neck and shoulders as she ran her hands over his body and tangled them in his hair and beard.

Erin's hand snaked down the front of John's briefs, closing gently around his swelling member and coaxing it to arousal - her breath caught when she felt the full size of her lover. He was much larger and thicker than any other man she'd known and the thought of taking the stout organ inside her body excited her even more. She clamped her lips to his and explored his mouth with her tongue, inhaling the deep masculine scent of him. John's lips and tongue traced their way from her mouth to her chest, then across her ribcage (stopping for a wonderful time at her navel - she'd never known touches there could be so erotic) and down to her warm sex. Erin's back arched, leaving her body supported by her head and heels only, as John's tongue probed inside her. He began with the lightest of touches, the sort most women long for a man to understand, but as he read her excitement he began to give her the firmer, rougher treatment she desired. Once he brought his fingers into play, Erin could only ball her hands into the sheets as she reached a shuddering orgasm which brought her entire body out in goose-flesh.

John raised his face from her sex and kissed his way back up her heated body, staying away from her now-sensitive groin. He bided some time by caressing and kissing her breasts and shoulders as she slowly recovered from her orgasm and built back to the level of passion she had occupied earlier.

"John," she breathed. "My sweet, perfect man."

John gave her a strange look but said nothing, running his callused hands across her abdomen. Erin finished removing her new lover's clothing and began to stroke his cock, tickling the underside with long fingernails while nibbling at his tiny male nipples.

"Erin," he said breathlessly, taking her face between his hands and bringing her gaze to his. "I don't know if I can go through with this. It just doesn't feel quite right."

"What's wrong? Is it me?"

John laughed nervously. "Sweet Jesus, no. I'm not sure what the problem is."

"How long has it been for you, John?"

"Since I've been with a woman?"

Erin nodded.

"About twelve years," John said after some thought. "After the war, I just wasn't interested."

Erin propped herself on an elbow, dabbling her fingers through John's sparse chest hair. "Why not, do you think?"

John lay back, staring at the ceiling. "Once I got back home, I spent about three months just being happy about being alive. Then I thought about all the buddies I lost. And all the men I killed. The medal ceremonies and the dedication of the memorial made it worse. I felt guilty about surviving. Everybody told me over and over that my problems were completely natural and I'd get over them. To keep from thinking about it, I settled into a routine and concentrated on Jimmy. That routine became my life, and it didn't include women."

Erin placed nuzzling baby kisses across his broad chest. "You still have a flair for it."

"Must be like riding a bike."

Erin giggled, then resumed her serious demeanor. "I'll go if you need me to."

John drew a shuddering breath and she realized he'd been weeping. "I don't know what I need."

Erin rolled atop him, crushing her breasts between them. Her delicious weight settled onto John and he sighed. Perhaps his mind was not ready for lovemaking, but from the pressure against her thigh, Erin knew she had his body convinced. She rubbed his penis with the smooth skin of her thigh.

"I can tell you what I need," she told him. "I need you. I have no idea how or when it happened, but over the course of the past eight months I looked up and realized that I'm in love with you."

"Don't say that."

"It's already said. And I mean it. I love you, John Murphy. I need you."

"You don't need me. You're a strong woman. You don't need anything."

"What have I done to make you think that? I've been living for your company for months."

"Erin..."

She placed a slim finger over his lips, kissing his strong jaw line. With her other hand she maneuvered the head of his erect cock between her labia and slid back, penetrating herself about a half inch. Both their bodies stiffened and John's breath caught.

"We can't," he tried once more. "I'm don't have a condom."

"You haven't been with a woman in twelve years and I'm on the pill," she countered, easing another inch of him into herself. From the corners of her vision she could see John's hands wavering back and forth, unsure of whether or not to hold her or lift her off of his body.

"Hold me, John," she breathed into his ear. "Make love to me."

A tear ran from one eye towards his ear. Erin kissed it away.

"Erin, I just don't know."

"I love you," she said. "You can know that."

"And if I can't return the love?"

"Don't be scared, John," she told him, easing more of his length into her middle. The waves of pleasure spreading through her threatened to rob her powers of speech. "I don't want you to give up your world for me. I want to see if I can fit into it with you."

John's hands enclosed her waist and for a moment Erin thought he'd lift her away. He paused.

"I hope you know what you're doing," he breathed.

Erin wrapped her arms around him, feeling small as a child atop John's huge frame. "I know I do, Johnny. I'm sure of it."

John's arms wrapped around her tightly and he slid his full length into her. She gasped and clutched him as she would a life preserver in the middle of a stormy sea. They lay there like that for a long moment before John rolled over on top of her, never quite putting all of his weight down on her smaller body and began making love to Erin with long, slow strokes that capped a tempestuous passion that would burn the world down if released. She was unsure how John controlled the raw flow of need and desire and kept the slow, piercing ecstasy of the snail's pace. Erin's body nearly hummed with the sensations. She wanted to pant and moan and scream, thrashing like a beast in heat, to give herself to the desire and love this man like a wild frenzied animal. But the pace never quickened, never varied from the long, sensitive strokes which alternated between filling her up completely to nearly withdrawing from her body. A shaky noise, half sigh and half moan escaped her. She was completely in his control. She had never submitted to anything like she was allowing John to master her and the feeling was beyond intense. She thought that she could happily spend the rest of her life in this man's bed.

"God, John, please," she near-pleaded. "Don't tease me any more. Just take me."

John rolled back over, placing her on top. His face was a mixture of disappointment and frustration. *Oh God, I forgot his leg*, Erin thought miserably. *That could have been as fast as he could go. Good job, there, Erin. Aren't musicians supposed to be sensitive?* She curled around him.

"How's the leg?" she asked in a small voice.

"Hurts," was all he answered.

"I'm sorry, John. I forgot."

"Forget about it. You be on top for a while. We can go as fast as you like."

Erin's mind reeled. Injury or not, he had just taken control of her like she'd never known anyone could, and then flipped over onto his back and offered to let her take the same control of him. "I really liked going slow, though," she told him. "You're a beautiful lover."

Erin re-established a pace, much quicker than before, tossing her head back as she rode him. Her soft hair tickled between her sweaty shoulder blades. Her entire body was heated and responsive to the slightest touch or sensation, and John used his talented hands to usher her towards greater and greater ecstasy. She could feel another climax building, slowly, towards an eruption inside her.

Her lover's breath began to speed up and he rolled atop her once more, quickening the pace yet again. Erin felt as if her vagina was liquid fire and every motion of the huge cock inside her sent thrills all the way to her fingertips. She wanted to call out to him, to tell him what he was doing to her, how much she wanted and loved him. But all that came out were chirping little-girl grunts.

She came hard, grabbing the bed beneath her as if it would fall away, then clinging to John's body as another, and then another orgasm tore through her. She had never multiplied before in her life, but then, she'd never been made love to quite so masterfully before. As her third and final orgasm died down, John's eyes screwed tightly shut and he rolled atop her, shoving himself into her harder and harder. A tiny groan escaped his lips and he pulled his penis free of her. His semen shot from him, the first two spasms reaching almost to her chin and covering her breasts. After what seemed like a long time for a man's orgasm, John collapsed, rolling aside to lay beside her. Not caring that her upper body was covered in sticky goo, she pulled him into a panting, sweaty embrace.

Erin was close to tears with the intensity of her emotions. "That was beautiful."

John said nothing, only squeezed her tight.

"I didn't even know anything could feel like that," she continued. "You're incredible."

John kissed her forehead. "You're dynamite yourself," he breathed. "I usually last longer."

"I didn't mind."

John chuckled. "Didn't look like you did, *cailin*. I got the impression you enjoyed yourself."

"I love you," Erin said, loving the sound and taste of the words as they left her mouth.

John's eyes met hers. "Can you live with it if I said I very much wanted to love you?"

She smiled. "I could live with much less than that."

John's voice was stern. "You don't have to settle, Erin. You're better than that."

"Save the lecture, John. I want you. I love you. I can wait until you're ready to love me."

He gave her a squeeze. "Sorry about the mess," he said, scraping a fingerful of his sperm from her breast. "I don't trust those little pills so I thought I'd play it safe."

Erin brazenly licked the semen from his finger. "I kinda liked the mess. I've never done that before. It made me feel kinda wicked. I was just gonna ask if you'd do it again sometime."

John sat upright, pulling her with him. "If you're planning to do that again, we should get a shower and something to drink. I'm not as young as I used to be. That really took it out of me."

She patted one of John's rock-hard buttocks. "You've got the body of a twenty-year-old."

He broke the embrace hesitantly, and went to the bathroom. She heard him use the toilet and start the water running. He came back in and handed Erin a towel. He knelt stiffly before her and removed her stockings and garter, then took her by the hand and led her into the shower with him.

* * *

James had always hated planes, and Sara was no different. As the 747 wide-body bucked over some rougher air over the North Atlantic, she white-knuckled the arm-rests and momentarily stopped breathing. She adjusted her headphones and cut a sideways look at her friend Erin, who slept blissfully in the seat across the aisle, dreaming with a huge "I-just-got-laid" smile on her face.

Sara couldn't help but feel a little satisfied herself.

* * *

The tour was one of the most successful in many years. The reviewers were all impressed with the emotional depth and sensitivity of the new soprano and speculated in print that her willingness to bare her soul for the audience and weave them into the sound tapestry had rubbed off on the old professional, Erin MacArthur, who seemed to be singing with a release and a freedom that she hadn't given in years.

Sara was one of the first down the jet-way, leaping into Curt's arms with a delighted grunt and squeezing him as tight as she could. She rained kisses over his face and neck, ecstatic to be back among loved ones for a few months until the next tour. She couldn't remember ever seeing her husband so tired. Dark circles made his eyes look hooded. She cast her eyes around, looking for John, and when she did not find him at the gate, where he'd waited for years, worry seized her throat.

"Where's Johnny?" she asked her husband.

Curt's face was solemn, drawing Erin towards him with an open arm. "I tried to call but you were moving around so much. It's bad news."

"What is it?" Erin demanded.

"Johnny's leg gave last night, while you were in Rome. There was a lot of hemorrhaging, he lost a lot of blood. He's in the hospital right now. The Army's got the best docs in the country working on him, but he's real sick. He'll survive, but it's doubtful that he'll ever be the same again."

Sara's eyes blurred with tears. "What happened?"

"He was working in his garden and put too much pressure on that bullet in his leg. He tore the artery in his thigh. Damn fool got in the car and drove himself to the VA hospital, passed out right in the waiting room. I didn't hear until he'd come to and asked one of the nurses to call me. I've been at the hospital since then. Johnny's still in ICU and they're limiting visitors. He's gotten calls from the President and the Secretary of Defense. CNN has even shown up."

"Oh God," Erin breathed, her tears flowing uncontrollably.

"Come on, I'll take you," Curt said.

"No you don't," Sara ordered. "You're going straight home to bed, honey. You've been up two nights straight. Erin and I will handle the luggage and we'll take a cab to the hospital."

Curt fixed her with a hard gaze, the one John called the "hundred-yard stare." Her heart froze. "No way, Sara. John saved my life in the war and I'm staying by his side."

Sara couldn't argue. She'd always known about the special bond that Curt and John shared, that forged between men in war that made them closer than brothers, a world that Sara could never enter, even when she was still James. There would be no convincing him otherwise. He stumbled a bit as he led them towards customs and the baggage claim.

"At least let me drive. You're exhausted," Erin pleaded.

"Okay," he mumbled. "That's probably a real good idea." He handed Sara a handkerchief and she blotted her eyes dry before passing it to the still-crying Erin. "Sorry I had to dump it on you like that, but I think Johnny needs his family around him. I wish James were here."

"He will be," Sara said and did not clarify.

* * *

John had always filled Erin's eyes as a huge man, but he looked tiny in the hospital bed, surrounded by monitors and respirators. The nurse was typical Army, very direct and businesslike, which relieved everyone. The woman was brutally honest about John's condition and Erin was thankful that she knew the truth. John had only regained consciousness for a few short periods since the surgery.

"Don't rile him up," the nurse cautioned. "If he comes to, he needs to be as calm and comfortable as possible. He took a big shock. We thought we might lose him when he came in. He's not out of the woods yet by any stretch."

"Thank you," Sara replied. "We won't be very long."

They walked into the sealed room quietly, listening to the beeps and the hisses of the monitors. Curt took a seat by the bedside and took Johnny's callused hand in his. John stirred, his movements betraying extreme weakness, and opened his eyes a fraction. An exhausted and painful smile crossed his face. His voice was hoarse and thick, raspy from his recent intubation and layered with fatigue.

"Hey, buddy," he whispered. "I knew you'd come."

"Look who's here, Johnny," Curt smiled.

His pale face brightened when he saw Sara and almost retained its old animation when he saw Erin. Curt repressed a smile. His old company commander had fallen for this girl hard.

"All my folks are home," he said, smiling. "This is great."

"How you feeling, Johnny-bear?" Sara asked, her voice poised on the edge of tears.

"Weak. Hungry. Real, real sore."

"You'll make it. You're gonna be fine," Curt affirmed.

"Docs say I'm not doing so hot," John corrected. "Apparently I've been out for a while."

"You needed some sleep," Curt told him. "That's all."

John reached out and took Erin's hand. "Hi there."

Erin kissed his hand, careful not to disturb the IV. "Missed you."

"Missed you, too. You ready for the concert tonight?"

Erin smiled. "Hope so. The music's getting a little stale."

"We've only sung the same program fifty times," Sara added.

"It'll be beautiful," John said. "Public radio's gonna carry the program tonight, live. I talked Major Everett, the nurse, into letting me listen. Can't go breaking a perfect attendance record."

"John..." Erin began.

"That was a joke," John said. "How come nobody ever laughs in hospitals? I ain't dead yet."

Curt snorted. "I've been telling everyone that you had a bizarre gardening accident, like the drummer from Spinal Tap," he said. "General DeShong didn't think it was very funny."

"That's why they put him on the Joint Chiefs of Staff," John said. "DeSchlong always was a cold fish, even when he was a shave-tail major in the 32nd. Couldn't stand his ass then, can't stand him now."

John doubled up in a mild fit of raspy coughing. Erin handed him a small cup of water.

"Having that tube down my throat is making it hard to talk for long," he explained.

"Then keep your damn mouth shut," Curt said, and John laughed.

Sara sat at the foot of the bed. "Anything you need, Johnny-bear?"

"Nope," he said. "You're all home, that's all I wanted. Unless you think one of you could sneak me in a pint of McEwan's and maybe a corned beef on rye from Tucker's Deli."

"I think Major Everett would tear off my legs," Sara said.

"Curt, why don't you take your wife home? You don't have long till you'll have to be at the Lincoln Center. Erin can stay with me for a while and take my pick-up home for me."

"You sure?" Curt asked.

"I've been sleeping for two days. You haven't. Do me a favor, get some bloody rest. You're worrying hell out of me." Johnny collapsed into another paroxysm of coughing.

"All right," Curt conceded. "Erin, call if you need anything."

Erin nodded absently, her eyes riveted to John. Curt took Sara's arm and, after she had kissed her brother's forehead, led her away. Erin took Curt's vacated seat.

"How are you doing, John?"

"Better, for seeing you," John said. "Wish I could give you a proper welcome-home."

Erin smiled, sweeping her hair behind one ear. "Me too."

"I could use a kiss, though," he said. "I promise I'm not contagious."

Erin leaned over and shared a long, snail-tongued kiss with her lover. John was listless and his breath was atrocious, but she didn't care. She recovered her grip on his hand. "I love you."

John rolled a bit, to face her more. "That's why I sent Sara and Curt away," he explained. He took a long sip of water and looked in her eyes. "I go about quoting *Hamlet* a lot. I should have remembered some scenes other than the ones where Hamlet is just feeling sorry for himself, I guess."

"Such as?"

"This above all: to thine ownself be true, and it must follow, as the night the day, thou canst not then be false to any man," John rasped, squeezing his hand. "I was scared, Erin. So much, so fast. I didn't realize until you'd gone that I should have told you how much I love you."

Erin smiled. "Do you know how long I've dreamed of hearing that from you?"

John managed a weak shrug. "About as long as I've dreamed of saying it. But I'm afraid it may be too little too late," he said. "I won't lie to you, Erin. I don't think I'm gonna make it."

"Don't be silly," she said. "You'll be just fine. Good as new."

John's face became blank. "I know my own body, Erin. I'm not just being gloomy. There's something out of whack inside me. I don't know if I can make it through this in one piece."

"Please don't talk that way, John," Erin pleaded.

"I'm just being honest. Something doesn't feel right. I think I might be dying."

Erin pressed her forehead against his hand. "I don't want you to die."

"I'm not really happy about it either, and trust me, I'm not going to quit fighting. But the docs say the blood loss might have caused some brain damage. They don't know what that might mean, but I doubt it'll be good news."

"Dammit, I just found you. I can't lose you. It's not fair."

John chuckled, caressing her soft hand with a thumb. "No, it's not. Nothing ever is."

They sat there, saying nothing, for a long while. John fell back into a light sleep and the nurse chased Erin away, telling her that John needed his rest to recover. Erin went back to the lobby and recovered John's keys from the properties room. She took her lover's red Nissan pick-up

back to Curt and Sara's house and tried to put on a brave face. She took over the back bedroom to dress herself for the final concert of the tour and shut the door so nobody would see her cry.

The Master Chorale had never given a concert as beautiful. Every note, every breath was perfect in its delicacy and the audience sat enthralled as waves of pure feeling broke over them. In his hospital room, John Murphy lay back into the too-soft pillows and stared at the ceiling, letting the music wash over him for what he knew would be the last time. He let his regrets go, one by one, letting them be carried away on the current of the music rattling from the old clock-radio the nurses had brought. When Sara and Erin had finished singing Vivaldi's *Kyrie*, John closed his eyes and surrendered to the crushing fatigue that was weighing at his soul. He never heard the alarmed squawks of the machines hooked to his body.

The doctors told them that the part of John's brain that controlled his heart and lungs had suffered damage from the blood loss, and that was what finally took his life. He had standing DNR orders and the medical personnel in the room were forced to just watch as the country's most decorated soldier simply lapsed into coma and stopped breathing.

* * *

He was entitled to a full military funeral, but John's final wishes were to have his ashes scattered in Ireland, near his childhood home. It had not taken long for Sara to think of herself as wholly American after she and John had moved to the 'States in their youth, but she knew her brother's heart was always in County Antrim where he'd been born and raised. And although there was a white cross in Arlington National Cemetery with John's dates and rank and decorations on it, his real grave was a new-planted cypress tree in the hills south of Derry city with a small carved stone marker at its base:

It is never Good-Bye, for the Forest will always be there; and anyone who is Friendly with Bears can find it.

A gentle epitaph for a gentle man, from a story that John read to James in Sara's earliest memories. She found it hard to be sad for her brother, who she firmly believed was in a better place, surrounded by the music and growing things that had washed away six years of war from his soul.

Erin was inconsolable, and when she sang the bitter despair she released into the music wrung tears from audiences around the world. Calluses slowly formed over the wreckage of her heart, allowing her to try and exist again, possibly even love, but she could not avoid the stinging in her eyes every time she performed in the Armagh Cathedral, only a few miles from where the love of her life rested forever.

Sara quit touring a few years later, the raw spots on her heart hurting too badly to sing. Curt was patient and understanding, seeming to bear up under the weight of John's death better than anyone. John had asked Curt, in his last will, to shatter his sword, the blessed steel that freed Sara from the prison of being James, while reading a verse that John thought summed it all up:

"Do not weep, maiden, for war is kind.

Because your lover threw wild hands toward the sky

And the affrighted steed ran on alone,
Do not weep.
War is kind.
Hoarse, booming drums of the regiment,
Little souls who thirst for fight,
These men were born to drill and die.
The unexplained glory flies above them,
Great is the battle-god, great, and his kingdom --
A field where a thousand corpses lie.
Do not weep, babe, for war is kind.
Because your father tumbled in the yellow trenches,
Raged at his breast, gulped and died,
Do not weep.
War is kind.
Swift blazing flag of the regiment,
Eagle with crest of red and gold,
These men were born to drill and die.
Point for them the virtue of slaughter,
Make plain to them the excellence of killing
And a field where a thousand corpses lie.
Mother whose heart hung humble as a button
On the bright splendid shroud of your son,
Do not weep.
War is kind."

Curt was withdrawn for a while, but recovered - again, Sara suspected, something from the relationship between men who had fought and died alongside one another. Their first child, a beautiful daughter, they named Cynthia after Curt's mother. Their second, a son born two years later, could have only been named John. The children brought life back into the hole John had left, and even Erin seemed to take comfort in their presences. Once they were old enough, Sara rejoined the civic chorus and began singing again, thinking it unfair to John to profane the gift he'd given her so long ago by not making music with her beautiful voice.

Curt sat on the stone bench in John's garden, the thing he'd been installing when he busted his leg for the last time, and sipped a cold Harp lager from one of his dead buddy's prized pint glasses. His wife had been torn up, and poor Erin was still a wreck, even on this the tenth

anniversary of John's passing. Somehow, Curtis Lieberman had managed to keep from falling apart at John's death and found a special comfort in the garden his best friend and brother-in-law had built.

Curt sipped his beer and idly wondered if it was just that he was Friendly with Bears.

That's probably it, he thought to himself, and smiled.