



Stories by

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Corie Ralston

Nicole Zanier

Melissa Ann Chadburn



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In This Issue

I'm writing to you on a nifty day. 1-1-11. Yep, New Year's Day 2011. Given the problems of 2010, we're wishing all of our readers a more prosperous and healthier year.

This is our January Trick or Treat issue. The trick being the omission of our October issue and the treat being this great January one! We're introducing three new contributors and a returning author whose stories are clever and provocative.

This Side of Kinsey by Corie Ralston is a quirky tale about futuristic dating agencies.

"Sandy takes in my khakis, my boots, my crew cut.

"Oh," she says, "You must be the lesbian."

I smile. "I'm Jules Morgan. Tidy Token Agency."

Nicole Zanier's *Torn for Her* tugs at the heart.

"We agree to meet alone, for a late night dinner. I haven't seen her in days and it is becoming unbearable. She picks me up in her car and we drive, aimlessly, undecided on where to go. She tells me about the events of her day in her beautiful voice and I listen, not really hearing, responding only with one word, quick answers."

Elaine Burnes's *Tracy Arm* is the vacation trip filled with sadness and longing.

"Kate's breath fogged the window, and she shivered from the morning chill penetrating the glass. She decided not to wake Stephanie, snoring softly in the other bunk. The solitude fit perfectly, familiar now, almost comforting."

Communion by Melissa Ann Chadburn examines the true meaning of forgiveness.

"I smiled nervously and thought, This is strange and funny but sort of sexy . . . I thought of my new lover and how this could make a great kinky scene. I knew he was waiting. I never did well with silences. I heard the priest place his palm on his wooden shelf. I had to say something. What constitutes a sin anyway?"

Enjoy!

Claudia

Cha-cha-cha-changes

Yep. We're late with this issue. Again. Blame it on the rapidly changing publishing landscape summed up in a single word: ebooks. 2010 has been an explosive year of growth for Bedazzled Ink, and we've been running all year just to keep up. We're not as young as we used to be so running is more walking really, really fast but not quite fast enough. *Khimairial Ink* has always been a hobby for the staff at Bedazzled Ink, and we just didn't have the time to spend on it in 2010.

We've decided to change to a twice-a-year format with larger issues that we'll not only put out as pdf's but as mobipockets and epubs. We're also looking for a new managing editor—someone who would love to be at the helm this very special zine.

So those of you who have sent in submissions, be patient for a while longer. We're getting through them and are about to accept some really outstanding stories for our next issue.

Enjoy!

Carrie



Do you write stories that are positive, quirky, clever, funny, light, breezy?

Do you write stories that make us laugh, or at least smile a lot?

Do your stories stray from the garden path of expectation in amusing ways?

In other words, are your stories fun and original and entertaining and maybe even have an out-of-the-blue surprise or two or clever twists?

If "yes" to any of these questions, Nuance is looking for you.

<http://www.bedazzledink.com/nuance>





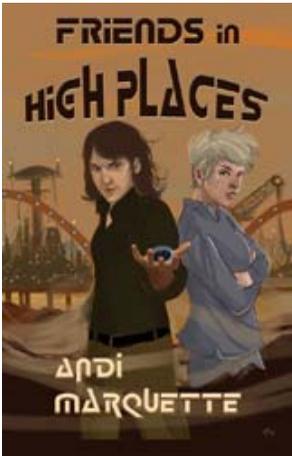
Raise the sails!
Adjust the thrusters!

Skulls & Crossbones
Tales of Women Pirates
edited by
Andi Marquette
R.G. Emanuelle



Mindancer Press

<http://bedazzledink.com/books/mindancer-press/skull-and-crossbones/>



Take off
for exciting
adventures in
space with
Torri and Kai
and the crew
of the
Far Seek



The Far Seek Chronicles
Andi Marquette



Mindancer Press

<http://mindancerpress.wordpress.com/books/friends-in-high-places/>
<http://bedazzledink.com/books/mindancer-press/a-matter-of-blood/>

This Side of Kinsey
Corie Ralston



Sandy takes in my khakis, my boots, my crew cut.

"Oh," she says, "You must be the lesbian."

I smile. "I'm Jules Morgan. Tidy Token Agency."

She ushers me into the voluminous vestibule of her summer "cottage", motions toward the living room with a flutter of her hand, and then forgets about me as someone else arrives.

I hear her squeal-hellos fade as I head down the indicated hallway. I snag a plate of prosciutto from a passing tuxedo-clad waiter and station myself near the champagne.

A man in a deep skier tan and the latest in velvet slacks approaches.

"Make a lot of money doing this?" he says.

I shrug. "Enough." I'm not paid to be friendly.

"I've heard they hire straight Tokens at some parties in New York."

"Not here in Tidy."

"Maybe I could hire myself out," he says with a wink.

"The agency uses a battery of physiological response and pheromone tests to certify their people," I say.

He gives me a blank look.

"They don't make mistakes," I say.

He loses interest and goes off to talk to his skier buddies.

The party is boring, but I do my time. I watch the crowd, all rich and old and not-quite fashionable, all wishing they were young and hip. Tokens at their parties help them believe they're young and hip.

Trina arrives in the midst of the fashionably late crowd. She stands out with her blue-black skin against the red silk of her blouse, but she would stand out even if she weren't the only non-melanin-challenged person in the room. She's tall, with a long regal face, spiky dreads and eyes you could drown in.

She appeared in town just a few months ago. Usually she drags along some hulk of a guy, pinheads on large sloping shoulders. But tonight she's alone, and she looks uncomfortable. Which is strange, because normally she

makes conversation with anybody, makes black look comfortable among white, which is, after all, what she's paid for. At the end of the party, Sandy hands me the cash card and says, "Are you available next Saturday? It'll be a much bigger party. Very high-end." She nods meaningfully at my khakis. I get the hint. I'll have to dress up. Maybe I'll splurge on some black slacks. But you bet I'll be there. Bigger party, bigger pay.

NEXT SATURDAY, SANDY doesn't call. It's not that I need the money so badly, but something bothers me about it, so I bend the agency rules just a little and call her.

"Oh, Jules," she says. "Sure I remember you. Sorry. I found another one."

"Another lesbian?" I say.

"Black and gay. Two birds. One stone. You know."

I fume but I end the conversation politely, and then I go through my mental list. Who could it be?

I call the three other lesbians in town, but they haven't heard of any newcomer. I do learn, however, that Cat is now sleeping with Gina, and Freda is threatening to leave town. The usual drama.

I call my agent, but she won't give me any information.

"I'm sorry, Jules," she says, staring out from my phone with a look of sympathy. "You know I can't talk about the other Tokens." She speaks in a soothing voice, as if I am angry. Which I am.

Either this new Token is from another area, encroaching on my party territory, or she's a fake, somehow duped the certification tests. Either way, I'm going to find out.

I WAIT ON the walk in front of Sandy's mansion, pretending to talk into my cell. Limos pull up the manicured gravel driveway and disgorge women in elegant black dresses, men in tailored suits. One woman in baggy pants strolls up the driveway in flats. I look again.

Trina.

"No way," I say.

She sees me, stops. She's wearing cargo pants with a million pockets, no-nonsense Chelsea boots, and an oversized sweater.

"Kind of playing it up a bit, aren't you?" I say.

She looks away. "Just doing my job."

"My job! This was my job!"

"Sorry."

She shrugs, and for a moment she really does look comfortable in those clothes. She's even starting to slouch a little. And then I figure it out. It's under-the-counter 'mones. Has to be.

True orientation changing is still in the research stage, but for a small fee you can go to a black-market ‘mones dealer, get a hormone cocktail injected directly into your pituitary, and for a day or two you’ll be gay. Or straight. Or wherever on the Kinsey scale you want to sit. It’s not exactly safe. There are a few cases of people going loopy and more than a few nasty infections from unclean needles.

But even that wouldn’t fool the certification tests. How did she do it? I don’t know much about ‘mones, but I am determined to out her.

I stalk home, find my digital cam, buy an instant upload link with time and date and reality stamp certification. And then I wait, loitering in front of the row of high-end restaurants and cocktail lounges that make up most of downtown Tidy.

IT’S THREE DAYS before I see her again, but when I do, I know I have her. She’s with a big goon of a man, all neck and shoulders. I follow them into a retro disco establishment, glittery disco ball and high-pitched Bee-Gees, and everything served in gigantic martini glasses. I stand in the shadows behind the bouncer. I’m ready to get a shot of her smooching with this hulk and send it in to the agency. She will be disqualified and I will get my job back. Take that, you wanna-be!

But something isn’t right.

He has a meaty hand on her back, but she’s not leaning in to him. In fact, she’s ogling the women on the dance floor. And then every minute or so she shakes her head, as if she can’t believe what she’s doing. And then she starts staring again.

I have my camera ready, but there isn’t one decent shot of her and the goon. They’re not smooching. They’re not even holding hands.

Suddenly he leans over, yells something into her ear, then he heads for the door. She follows, and I trail along behind.

I get outside in time to see him stalking away. She hugs herself, looking so sad I just can’t help it. I go over.

“What are you doing here?” she says.

“Clubbing. Same as you.”

“The gay bar is on the other side of town.”

“I could say the same to you.”

We glare at each other.

Finally, she relents. She puts her face in her hands and says something I can’t understand. I guide her away from the clot of heteros hanging outside the club.

We’re standing under an awning just south of main, and the winter air is chilly. She’s shivering in her miniskirt, and she pulls at the spaghetti strings on her blouse as if they are bothering her.

"I don't know what's happening to me," she says.

"What exactly is happening to you?" I say.

She shakes her head. "I keep finding myself wanting to buy sensible shoes. Sleeping in instead of getting up early to do my hair and face--"

"You went to a 'mones dealer, didn't you?"

"Yesterday I woke up and put on those cargo pants without even realizing what I was doing. They just seemed so, I don't know, so practical. All those pockets." Her voice breaks.

"It's okay," I say. "It'll go away."

But I can't help my vindictive side from thinking: maybe she'll think twice about stealing my job again.

"I just don't want to end up with a mullet and those awful clothes—"

All right, I've had enough.

"You know," I say. "Some lesbians like those kinds of clothes."

"If I'm going to be a lesbian, I want to be a lipstick lesbian!"

"Well, put on some lipstick then!" Now I'm feeling defensive about my sneakers and jean jacket. "Butch and femme is so last century. You can be whatever you want."

"No, I can't! You don't understand."

She's right, I don't understand. "I'm going home," I say. I'm tired of this drama. This is exactly why I do not hang out with Freda and Cat and Gina.

"Don't go," she says softly.

She sinks down onto a planter box, squishing a row of marigolds, and starts to sob. I sit next to her, wondering what to do. I can't just leave her like this.

She wipes her eyes. Then I realize she has her hand on my knee. She gives my leg a squeeze.

"You don't want to do this," I say.

"Yes, I do."

"You're going to regret this when the 'mones wear off."

"Does that mean you're saying yes?"

THE NEXT MORNING I say, "We can go to parties as a couple and split the pay. Just until you revert."

She's just waking up, blinking sleepily in the early morning light. I've got the blinds programmed to open gradually, ease the morning in. I like the way she looks in the morning, slightly confused but happy, all the worries of the night a distant thing.

"I don't think I'm ever going to revert," she says.

The phone rings. I sit up, pull on a bathrobe and switch on the screen, expecting Sandy.

It's a guy in a serious suit. Solicitors, I think. How do they get through

the screening program? I'm about to switch it off when a legal logo scrolls across the screen. A lawyer.

"Jules Morgan?" he says.

"Yes."

"We are attempting to locate Trina Coleman." He pauses. "Have you had contact with her in the last few weeks?"

"Uh, I've seen her around." From the corner of my eye, I can see Trina has frozen in place on the bed.

"Who are you representing?" I say.

"Breeton-Fugulle-Paris-Danphysics," he says. Everyone drops the "p." Biggest pharmaceutical conglomerate on the planet

"Why are you looking for her?"

"I'm not at liberty to divulge that information," he says.

"Is there a reward?"

He must be smarter than he looks, because he says "No," and simultaneously flashes a figure on the screen. It's a lot. I wouldn't have to work as a Token for a long time.

"I don't know where she is," I say, wondering how I can let him know she's right here, right now, in my apartment.

He flashes his card to my home system. "Call me if you have any information."

I power off and Trina says, "You're thinking about turning me in, aren't you?"

"No, of course not." But of course I am. I'm thinking about how I could afford to get a better apartment. Then I think: that's a lot of money. Why do they want her so bad?

"Trina," I say. "Did you do more than take black market 'mones?"

"The thing is," she says. "I never took black market 'mones."

"What?"

"I never took any 'mones at all."

I decide to wait a little longer before calling Mr. BFD back. "What's going on, then?"

"You have to promise not to tell anyone. Okay?"

"Cross my heart."

She starts in about how she always felt like a woman trapped in a man's body, and I kind of tune out, but then I tune in again when she mentions a corporate sponsored research program about gender changing.

"Wait a minute," I say. "You're a genetic male?" What I'm thinking is: I slept with a man!

"I'm not sure," she says. "They were in the process of changing all those Y's to X's. Every cell in my body."

"True gender changing? That's not possible."

“BFD thinks it is. Targeted chromosome replacement. It makes everything else just happen on its own, without hormones or anything. I grew these fabulous breasts, and my hairy--”

“It’s okay,” I interrupt. “I don’t need to know all the details.” All I can think is: Chromosomes be damned. She was born an XY. She’s ruined my record.

“It was great at first,” she says. “Finally my body matched how I always thought of myself.”

“So did you like women or did you like men?” I say. “I mean, before they started changing those Y’s to X’s?”

“Does it matter? I was finally a woman. I loved my body. But then it all started to go terribly wrong.”

“Like how?”

“I started wanting to wear loose pants.”

“So?”

“And wear sensible shoes!”

“Who says cargo pants look bad on a woman?” I say.

“Everyone who is fashionable,” she says.

“Not me.” I most definitely love my khakis. And my crew cuts. And yes, even a fanny pack looks good to me. “A cargo lesbo! Why can’t I be a lipstick—”

“All right. All right.” I need to call Mr. BFD and get that reward. “How many Y’s do you have left, anyway?”

“I don’t know.”

“Maybe if you finished the treatment—”

“And become even more unfashionable? No way! I really liked being a girl,” she says. “A fashionable girl. The clothes. The heels. The makeup. Oh, god.” Here we go. More weeping.

I try to head it off. “So why is the company after you?”

“Because of one of those contracts I signed. I promised to do publicity for them. TV spots. Magazines. I can’t do it now. I just can’t. I hate myself.”

“Just go back and do the damn commercials. How hard could it be?”

“I hate flannel. But I love it!”

So did I sleep with a straight girl or a trans femme man? And does she like flannel or doesn’t she? How much of her original DNA does she have left? My head is spinning.

“I put on a silk dress and I feel like a fake. I put on a baggy pants and I like it. But I hate it. I hate that I like it.”

Too late. The weeping has gone into waterfall mode. I ponder how to get her out of my apartment.

“I can’t go home now,” she says, as if reading my thoughts. “I can’t go outside anymore.”

“Why not?” I say.

“What if my friends find out I like cargo pants?”

“You’ll have to come out to them at some point,” I say. “Either that or force yourself to wear heels and motion-restricting clothes the rest of your life.”

Mistake. The weeping resumes.

“Listen,” I say. “I’ve got a brunch party to go to. Why don’t you help yourself to some food. I’ll be back later and we can figure out what to do.”

“Thanks,” she says. She wipes her eyes. “I mean it. You’ve been so good to me.”

She won’t think that for long.

MR. BFD STANDS next to me outside a downtown café with his hands in his coat pockets. He talks straight ahead, as if we’re in a spy movie and he’s pretending he doesn’t know me. Or maybe he’s just embarrassed to be seen with someone wearing sweats and bed-head.

The smell of roasting coffee and no-foam-caramel-macchiatos wafts out each time the door slides open. Already the winter skiers are starting to thin out. There will be a lull before the summer herds arrive. That reward will come at just the right time.

“Breeton-Fugulle-Paris-Danphysics just wants to see her back safe and sound and glamorous,” he says. “A little money for you, a little good publicity for us. Who’s the worse?”

“Sure,” I say.

“Getting a job as a Token.” He rolls his eyes. “Pretty stupid. You know what I love about my job?”

No, I don’t, and I don’t care. But he doesn’t ask if I care.

“These people are so easy to track down.”

“How many are there anyway?”

But he isn’t listening to me.

“They all want a free ride. Just lazy, I suppose, like all Tokens,” he says. He risks a sidelong glance at me and adds as an afterthought, “No offense.”

I was about to ask about that reward again, but then I change my mind.

“So what will happen to her?” I say.

He shrugs. “She broke her contract. If she comes back to LA and does the publicity, then we’ll forgive the breach. Minus the fine for her actions, of course.”

“A fine?”

He names a figure. Same amount as the reward. How stupid does he think I am, anyway?

“And if she doesn’t?”

“No more targeted genetic treatment for her. She’ll end up in a gender no-man’s land. So to speak.”

“I think she’s already in no-man’s land,” I say.

He’s still looking straight ahead, barely listening to me. “She owes us,” he says. “We gave her the body of her dreams, and all she does is run and hide. Typical.”

“Typical of what? Typical of men who are really women who turn into last century non-fashionable lesbians?”

“What?”

“Never mind.”

“Listen, it doesn’t matter how she feels about her transformation. If we want her to dance, she’ll dance.”

“I’m not sure you’ll like the way she dances now,” I say.

“Are you telling me she no longer enjoys looking beautiful?”

“I’m just saying she’s not fitting your definition of beautiful anymore.”

“There is only one beautiful,” he says. “Don’t you watch television?”

He finally looks at me, and his gaze is both perplexed and condescending. “You know, maybe you should consider the program. You might look better as a man.”

I grit my teeth. I manage to keep myself from responding.

“So,” he says. “Are you going to tell me where she is?”

I pretend to consider for a moment. “I’ll call you later.”

WHEN I GET home, Trina is sprawled on the couch, used Kleenex surrounding her like tiny little clouds.

“Come on,” I say.

“What?”

“It’s time to give in to those cargo tendencies.”

She tries to cover her eyes but I take her hand and pull her upright.

“I’ve been doing some research,” I say. “It’s called clothes therapy. All you need to do is give in to your butch impulses for a few days and they’ll start to go away. You’ll start to enjoy back-breaking stilettos and suffocating zippers once again.”

“You really think so?” She looks at me with those wide, trusting eyes.

“I know so.”

“I do like the way loose shirts feel.”

“Yes.”

“And flats are so much more comfortable.”

“Now we’re talking!”

I pull her into the bedroom, fling open the closet.

Jeans and sweats and cargo pants, black slacks and button-downs for

the fancy occasions. And the accessories: key chains, belts with large buckles, a few neckties. And flannel. Lots of it.

Trina rushes forward, pulls a plaid shirt to her face.

“Just give in to it, Trina,” I say. “Let go.”

She swoons into the flannel forest.

I back out slowly, quietly.

I use the kitchen screen to call Mr. BFD.

“She’s here, at my apartment,” I say, low and conspiratorial.

“I knew you’d come through for me,” he says. “Flash me the address.”

I get the camera unplinked and ready.

WHEN MR. BFD arrives, I have the camera on him the moment he swaggers in, red-light blinking ‘live’.

“Does BFPD pharmaceutical confirm or deny the plight of Trina Coleman?” I say.

“What?” I can tell he’s about to get angry, but then he sees the reality-certification-logo on the cam and changes his mind. He knows this footage is being archived and stamped as it rolls.

He looks directly into the camera. “Well, since you have that on, maybe I can explain to any potential viewers exactly what is happening here. We are here to meet Trina Coleman, a successful participant in our new gender-transformation program.”

“And you want her back?”

“Of course we do. This is the real thing. Actual chromosome-changing, not just the outward sexual characteristics. Trina started out a verified XY male, went through the treatments, and emerged a stunning XX woman. And you, too, can become the woman or man of your dreams. The cost is minimal, the results guaranteed.”

“Trina!” I yell. “Come out of the closet!”

Trina emerges from the bedroom. She’s wearing an oversized t-shirt, out-of-date navy slacks that hang half-way down her butt, army boots and a fanny pack.

“Good god,” BFD says.

“Hi Trina,” I say. I give her a thumbs-up.

She looks at the camera, at Mr. BFD and then back at me. First anger glimmers in her eyes, and then understanding.

“I always loved those fanny packs,” I say. “So practical.”

“Turn that camera off now!” BFD says.

Trina narrows her eyes at him. Then she pulls her keys out of her pocket and loops them on her belt.

“Nice!” I say.

“I’m getting a tattoo and a mullet this afternoon,” she says.

“Butch is beautiful!” I say.

And she is beautiful. Those loose pants. Those no-nonsense boots. She is the most beautiful woman I have ever seen. Her regal air is back. Trina is a strong, proud, boot-wearing goddess.

“Well?” I say. “You still want her for those publicity spots?”

“You can’t show up in LA with a fanny pack,” BFD says to Trina. “I’ll lose my job.”

I lower the camera, switch it off.

“Well, then,” Trina says. “How about you explain to the company why I can’t do those commercials?”

BFD scowls, looks like he is about to say something, thinks better of it. He heads for the door, then turns at the last minute. “You keep that footage archived or the deal is off,” he says.

“Fine by me,” Trina says.

He turns to me. “And you’re not getting any reward.”

I shrug. “I guess I’ll just keep working as a Token. Easy money, you know.”

He slams the door as he leaves.

Trina sinks onto the couch. “Good riddance,” she says.

“What about finishing the program?” I say.

She shrugs. “I’m starting to like myself just the way I am.”

“Not everyone can be lipstick,” I say.

She smiles. “You must think I’m a total jerk.”

The funny thing is, I don’t.

“You’re okay,” I say. “For someone with a few Y’s.”

Stone Franks

THURSDAY 09/12/04
KINKY STRIP FROM DI LAYTER
DJS MEL + PHYLLISHAVE



ONSTAGE @ 12:00 NAKED BY 12:00
THE GARAGE CLUB
ESTABLISHED 1993

CORNER OF BLANDFORD ST/DUKE ST.
€5 ON DOOR/MEMBERS €3. OPEN 7:00-02:00.
FEMALE'S ONLY. PLEASE DO NOT BE OFFENDED IF WE ASK
TO SEE OR FEEL YOUR GENITALS. B.B.B.B.

TAUGHT

Torn for Her
Nicole Zanier



We agree to meet alone, for a late night dinner. I haven't seen her in days and it is becoming unbearable. She picks me up in her car and we drive, aimlessly, undecided on where to go. She tells me about the events of her day in her beautiful voice and I listen, not really hearing, responding only with one word, quick answers. We chat about random things for a while, just enjoying each other's company. Then, she moves the subject on to her boyfriend and their relationship problems. This I did not want. I turn and gaze out the window as she breaks my heart with her heterosexual dilemma. I catch the last part of her story, the part where I am supposed to respond to it all, as a good friend would do, but I find guiltily that I had not heard a single word that she said.

Quickly, I mumble something about how it will all turn out okay in the end. She sighs. She says no. Everything will not be okay. We're silent for minutes. If I were to eat right now I would probably be sick. I look at her face. It's unreadable. I say maybe we should just go home. I've obviously upset her. She says no, she's hungry and we might as well eat. I agree. I glance at her again. She seems even more upset. I want to kiss her, hold her, and tell her I love her. I cannot. I never can. I'm torn for her friendship and for her love. Sadness overcomes me. Maybe, after tonight, we should not talk anymore. It seems we always end up like this. Upset with one another but unable to admit it. She passes our favorite restaurant. I'm confused. She turns onto a random dark side road. I ask her if she's all right. She says no. This must be my fault, I don't listen to her, I never want to be supportive of her relationships, and I'm never happy for her. Always jealous. Maybe she's noticed. She parks the car at the end of the in front of a dark, unfamiliar house. She turns off the car engine, looks at me, and then looks away.

"I'M SORRY," I say, wishing I meant it, not sure why I was saying it. "Things with him will get better."

I wait for her response, something to the effect of "No it won't" accented

with teary eyes and a shaky voice, where then I am forced to pour on the “supportive friend” bit extra thick.

She surprises me. “I’m going to break it off.”

I ask her why. She says she doesn’t love him. Not in the way she’s supposed to. Her decision is final. I tell her I’m sorry. She says she’s not, so why should I be? She turns to me, and we look into each other’s eyes. I ask myself if I should tell her. No. Wrong time. Yet when is the right time? I have all these things I want to tell her. You’re a beautiful person. I wish I were like you. I admire you, I always have. I love you. No, not just as a friend. I wonder what she’d say.

I put my hand on her knee and assure her that someday she’ll find her soul mate, someone as perfect as she is. A little too mushy probably but we’re friends, and she needs to hear it.

“Thanks,” she replies with a slight smile. I think she’s a little embarrassed by my words. It’s dark but she looks to be blushing.

“You’re so beautiful,” I say suddenly, without thinking. She gives me a funny look.

“You’re out of his league.” There, that seems better. Good recovery. Let’s move on. She smiles.

“You’re always so nice to me,” she says.

“Well, we are friends, right?” I reply. “It’s my job.” I turn on the radio, on low. She switches it off.

“You’re always complimenting me,” she says. At least she doesn’t sound disgusted.

“That’s bad?” I ask. Keeping it simple, keeping it simple.

“No, not at all. It’s just sometimes I wonder . . .”

She’s on to me.

“Wonder?” I ask. “Can we drive please?”

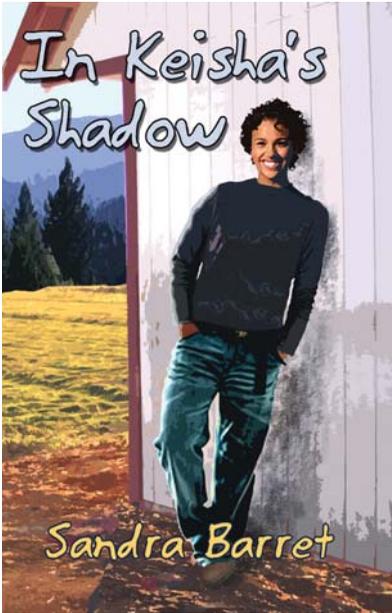
She just stares at me with a smirk on her face, the look that says, *No we’re not going anywhere. I’m in control. I’m onto you. I know something.*

“Well?” I ask, agitated. “Dinner or not?”

She looks me up and down. Suddenly I wish everything I’d ever said I could take back. We’re looking into each other’s eyes. I feel dozens of different emotions all at once. She leans closer. I’m frozen.

“Anything you want to tell me, you can.” she says. “I’m always here for you.”

I sigh. Great. She knows now. She starts the car. I tell her I should probably get home. She says okay. She drops me off, I wave goodbye. She says for me to call her tomorrow, to go to the mall. I tell her I have to work. She says maybe Friday. Okay. She drives away as soon as close the car door and I stand, under the moonlight, and watch the car disappear.



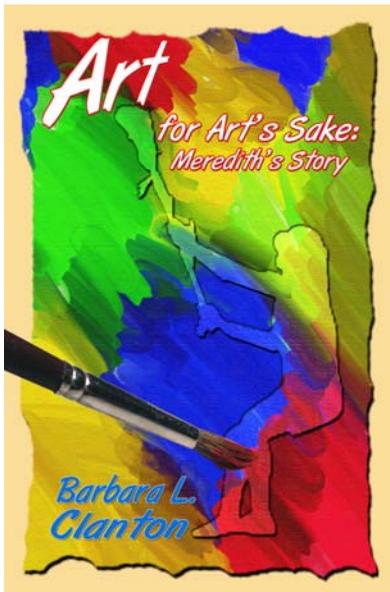
In Keisha's Shadow

Sandra Barret

Tori's life seems to be going from bad to worse when brash and flirty Ashley shows up and turns her world upside down.



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Tracy Arm
Elaine Burnes



The small cruise ship drifted across a steel-colored plane and a light fog blurred the line between horizon and sky. Mist draped the forested shore, unmarked by humans. Kate sat at the end of her bunk and leaned against the cabin window, watching three humpback whales float by, not fifty feet from the deck railing. The deep whoosh of a fourth whale, exhaling as it surfaced, sounded through the room, and a cloud of water vapor shot skyward. The massive form then slipped beneath the still water.

Kate's breath fogged the window, and she shivered from the morning chill penetrating the glass. She decided not to wake Stephanie, snoring softly in the other bunk. The solitude fit perfectly, familiar now, almost comforting.

At 6:30 the intercom crackled to life as the ship's naturalist gave the wakeup call, announcing that the shore visit to a rainforest would begin at eight. Stephanie groaned awake and Kate retreated to the bathroom.

"What day is it?" Stephanie called through the bathroom door.

Kate counted back. This was their second morning aboard the boat, but they'd spent a week traveling from Fairbanks down through Denali National Park then to Anchorage for their flight to Juneau and the cruise. She'd completely lost track.

"I've no idea," she said, and for that she was grateful.

She sighed and reached for her toothbrush, grabbing the sink to steady herself as the ship rolled gently in a turn. Alaska had seemed like a good idea three months ago when Stephanie had suggested it. She hadn't seen her college buddy in years and she needed the distraction. She just wished Jill was here. But that was the point. Better to be here without Jill than at home without her.

AT THE APPOINTED hour, full of French toast and coffee, Kate found herself doing a double take as she rounded the corner to the muster area and spotted the crew member handing out life jackets for the ride on the Zodiac to shore. *Is that a dyke?* Kate felt a nudge.

"Check 'er out," Stephanie whispered.

Kate's gaze lingered as the woman bantered with the guests while showing them how to put on their "PFDs," she called them, for personal flotation device. She was unmistakable, with short, dark blond hair in a boy's cut that was carefully parted and combed, accentuating her firm jaw line. Kate had only begun to analyze why that set off her gaydar, when the woman laughed, deep and sure. Not giggly. Her face had lit up with a broad smile, laugh lines creasing her cheeks. It triggered a tiny detonation deep within Kate.

Fellow passengers formed a line, and Kate's peripheral vision blurred as she inched closer. Then she was next and the woman met her gaze, her eyes gray like the ocean. She said something.

"I'm sorry. What?" Kate asked, flustered.

"You might want to take your cap off," she repeated.

Tracy, Kate read from the nametag above her left breast, merely hinted at under a fleece vest worn over her uniform.

Tracy showed her how to hold the inflation tubes aside to fit her head through the opening. Their hands brushed and Kate flinched as she took the PFD from her. She pushed her head through, then Tracy pulled the strap around her and hooked the clip.

"You're all set." She smiled and turned her attention to Stephanie, warning her to remove her glasses as well as her cap.

It was over so fast. Kate found herself pushed back to the rail as more people milled about. She wanted to say something to Tracy, but had no idea what. Besides, the woman was working. Kate sighed and wondered what was happening to her. Maybe it was because they'd been surrounded by heterosexuals on this trip. Was Tracy merely an oasis in the desert? She hadn't reacted this way to a woman in, well, two years. Stephanie looked at her strangely.

"What?"

"You interested?" Stephanie nodded toward Tracy.

A chill made Kate shiver. "No." It was reflex more than answer. She thought about taking it back, saying "maybe" instead. Stephanie would be thrilled. She'd spend the rest of the trip trying to get them together. That was the problem.

As the group headed down the stairs to the waiting *Zodiac*, Kate twisted around to keep Tracy in sight as long as she could, and all during the hike through the rainforest, she thought about her. When they returned to the ship, a male crew member took their PFDs. Kate looked for Tracy, but the *Sea Star*, with just four decks and only a hundred passengers, was plenty big enough to hide a dyke.

THE NEXT EVENING in the ship's lounge, while the naturalist pointed to a photo of a raven projected on the screen, Kate stared through front window, watching Tracy out on the bow until it had become too dark to see. The last she had seen of her, Tracy was leaning over the rail, watching the anchor as it dropped. Another crew member manned the machine that lowered the hefty chain. Kate had no idea what ravens ate or where they lived.

When the door to the bow opened, Kate had been nodding off but looked up in time to see Tracy breeze past her, oblivious that another lesbian was thinking of her, so close by. In the nick of time, she thought to check Tracy's left hand. No ring. She sighed.

"GOOD MORNING, SEA Star," the naturalist announced through the cabin's intercom. "Are you ready for a lovely morning in Tracy Arm?"

Kate startled awake by the voice. Then the words sank in. *Tracy Arm? Tracy.* She sat up abruptly. That was it, the perfect excuse. Today she would talk to her. She leapt out of bed and rushed through washing up.

Stephanie peered out from under her blankets as Kate got dressed. "What's got into you?"

"Glaciers. Icebergs." Kate said, dodging the answer. "Tracy Arm is supposed to be the best place to see ice calving off the glaciers." She grabbed her camera and binoculars. "I'll see you on deck."

All morning Kate wandered the ship, alternating between looking for Tracy and staring, mesmerized by the steep walls of the narrow inlet and the towering glaciers. She craned her neck at the granite cliffs on either side that rose two thousand feet almost straight up to an azure sky, unmarked by clouds or airplanes. Below her, bits of icebergs in various shades of blue and white floated by in emerald green water. Other than the hum of the engine as the ship motored slowly toward South Sawyer Glacier, there were no sounds except occasional pops and cracks of ice breaking off, then a roar as an avalanche rolled down the face of the glacier and splashed into the water. The naturalist described the long, arm-shaped fjord, with its ninety degree bend at the "elbow," and pointed out bare rock that just five years earlier had been covered by a glacier melting rapidly due to climate change. The ice glistened, wet and vulnerable in the bright sun, and Kate tried to comprehend a world too warm for glaciers.

Everyone, it seemed, was out on deck, except for the elusive lesbian crew member. By noon, Kate despaired of ever seeing her again. Then, right after lunch, there she was, in a sweatshirt and jeans, binoculars around her neck, playing tourist like the rest of them. Of course, she couldn't work 24/7. It took almost an hour for Kate to gather the courage to approach her, standing by the rail on the bow.

“So, Tracy, what do you think of Tracy Arm?” she asked, immediately convinced that was the lamest possible question.

Tracy looked confused for a second then smiled shyly. “Ah, the nametag.” She patted her sweatshirt, but there was nothing there. “I like it. You?”

Kate nodded in agreement and returned the smile, relieved. “Off duty?”

“Yeah.”

“That’s nice. I’m Kate.”

“Tracy.”

“I know.”

“Right!” Tracy blushed.

Oh my, Kate thought. She’s nervous too.

“This your first trip to Alaska?” Tracy asked.

“Yeah. You?”

“I live here.” Tracy paused, then added, “In Juneau. Not, you know, here...” She nodded to take in the boat and relaxed against the rail.

“So, how’d you get this job?”

Tracy met Kate’s gaze then looked away. “Well, that’s kind of a long story, but it’s something I’ve wanted to do for a while.” She looked back at Kate. “The short version is, they were hiring and I was available.”

“I’d love to hear the long version.”

Tracy’s eyes narrowed and her smile vanished. The effect gave Kate chills. What had she said? Was Tracy angry?

People began to press around them. Things were getting interesting at the glacier. The naturalist was pointing at something. Seals on an ice floe. That was all.

“I once dated a woman who sailed,” Kate said as a way to broach the reason she had wanted to talk to Tracy in the first place. Kindred spirits and sisterhood.

“Yeah? So, you don’t?”

Oh, no, Kate thought, she’ll think we have nothing in common. “I’d love to learn,” she said.

“I’m sure you could take lessons.” Tracy’s clipped, serious tone sounded like a door closing. She turned toward the seals and raised her binoculars.

Kate lost her nerve. “Yeah, maybe someday I will.”

“WHAT DAY IS it?” Stephanie asked.

Kate ignored her friend. She hadn’t slept well and woke in a foul mood. She checked her watch. The fifth. August fifth. *Fuck*. This was why she hadn’t cared that they’d lost track of time. This was why she had pushed to go on the trip this week. She wanted to forget, to be somewhere else today. But it didn’t help.

“Is it Wednesday?” Stephanie asked.

“Yes!” Kate threw the covers off and sat up. “God, can you let it go?”

“What’s bugging you?” Stephanie teased.

Kate glared at her. “Fuck you.” She headed toward the bathroom but stubbed her toe, letting out a frustrated howl. “God *damn* it!”

The boat turned at that moment and Kate lurched against the desk, her hip slamming into the chair. She burst into tears and sank to the floor.

Stephanie went to her. “Hey, what’s going on?” She put her arms around Kate and held her while she sobbed.

It took several minutes before Kate regained control, but when she tried to speak, fresh tears flowed. She rocked against Stephanie who cooed soothingly. When she stopped crying, she lay in her friend’s arms, quiet, afraid to speak.

Finally, she took a deep breath. “It’s August fifth.”

“Oh, shit. Your anniversary.”

“I was hoping I would be so distracted I wouldn’t notice.”

“I’m sorry. I should just shut up.”

Kate sighed. “It’s not your fault.” She pressed the heels of her hands to her eyes, to dam the flow, to no avail. “Why does it still hurt so much? I know she’d want me to move on. She wouldn’t want me . . . like this.”

“No, she wouldn’t. But it’s not that easy.”

Kate relaxed against Stephanie and they sat, quiet.

“I’m so tired of this,” she said after a few minutes. “I’ve completely forgotten who I used to be and no one else remembers either.”

Stephanie wiped Kate’s wet cheek. “I remember. You’re the one who lights up a room just by walking through the door. The one who makes me laugh so hard I cry.”

“Not any more, I don’t.”

“You will again. I promise.”

They remained on the floor while the voice crooned through the intercom about the day’s port visit.

“Would you mind if I didn’t go into Sitka today?” Kate said.

“Sure. We can stay here.”

“No, I mean me. I’d like to be alone today.

“I don’t know...it doesn’t seem like a good idea.”

“Then I won’t ask. I want to be alone today. I’m tired. I’ll probably sleep through it all.”

Reluctantly, Stephanie agreed. Kate crawled back into bed and pretended to fall asleep while Stephanie got dressed. She felt a light kiss on her forehead and heard the door close softly. The tears returned.

On this day three years ago, Kate had stood next to Jill on a sunny patch of grass in Boston’s Arnold Arboretum, sweating and breathless. Their friend Margaret, a minister, had performed the ceremony. Kate remembered how

serene Jill had appeared, except for the death grip she had on Kate's hand. They were surrounded by friends and family. Jill's mother wept joyfully. Kate's father wiped tears of pride. It was a day she had never expected to be allowed to have. A legal marriage to the woman she loved more than life itself. They had written their own vows—to love each other forever, because they knew the physical world could not contain what they felt.

Ten months later, a drunk driver ran a red light and broadsided Jill's car, killing her instantly the doctor told Kate. She thought for sure she would continue to feel Jill's presence, might even see her in dim corners of their favorite room—the den with the woodstove. But Kate had felt nothing. No sensations, no vibrations, only the chilling, dark sorrow that encased her. It was as though time itself had stopped, like Jill's wristwatch, frozen at the moment of impact.

KATE WOKE WITH a pounding headache. Thirsty and hungry she dragged herself out of bed, got dressed, and went in search of food. The ship was quiet. Most of the guests had gone ashore. She made a sandwich from the scraps left on the lunch buffet, poured a cup of coffee, and found a table outside at the back of the boat. Warm sunlight eased her aching sinuses. When she finished eating, she leaned back and stared over the rail.

Sitka Harbor buzzed with activity as fishing boats chugged past and floatplanes took off from the watery runway. On the shore, steep green mountains appeared to rise right out of the streets. A swirling breeze mingled the scents of spruce trees and diesel fuel.

Movement caught her eye. Toward the front of the boat and silhouetted in the bright light, a deckhand cleaned cabin windows. Smooth arm strokes swept wide arcs. The person moved a window closer. Up, down, side to side. Spray, squeegee, wipe the smudges. Next window. The rhythm lulled Kate such that she was startled when the person, having reached the end of the row, turned to her and smiled.

“Sitting out Sitka?” Tracy asked.

Kate smiled back, confident her sunglasses hid her puffy red eyes. “Something like that.”

“You're not missing much.” Tracy leaned against the wall.

“Really? I heard it was terrific. ‘Paris of the Pacific,’ according to your company's brochure.”

Tracy smiled shyly. Kate found that endearing, yet heartbreaking.

“It's a tourist town,” Tracy said. “Not my style, anyway.”

For longer than necessary, Tracy held Kate's gaze, squinting in the bright light. Kate wished she wasn't wearing sunglasses so Tracy could see her eyes. But not under these conditions.

“I didn't mean to be so brusque yesterday,” Tracy said at last.

“Were you?”

“About why I’m here.”

“Oh. Well, I didn’t mean to pry.”

“Mind if I join you?” Tracy glanced toward the empty chair at Kate’s table.

“Not at all. Please do.” Kate silently cursed that today, of all days, Tracy wanted to chat.

Tracy sat down, placing her squeegee and spray bottle on the deck beside her. “It’s beautiful here, isn’t it?” She gazed out over the harbor. “Look, there’s an eagle.”

Kate followed Tracy’s arm to where she pointed but had to force herself to look beyond the muscled forearm, large watch, and blunt fingers. The iconic bird, with its white head and tail, sat on a post at the end of a nearby dock.

“They’re common as crows around here, but I never get sick of them,” Tracy said. She lowered her hand into her lap.

Kate looked back at Tracy and admired her profile. Tracy turned and met her gaze. “Do you still want to know why I’m here?”

“Uh, sure.”

Tracy leaned forward and put her elbows on the table. “A story as old as the sea. My girlfriend cheated on me. I left in a huff, which left me homeless. So I took this job. Thought a change of scenery might clear my head and distract me.”

A knot formed in Kate’s stomach. “I’m sorry.”

“So am I.” She straightened. “Well, I should get back to work. I just wanted to apologize. I didn’t want you to think I was rude.” She bent to get her cleaning supplies and stood. “Enjoy the day.”

Then she was gone. Kate let out a breath, wondering what had just happened. Had Tracy wanted her to know she was single? To what end? She hadn’t pursued it further.

A warmth penetrated Kate. A connection had been made. A bit of ice had broken off the wall and fallen into the sea, its ripples reaching out.

WHEN STEPHANIE FOUND her later, she had moved to the top deck to stay in the sun, now angled low over the Pacific.

“How was Sitka?”

Stephanie pulled up a chair. “Kind of touristy.”

Kate laughed. “So I’ve heard.”

“How are you?”

Kate told her about Tracy.

“So you are interested.” She smirked.

Kate shook her head. “I don’t think I am. She was this kind of mythical

dyke, but now that we finally talked, if you could call it that, I don't feel so obsessed with her."

"Well, that's too bad," Stephanie said. "She's cute."

"Oh, please. We live on opposite sides of the country. What would be the point?"

Stephanie looked at her. "True. You wouldn't move cross country for me. I just thought maybe you'd learned something from that."

Kate's breath caught. "What? Are you still pissed about that—after ten years? We've talked about it. I thought we were okay."

"I am. I've moved on. You're the one who hasn't."

"Um, remember Jill? I think that qualifies as moving on."

"I mean playing it safe. You say you're tired of mourning. Well, stop."

Kate looked at her friend, stunned. Stephanie's frank honesty had attracted Kate to her in the first place, but also pushed her away. Friends, not lovers, they'd decided in the end, when they'd realized it wouldn't work, after Stephanie took the job in Seattle and Kate wouldn't go with her. "It's not that easy...I'm not sure I know how—"

"I know." Stephanie gave Kate's hand a squeeze. "But even here in the frozen north, summer arrives, flowers bloom. Look around." Kate noticed the eagle still on the post. "There's beauty to behold. Don't hold yourself back because you think it's expected of you."

KATE FLOPPED ONTO the couch in the reception area of the Cruise Alaska office in Juneau, too exhausted to be angry that the airline had screwed up her reservation. "Rich," from the cruise company, was trying to sort it out, but there were no more flights for the day so he was also trying to find her a hotel room. Kate closed her eyes. She dozed, but woke with a start when someone sat beside her.

"I'm sorry. I was trying not to wake you."

Tracy. In full butch glory—cargo shorts, T-shirt, and Texas. Kate wore the same thing all summer, so wondered what made that butch. But on Tracy, the effect accentuated her inner male. Perhaps aided by her furry legs. "Hi. What brings you here?" She felt warm suddenly.

"Collecting my paycheck. I thought you guys'd be gone. You doing some sightseeing?"

"Hardly. Steph's probably home by now. I got delayed." She explained the lost reservation.

"Oh. Sorry to hear that." Tracy wrinkled her brow and glanced around the office then back at Kate. "So . . . You aren't together?"

"No. She lives in Seattle. I live in Boston. Just old buddies."

Tracy shook her head as a blush spread across her cheeks. "Shoot. I just assumed . . . Sorry."

Kate smiled and regarded Tracy. All this time, she had thought they were a couple. How ironic.

“You okay?” Tracy asked. “Where are you staying?”

“Rich is looking for a room. I’m fine.”

Tracy’s red deepened and spread down her neck. “Well, you know . . . You’re welcome to stay with me.”

Kate suppressed a chuckle. “Where? Under a bridge? I thought you were homeless.”

“Oh, that. No, I got a gig cat-sitting for a friend who’s working the next three tours. His apartment’s not far. We could walk. It has two bedrooms . . .”

Tracy was a near stranger. Kate knew she had no business going to some strange apartment with a stranger. Yet Tracy had also begun to stir the most faint, vaguest feelings inside her. Feelings she had been sure were locked away forever in a permafrost of grief. “That’s very kind of you. Thank you.”

“Great. Shall we—?” Tracy stood and hoisted Kate’s bag onto her shoulder.

“You really don’t have to do that,” Kate said.

Tracy dropped the bag. “Sorry. Habit.”

Juneau consists of a sliver of flat land along the shore with the rest of the town built up the side of a steep mountain ridge. After only a block of climbing, Kate had to stop and rest. Without saying anything, Tracy took her bag. Kate didn’t protest this time.

“Sorry about the hill,” Tracy said when they reached the apartment and Kate bent over to catch her breath while Tracy dug the keys out of her pocket.

Inside, they were greeted by a large, orange cat. It flopped to the floor in front of them and rolled over. Kate bent to rub its belly.

They toured the apartment together, then Kate dumped her bags in the spare room and lay down on the bed. It was dusk when she woke. She blinked and looked around to orient herself, still feeling the gentle roll of the ship although she was on land now. In some guy’s apartment. With a woman. She checked her cell phone. Rich had left a message that she was on standby for the morning flight or he could get her a seat on the afternoon one if she called him by five. She checked her watch. Seven o’clock. Too late.

She wandered through the quiet apartment. Passing the master bedroom, she spotted Tracy, likewise passed out on a king-sized bed, still in her shorts and T-shirt, the cat—Bill, Tracy had said—curled against her hip. Kate leaned against the doorjamb. Tracy lay on her stomach, face turned to the door, peaceful, beautiful. She wondered what it would be like

to slip a hand under her shirt. To rub her back. Kate surprised herself. Tomorrow they'd part ways and never see each other again. A wave of sadness washed through her. She pushed away from the door and headed to the kitchen.

She found Cheerios and milk and was eating at the table when Tracy stirred. Kate heard a door close, the toilet flush, the faucet run.

"Sleep well?" she greeted Tracy when she came into the kitchen.

"I guess so." Tracy looked at the empty cereal bowl. "I'm not much of a host."

"Don't worry about it. I fell asleep, too."

Tracy started opening cabinet doors. "That one, over the toaster," Kate said. "I've already ransacked the place."

"Thanks."

"Spoons are by the dishwasher."

Tracy was smiling as she sat across from Kate. She poured the milk, sprinkled some sugar on the cereal, and looked around as though searching for something. "Napkins anywhere?" she asked.

Kate shook her head. "Not that I could find." She handed Tracy the paper towel that had been in her lap. "Here. I was neat."

Such easy domesticity. Kate felt a mysterious cramp in her belly, unclear if it was a good thing or not. She told Tracy about Rich's message.

Tracy nodded, then finished chewing. "If you're interested, I could show you around Juneau in the morning."

"Sure. So, did you live here? In Juneau . . . with . . ."

"Yeah."

"Any worries you'll run into her?"

Tracy was still.

"I'm sorry."

"That's okay. Yes, I am worried. Running away doesn't really solve anything, does it? Just puts it off. I suppose I'll have to deal with her at some point. But frankly, I'm more pissed than hurt."

Tracy's smile spread warmth throughout Kate. The hairs on the back of her head tingled.

"So, what do you run away from?" Tracy asked.

Kate looked at her, startled. "Excuse me? Are you a shrink, too?"

"Just nosy. On the boat the other day, you looked like you were either hung over or had been crying. I thought maybe you'd had a fight with your missus. Guess I was wrong. I felt bad for you and wanted to say something, but didn't know what."

"Do you ever get so tired of playing a role that you just want to cry?"

Tracy looked puzzled. "What role are you playing?"

"I was just tired, that's all."

In the silence that followed, Kate relaxed. Tracy placed no demands on her, had no expectations. She was easy to be with.

“Feel like going for a walk?” Tracy asked when she finished eating. “I need to get some groceries.”

“Can we skip the hills?”

“Fraid not. Juneau’s pretty much all hills.”

RAINFOREST FOODS WAS a hippy natural foods store, and Kate liked it immediately. They entered near a buffet of soups and salads. Her hunger returned with the aroma of pizza under a warming lamp. “Want some?” she asked as Tracy grabbed a basket.

“Sure,” Tracy said. She headed to the produce section.

While Kate busied herself finding a container and cutting slices, she glanced over at Tracy, the once mythical dyke now squeezing tomatoes and sniffing peaches.

They chatted as they wandered the aisles. Tracy’s father had been a harbor master, that was why she was interested in working on the cruise ship. “I grew up around boats.”

“In Alaska?”

Tracy shook her head. “I’m from Cape Cod. I sometimes think about moving back East. Maybe Provincetown,” she said with a knowing wink.

Kate felt a sudden queasiness. *Don’t come to Massachusetts, Tracy. We have drunk drivers. Please stay alive.*

An awkward silence followed and Kate figured Tracy would be expecting her story. But her grief closeted her. Chit chat while wandering a grocery store aisle isn’t intended to include a description of your wife’s death from being crushed by a Ford F150 pickup truck. The last time Kate saw Jill, it was to identify her body in the morgue.

BACK AT THE apartment, armed with pizza and beer, they sat on the floor in the living room and listened to music from Tracy’s iPod hooked up to the stereo.

“You don’t talk much about yourself. Is there a reason?” Tracy asked as she sipped her beer. “Or maybe I just go on too much myself.”

“No, you don’t.” Kate looked at her then away. “I just haven’t been able to figure out how to talk about . . . well . . .” She sighed, tried looking into Tracy’s oceanic eyes, but lowered her gaze to her plate. “My wife died two years ago. In a car accident. And it seems like time stopped at that point and nothing has happened that would interest anyone. And I’m tired of being the tragic widow, but there’s nothing else to say, and I don’t know how to say that.”

Tracy set her beer on the coffee table and wiped her mouth. "I think you just did."

Neither spoke while the Dixie Chicks crooned in the background about easy silence and peaceful quiet and suddenly Kate wanted to laugh. That was all it took? Tracy hadn't looked at her with pity or said the usual, I'm sorry for your loss, it must have been hard, and for that Kate was grateful. She popped the last bit of pizza into her mouth and savored the squish of the artichoke, the bite of the garlic, and the aromatic parmesan. It was the first time she had talked about Jill without crying.

Tracy leaned back against the couch and stretched her legs out. Kate felt an urge to touch them, see if the curls were soft or wiry.

The iPod shuffled on to a peppy k. d. lang tune and the topics of Kate's deceased wife and Tracy's ex-girlfriend sank beneath a surface of casual conversation. They traded coming out stories, family histories, and anecdotes of college life and jobs. At odd moments during brief pauses, Kate imagined kissing Tracy, but it was such a foreign sensation that she couldn't find a way to act on it before the opportunity passed.

As midnight approached, Tracy suggested they call it quits before their sleep cycles got more out of whack. Time had begun to move forward again, much to Kate's dismay. Tomorrow she would leave and Tracy would be relegated to memory or a slowly dwindling e-mail friendship.

AFTER BREAKFAST, TRACY went to finish unpacking and Kate called Rich.

"Good news," he told her. "I've got you on the 2:50 flight this afternoon. I'll pick you up at one."

Kate ended the call and looked at her watch. It was 9:30. She called Margaret, back in Boston, to give her the new flight information, but offered to take a cab.

"No dice," Margaret said. "I want first dibs on details. Any shipboard romances?"

Kate cringed. Margaret alternated between offering assurances that God was watching over her with a plan and baldly pushing her into dating again. "Nothing to report, Reverend," Kate said with a sigh.

The call ended, she looked around the empty kitchen. A sense of urgency filled her, but not what to do about it. She went to Tracy's doorway and watched her move around the room, humming to herself, dropping clothes into a laundry hamper. Bill took a bath in her now-empty duffel on the floor. Kate cleared her throat.

Tracy stopped and looked at her. "All set?"

Kate nodded.

"I can give you a lift to the airport."

“You don’t have to. Rich said he’d come by at one.”

Tracy remained still and quiet. It was as though energy passed between them, a signal, but one that Kate couldn’t interpret. Her heart began to pound. “Tracy.”

“Yes, Kate?”

She took a deep breath and let it out. “We’re two ships passing in the night, and there’s not much time left, so I’m just going to say what I want here. You don’t have to worry about hurting my feelings.” She hooked her thumbs in her pockets. Her voice shook. “I’ve been watching you for a week now, wondering what it would be like to feel your arms around me. And I just thought, if there was any chance you were—”

Before Kate could finish, Tracy had crossed the room and wrapped her in a firm hug. *Oh, God!* Kate’s knees weakened, but Tracy held her. She marveled at how solid Tracy was. Jill had been so slender. Fragile. Just a slip of a girl. Tracy’s muscles made her soft, not hard, which Kate had not expected. She burrowed her face in Tracy’s shoulder, her shirt smelling briny, like low tide. She slipped her hand underneath to rub her back.

When Tracy loosened the hug, Kate kissed her hard but let up quickly when she felt how soft and gentle the return kiss was. Two years of frozen emotion melted in a matter of seconds. Kate stopped thinking entirely as Tracy lifted her off her feet and lowered her onto the bed. Fumbling with each other’s buttons and zippers, she lost track of where she ended and Tracy began until finally they were both naked and she felt Tracy’s skin against hers. Warm and alive. With each kiss and touch, Tracy poured life back into her and she absorbed it gratefully, hungrily. The only thought that intruded was, *don’t cry*.

It was Tracy who cried. Just a little. Enough for Kate to notice. She wiped the tear. “Maybe you were a little more hurt than you thought,” she whispered.

“It’s not her I miss,” Tracy said softly. “It’s what we never had.”

Later, she lay in Tracy’s arms, warm and sleepy. Tracy kissed her hair and played with her fingers. Kate looked over at the clock. Eleven. Now she wanted to cry.

“Let me take you to the airport,” Tracy said, then kissed her neck.

“I don’t want to go.”

“I don’t want you to.”

Kate shifted so she could look at Tracy. “There’s something I probably should have told you. Before . . . well . . .” She felt Tracy tense. She touched her cheek and smiled. “Nothing infectious.” Tracy didn’t move, but an artery in her neck began to pulse. Kate turned back, afraid to watch Tracy’s face as she completed her confession. “I don’t want to be a ship passing in the night. I don’t do one-night stands.”

She felt Tracy relax and exhale. “Neither do I. Or one-morning stands.”

Kate turned. Tracy was smiling, her eyes wet.

“When do you *have* to be back?” Tracy asked.

Kate thought about what that meant. “Well, Monday, I guess.”

“So you *could* stay another day.”

Kate nodded. “I need to call Rich.”

“Yes, you do.”

“Then I need to call Margaret again.”

“Will she mind?”

“Not when I tell her why.”



The Speculative Literature Foundation is a non-profit organization dedicated to promoting literary quality in speculative fiction.

Launched in 2004, the foundation offers two grants of \$750 and \$800 annually to writers of speculative fiction, facilitates the work of small-press speculative fiction magazines, and provides an on-line meeting place for editors, writers, and fans of speculative fiction.

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Communion

Melissa Ann Chadburn



I smiled nervously and thought, *This is strange and funny but sort of sexy* . . . I thought of my new lover and how this could make a great kinky scene. I knew he was waiting. I never did well with silences. I heard the priest place his palm on his wooden shelf. I had to say something. What constitutes a sin anyway?

IT WAS EARLY evening at St. Augustin's church in Boyle Heights, California. I was at a rehearsal for my secretary's wedding. The jacaranda trees outside the church had left a light purple trail on the maroon carpeting that adorned the entrance. The wedding party sat in pews awaiting their turn to confess. Little glints of light bounced on the stained-glass windows. I sat outside the yellow pine door staring at the crucified image of Jesus at the altar. When I was a child, I would trace the blood over the arcs of his feet in my mind. When that game ended, I would imagine I lived in the church with all my friends.

NOW, AS A grown-up, I found myself inside a small, dark room where there was only enough space for me to kneel. It smelled like burning coal, and the seats were lined with blood-colored velvet, the smoothness of forgiveness. I was here to earn my turn for that dull wafer and sip of wine. There was a long, fat, leather kickstand on the floor to cushion my knees, and a smooth, light pine bar to hook my feet around. It was the stuff fetishes are made of. The thin bar, with just the right amount of room for you to strike prayer position, it was a whisper from God or a priest or a master, the tight caress of the wooden room. "Good girl," it said. When I closed the door behind me the sounds outside stopped. I knelt. "Uh hello . . . I've never done this before."

"When did you go to your last confession?" It was a firm, fatherly voice, starchy and raspy.

I could hear the window screen open. There was a dark grate between us. It was a farce. We both knew who the other person was. I knew he was the priest who was speaking to me outside, and he must have known who I was because I was the only English-speaking person there.

I clasped my hands together and bent my head down before the grated window. “This is my first confession.”

“Have you had your First Communion?”

“Yes.”

“Well, you must have confessed before that. When was that?”

I SEARCHED MY memory for hints. I knew there were classes for that. Catechism classes I had to endure for several hours after school. I was sent away frequently to some sort of principal’s office for doodling in my gold book. I would doodle devil’s horns on Jesus’ head. I would update the sketches of myself to look more punk rock. I remembered the woman who drove me home every day. She was a cat woman, the kind who owned so many cats she didn’t even bother to name them all. Her car reeked of animals and cigarettes; she was overweight and her arms and elbows would leak onto *my* side of the little white Volkswagen bug every time she shifted gears. That’s when I stopped trusting the whole thing. I thought it was just another ride home for my mother, another free after-school program.

“I don’t know. I was about six or eight.” By now I had slunked out of my prayer position and nodded my head to the side.

“How old are you now?”

We were looking straight on then. “Thirty-two.”

“So how long was that?”

“I dunno.”

I paused, looking down at my hands. I made math noises.

“I guess about twenty-six years. Something around there.”

“Okay.” He took a moment. “I want you to lean in and whisper all of your sins to me.”

YOU SEE WHAT I mean by kinky scene? I tried to think of the absolute worst thing I’d ever done. An image of my brother’s large dark hand holding a gun came to my mind. I saw only the butt of the gun, his hands between a woman’s legs, the skirt of her dress up against the wall. I tried to remember but I couldn’t see the woman, I couldn’t look, I was watching out for people in the parking lot. I was looking for people coming but I was crying. “Give me your money!” B said. He was just acting; he wasn’t really *that* bad. But he loved it. He loved this acting. He’d tell me later he thought his character had reached new heights. He had the woman pinned up against the wall, and with her sad white dress with brown flowers crumpled up around her waist, B pushed a gun up her. He’s huge, six-five, black, onyx black, muscular. It just looked so awful. I thought he’d gone too far. It was real; he was sticking a gun up some woman’s pussy for money. That’s what I

thought. He didn't have to do that. The woman pissed herself, the gun. She was a grown woman, she was shaking, she had money.

My hands were resting on the window in front of me, slightly moist. "Omissions to act. I think my sins aren't so much things I did but things I failed to do," I whispered.

"You have not confessed in twenty-six years and that is the only sin you can think of?"

"Uh, yes, Father. Except maybe honesty. There are times when I have been dishonest."

"What about sex? Do you have sex?"

I smiled to myself. *Oh naughty priest*, I thought.

"Yes, I have sex, Father."

I was in my element now. I smirked at the priest. Is this what he wanted?

"About how often? Once a day? Once a week? Once a month? Once a year?"

I thought, *There's a lot of math involved in this*. I looked down at my hands. *Let's see, I've been around thirty-two years. I started having sex pretty young, but maybe regularly around twenty-three.*

"Father, is this an average?"

He sighed.

"Yes."

"Once a week."

"Are you married?"

"No."

"Living with someone?"

I didn't answer right away. I didn't know how to answer. Maybe I should say that my boyfriend left a toothbrush at my house, and that has recently elevated the level of our relationship. But I wasn't quite sure what to call him. I had been living like a lesbian for the last ten years, and now I was dating a trans guy, and I just wasn't used to using the words *boy* and *friend* together in a sentence. When I was searching for a gender-neutral term that I could use to describe him, he suggested I call him *toothbrush-leaver*. I started to say, "Father, I have a toothbrush-leaver" but thought better of it. I settled on "Father, I'm gay."

"I don't care if you are homosexual, bisexual, transsexual, cissexual. But you have drifted from your faith. I cannot let you take Communion tomorrow because it would be sacrilegious."

I slumped in my kneel. No longer feeling the *good girl* caress, no longer caring. Well, no longer caring completely I suppose. You see, there's more to the story about the brother. It's true he was an asshole and that's probably what sticks out about him. But his madness was driven by a need to satiate his heroin addiction. I used to take him to pick up his methadone.

All the junkies sat around with little waxed Dixie cups, the Easteresque pastel flowers ridiculing their addiction.

They used to sit around with those cups, the dope fiends. They would take them apart, unravel them into one long piece of waxed paper, unfold the curled edges, and lick it clean. My brother seemed to hunker down in the chairs, making the plastic chairs disappear, like a parent at back-to-school night. He would look angry, then sheepish; he'd take his Communion in his mouth (that's what we called it, "Communion") and finally he would look relieved for a moment like an exhale. The last time I took him, he stood up to leave and I noticed his hands were still clenched in fists. Not a good sign for him. When he reached the door he smacked some guy on the head with one hand while delicately removing the Dixie cup with his other. He was always so coordinated, never got the BZZZZ in Operation. "Punk ass biotch!" he sneered and ran outside before anyone could move. They were in slow motion in there. Time stopped in there.

My brother eventually died. I always quote his last words as being "Fuck it." This sounds apathetic but really it wasn't. It was his faith. You see, despite his grungy, crass lifestyle he was deeply religious and he wore a gold crucifix around his neck. When he said those words they came out more like a slur, "*Fuuuuuckittt.*" At the same time he paternally stroked the miniature golden figure of Jesus on his crucifix. I got comfort in this. Regardless of all the horrible, mean, desperate things we did, there would always be a place for salvation. This priest was taking away my last hope for salvation. I say I do not believe in it but I want to. I wanted to think that the thing that kept me out of this small closet my whole life was not complete lack of disbelief but that this fell somewhere on Plan B and I was currently still working on Plan A.

"I don't feel I have drifted from my faith. God is with me in everything I do, Father." I pulled my feet and knees out from the holster and crossed my legs in the chair I raised my hands so my silhouette would cast a deep shadow across his face. If shadows were felt it would have been a slap. "But this is your church and I will respect your wishes."

"Okay, if you promise me not to take Communion tomorrow, I will absolve you of all your sins. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, amen." He slammed the door of the window shut. The room grew dark.

I SAT THERE sad, like I had lost something. Confused. I looked at the floor, at the stupid leather log designed to cushion knees. I could not leave the room, so I put my head down on the little wooden shelf. My dark curls splayed along my shoulder, my designer jeans falling low on my ass, I pushed my sneakered feet into the floor to try to get centered. *Wait, did I just get rejected from taking the Eucharist? The thing that people have*

been hounding me about for so long? I mean don't they recruit for this thing? I became overwhelmed with the guilt and shame of somebody else's judgment of my spirit. I felt unlovable. And this is where I get stuck. I find it very difficult to write my way out of this because that phrase is so painful. To feel unworthy of love is like having your body hollowed out so your spirit becomes separate from the vehicle that is your body. You're untethered, insatiable, every movement you've made up till now is completely worthless. "Unlovable," it leaves an echo . . . and my heart feels like a jumbled mass. Like this:

well I suppose you have to use your imagination the image won't transfer

I pulled myself together, got up, and left the confessional. I knew my secretary was waiting for a verdict. I knew I had been in there a long time. I passed the procession of expectant faces, not able to tell them, and walked out of the church. I was ripped into the brightness of reality, like when you exit a movie theater. The church exit led right onto the dark asphalt of the parking lot. There were three cars, my Jeep, a tan Buick, and right next to the door in a parking spot designated with a sign that said "Reserved for Father..." there stood the man with the voice. He was tall, bald, doughy. The type of white man you would be surprised to know was fluent in Spanish. A Phil Donahue, Santa Claus variety of white man. He was bent over struggling with his car. He drove an old navy blue Cutlass Ciera, with dark blue leather seats. I knew the car because I used to have one and my friends and I used to joke that it would be my stripper name.

"HAVING TROUBLE, FATHER?"

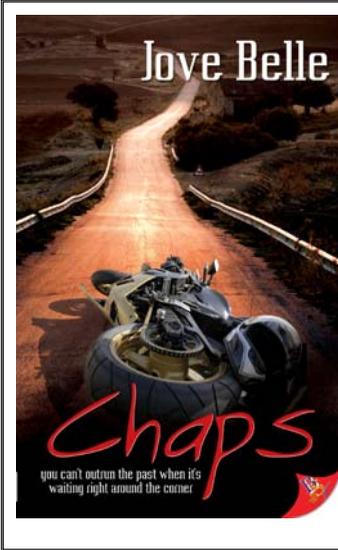
I'd like to say that he appeared jolted by my voice but he did not stop tinkering with his car. His face was red. I got closer and peered under the hood.

"Just think I need a jump."

His battery was covered in corrosion.

"You might need help getting to those battery plugs. Mind if I help you out?"

This finally jolted him. He looked up at me, his starched white priest's collar smudged with grease. I looked at him as long as I could. Held his gaze, showed him my wet eyes. They were glassy from rejection. I just happened to have a bottle of Coca-Cola. I walked around the old priest and poured it over the top, watching years of buildup and breakdown instantly get eaten away. I hugged the priest good-bye and whispered, "This is what Jesus must have felt like."

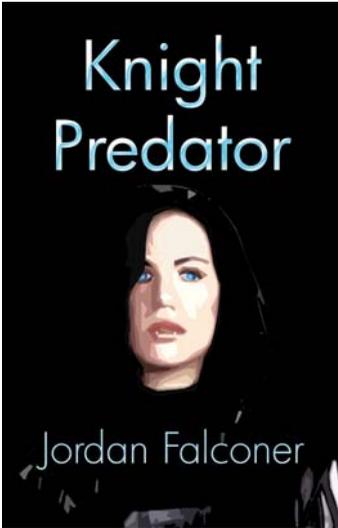


Bold Stroke Books . . .

Chaps
by
Jove Belle

*You can't outrun the past
when it's waiting right around the
corner*

<http://jovebelle.wordpress.com/>
<http://lesbianauthors.wordpress.com/>



Carlisle Crowley is a striking, beautiful vampire hell-bent on living her undead life to the fullest. The last thing she needs hanging around her is Bronwyn Hunter, a seventeen-year-old love-struck human girl. When Crowley's dark and mysterious past comes back to haunt her, the pair embark on a journey of self discovery that tests their relationship to the limit.

Knight Predator

Jordan Falconer



Mindancer Press

<http://bedazzledink.com/mindancer-press/knight-predator>

Contributors

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Melissa Chadburn's work has been published in *52/250*, *Thunderclap Press*, *Dynamic Magazine*, *The Examiner*, *People's Weekly World*, *Political Affairs*, *Shelf Life*, and *Splinter Generation*. She's studied with writers Leonard Chang, Susan Taylor Chehak, Tananarive Due, Dana Johnson, and Steve Heller.

After formerly studying law, she obtained an M.F.A. in creative writing from Antioch University. She is of African, Asian, Hispanic, Filipina, and Irish descent, and was raised by Dutch/Indonesian and British foster parents. She likes cheese, pit bulls, hot butch lesbians, good books, and solitude.