

Barely There

Samantha Hunter

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*Cover Art By Mike Fratto and Kim Van Meter*

*<http://www.samanthahunter.com>*

## *Chapter One*

“I can’t do this right now. I’ll call you back,” Gavin Wright spoke tersely into his Bluetooth headset, feeling like hell and driving too fast as he ripped away from the hospital parking lot. He had two big deals closing the next few days and he needed Emily.

*He needed Emily.*

He hung up, shaking off the emotions that threatened to swamp him. He couldn’t get the image of her being swept into the rocks out of his head.

Coma, the doctors said. She hit her head, swallowed too much water. EMS had brought her back at the scene, but there was no telling if she’d ever come out of it. Her Living Will gave orders not to let her linger, and guess who had to pull the fucking plug?

When she’d asked him about it, he’d said *sure*, thinking he’d never have to face the choice. Had she asked him because she thought he cared, or because she thought he didn’t care at all? It was what he’d let her think over the years, that they were only friends, mostly business.

Right.

There was a little time, the doctors assured him. Gavin’s eyes stung and he cursed, making another phone call.

“Hello?” a woman with a sultry British accent answered.

“Amy. Gavin. You free tonight?”

“For you, sweet, absolutely.”

“Great. Meet at my place in a few hours?” he said, figuring the only way he could get Emily off his mind was to get shit-faced and fuck someone mindless. A time-honored method of grieving, at least for him.

“Sure, it’ll be fun,” she said cheerfully. Amy was always up for a party.

“Yeah,” he agreed, hanging up as he pulled into the winding driveway of his La Jolla home, planning to get started on the first part of his evening as soon as possible.

\* \* \*

Emily Tucker wasn’t sure what was going on, but something was definitely wrong.

First she’d been standing, watching them work on her in the hospital, and now she was here in Gavin’s master bath.

It was disconcerting, to say the least, that she couldn’t remember the time in between. It was obviously a dream, so she went with it. Her dreams were so much more intriguing than her reality, anyway.

The shower was running. Gavin stood, naked, less than ten feet from her. Alone.

*Wow.*

He was truly gorgeous. The closest to naked that she'd ever seen him was wearing his tight little neoprene shorts for surfing. Full exposure was beyond her imagination. Well, not really. She'd imagined him plenty of times, but the reality was far beyond her paltry daydreams.

She'd never seen the strong, slightly squared muscles of his ass, or the dip where his waist merged intriguingly into the hollows of his hip. She'd definitely never seen what lay in between those powerful legs, though she couldn't take her eyes off him now.

The dark thatch of hair between his legs was the perfect nest for his cock, which was thick and long, even while soft. She licked her lips, wanting.

If this was a dream, it was a good one.

Every play of muscle, every inch of perfect, tanned skin was highlighted by the water coursing over his skin. She looked toward the mirror, but instead of her reflection, she saw only the bold modern print on the wall behind her. That chilled her, and she refocused on Gavin.

Maybe none of this was real, but there was nothing insubstantial about the knot of desire that formed low in her belly or the wetness that made the soft skin between her legs slick as she watched him wash.

Every muscle in his body was tense. His head rested against his fist on the tile wall, water pouring over him. He held the desolate pose for several long moments.

“Dammit!” The curse was spat out under his breath. He sounded ragged, alone and exhausted. She noticed a glass on the counter by the sink, empty. Scotch, probably.

“Dammit, Emily. I’m so sorry.”

His frame shuddered with emotion, and Emily’s eyes blurred with tears. His pain called to her even more so than his physical beauty. She reached out to find support on the nearby vanity, which her hand passed right through. She yanked it back, shocked.

No. This couldn’t be right.

She thought back to the hospital, to the way she’d stood and watched them work on her pale, bruised body.

Not a dream, perhaps?

Was she dead? Was that why Gavin was so upset?

No, no, no. She shook off the dread that iced her to the bone. She didn’t feel dead. She felt. . . more alive than she had in a long time.

Gavin didn't seem to notice her, though, as she stepped into the shower. She was invisible, and his hand went right through her as he reached for his soap, making her flinch again.

She must be dead. Was she a ghost?

She must be, because in her dreams, Gavin always saw her.

Here Emily stood inches away from the only man she'd ever really wanted, and he couldn't see her. A divine joke? After all, he'd spent the last seven years looking right through her. Now, she was more transparent than ever.

So why was she here? Did some greater power want them to get together? Was she being given one last shot at nookie before she went on to eternal chastity?

Or was she in a kind of purgatory, being taunted with everything she'd always wanted but had been too cowardly to ask for?

Gavin turned away, rinsing his back. Unable to resist, she reached out tentatively, tracing the strong curve of his spinal column, pulling her hand back as a jolt of heat hit her. Simultaneously, Gavin jerked upright, his eyes wary as he scanned the small space. She had felt him, and. . . .

"You felt it – you felt me touch you," she said in amazement.

Leaning in, she whispered in his ear, “Gavin, I’m here. Can you hear me, too? Do you know I’m with you?” she asked, needing to ease the agony in his expression.

She let her hand rest on his chest again, ignoring the disconcerting transparency of her body. Her fingers fluttered downward as she brushed the backs of her knuckles over his taut stomach, then along the length of his cock. This time he didn’t jump away but stood frozen in place, his body clearly responding to her touch.

Taking it further, she wrapped her fingers around his hardening shaft and stroked gently, the soap and water making him slick and smooth under her fingers.

He was everything she’d fantasized about every day for the seven years they’d worked together. All the late night hours they’d put in, when she wondered what he’d do if she took off her clothes and waited for him on the desk. Or the business trips where only an adjoining door had stood between her and the satisfaction she’d dreamed about.

Now, all that separated them was the gossamer fabric of life and death. Odd, that here, on the other side, she’d finally found what she wanted. But it was too late, wasn’t it?

“Gav, you’re so gorgeous,” she said, her voice shaking. If this was her last chance, she was taking it. Taking him. “I wish I’d been brave enough to do this when I was alive,” she whispered.

One of his hands splayed against the tile, braced on the side of the shower, the other covering hers as she helped him stroke. She watched his head tip back, his jaw tightening as pleasure wound its way around his body. She bent down, put her lips to one chocolate brown nipple and sucked.

“*Emily*,” he moaned.

She drew back in surprise. “Why did you say my name?” she asked, feeling ridiculous, as he couldn’t hear her anyway.

He stopped too, looking around the shower in a panic, pale.

“What the hell?” He poked his head outside and looked around.

Had he heard her? Heard something?

He shook his head, wiping his hands over his face. “I’m really losing it,” he said to himself, believing he was alone, although his erection pointed right at her as if to say *she’s right there, stupid*.

Emily, brave in her invisibility, snuggled against him as much as her transparent form would let her. She licked water from his skin, tasting him in wet kisses as she cupped his balls lightly and stroked the tender skin down in between his thighs. He responded by sucking in a harsh breath, quivering,

and cursing again. Made bold by her invisibility, she kept touching him, reveling in his response.

His breathing was ragged, his eyes shut tight as if trying to control his body's response, but he couldn't. She looked down where her fingers wrapped around him, unsure she was seeing correctly. Her hand was taking shape. She was less transparent. Her fingers formed, and the rest of her body followed suit, until she felt real again. Solid.

*"Holy shit,"* they both cursed simultaneously, caught between shock and pleasure, her hand fell away. This was freaky. She'd been brave when she thought she was invisible, but this was different.

He was looking straight at her, disbelief mixed with desire. "Emily? How. . .?"

"I don't know. I guess. . .did I die, Gavin?" she asked on a wisp of breath.

"No. Yes, I mean. . . ." he answered in a strangled voice. Then, laughed. "God, I really am losing it. There's no way you're here."

"I am here, Gav. I don't know how. An out of body experience, I guess. Just. . .go with it," she said, lowering to her knees, desperate to keep him in the moment with her. "Touching you makes me. . .take form."

She knew that if he pulled away, she'd slip away again, too.

He mumbled something unintelligible, one arm still propped on the wall, his face bowed into his shoulder.

He didn't believe it, still muttering about losing his mind.

She'd make him believe.

Closing her lips around the head of his cock, she took him in, sucked the water from his skin in a slow, drawing kiss. He groaned, thrusting forward reflexively, his legs tensing. She held him there, enjoying the sweet taste of his tender skin, marveling at the steely hardness underneath.

His male scent suffused the moist air. She'd dreamed of this so many times. Excitement at finally knowing what it was like to be with Gavin vibrated over her skin, urging her on. How many times had she imagined his taste?

Ocean salt and sheer, total male. He was perfect.

Gavin gasped as she pulled back, drawing hard, lolling her tongue around the silky crown of his erection then pursing her lips to kiss away the pearly liquid at the tip. He wasn't looking at her, his face still pushed into his shoulder, but there was no denying his response as he moved in, seeking more.

She relinquished control, accommodating him as he thrust deeper, his hand weaving itself into her hair, holding her head as he fucked her mouth.

She ran her fingers over the strong muscles of his ass, teasing him with touches that drove him wild, a fact that gave her immense satisfaction of a different kind.

*“God, Emily, yesssss.”*

She was taken slightly off guard when he grunted and moaned her name, coming inside her mouth. For a flash of a second, when she realized what was happening, she froze; she’d never liked this before, always gagging, but now she found it easy to swallow while holding him there, suckling and emptying him completely.

It was wonderful.

His cock filled her mouth to capacity, pushing against the back of her throat, but apparently incorporeal bodies had no gag reflex, so she let go and enjoyed the sense of completion that stole over her.

The absolute bliss of it, the hot pleasure traveling down from her mouth and up from her belly met in the middle and she trembled at the combusive release that consumed her without any direct stimulation at all. How was it she could be nearly dead and feel more intensely than while she’d been alive?

“Emily. . .” he sighed again. This time sadly, the grief stealing over his expression again.

“Gav,” she said softly, looking up to meet his eyes and show him she really was with him. He averted his gaze, didn’t respond, breathing raggedly as his arousal cooled.

“Gavin, please,” she pleaded. Her voice was thin, faint as her limbs, the rest of her body. When she looked down, she was barely there anymore.

“No,” she whispered as he turned his back and walked out of the shower, leaving her there to fade away.

## *Chapter Two*

The next time Emily appeared she was in Gavin's bedroom, watching him dress. She had no idea how much time had passed, but she thought she could still smell the soap and steam from his shower, though she was dry.

Still naked, as well.

Apparently whatever she was here to do, it wasn't done. Or was this was hell? She'd be stuck with Gavin, but never really able to be with him, forever.

He pulled on black pants and a black shirt in a reverse strip tease that had her transfixed until the reality set in.

Gav never wore black. She didn't even realize he owned black clothes.

"Dammit, Gavin, don't you *dare* mourn me!" she snapped with enough sheer emotional force to make him look up, the color running out of his face.

It struck her, too, what was happening.

It was about the emotion—emotions she always kept under tight control—they gave her power to reach through the barrier that separated them.

"Hell, I'm not even that drunk yet," he mumbled to himself and continued dressing, ignoring her until she wanted to scream, and so she did.

Why not? No one could hear her. Gavin was intent to ignore whatever it was he thought he was seeing or hearing.

Typical.

*You live in the world you make for yourself*, he always said.

Had she made this halfway place for herself? A reflection of living her life halfway, too?

Gav was a stone-cold realist who didn't believe in anything he couldn't see, touch or buy. His life revolved around their shared real estate business. Their hard work had made them both millionaires before thirty, but for Gavin, it was never enough. He always wanted more – more money, more deals, more wins, more women, more cars, more of everything – except more of her.

Somewhere there was a hole in Gavin's own spirit that he was trying to fill with all of those things. As she watched him, desperation seized her like the waves at the beach had--she remembered it all now--dashing fragile hopes against the rocks. Gavin would never believe her. He hadn't loved her in life, why would he bother now?

She swam against the drowning waves of regret, maintaining reason.

“You have to believe, Gavin.” She began melting back into the air. “No, not again,” she insisted.

Emily closed her eyes, tearing down the walls around every blocked emotion she could remember. She searched for every sad, happy, wonderful and awful moment of her life and let the energy of it all course through her.

The death of her best friend, Gwen, who was really more like a sister, when Emily was sixteen. It had been a terrible, tragic loss that marred her teenage years, and it made her afraid of losing again. So she'd tried to make sure she never had anyone else to lose.

*Ironic.*

Then, the exhilaration of their closing her first big contract with Gavin.

Realizing she loved her business partner, and hating the parade of women that he took to his bed.

The fear of knowing she was out of control in that water, that the currents were too strong, and she was about to be thrown into the rocks.

The memories helped her stay, but she needed more.

She needed Gavin.

When he went to pick up the half-empty glass of scotch on the dresser, she used what power she had and pushed at it.

Gav swore when the glass slid away from his fingers.

Hope bloomed when she realized she'd successfully pushed the glass with her sheer will. He grabbed at it again, and she focused harder, sending it crashing over the edge.

*Score.*

"You don't need to get stinking drunk to deal with this Gav," she said, standing so close to him that her lips were only a brush away from his ear.

"Says you," he muttered.

"You heard me!" She smiled, encouraged. Reaching up, she pushed a lock of his hair back. "Yeah. Says me," she whispered.

He'd seen her in the shower and he could hear her, even if he believed it was just a voice in his head. It didn't matter.

Excited, she followed him into the other room, planning her next move when the door buzzer rang.

Emotion was the key. Apparently, emotion was the only thing you did end up taking with you, and it was all she had to work with now.

Reaching out to Gav and making the king of the *He-Who-Dies-With-The-Most-Toys-Wins* believe in her would be a challenge, but one way or another, she was going to do it.

\* \* \*

Gavin wasn't sure he *could* get drunk enough to deal with the way this day was going. It was bad enough that he was having sex dreams about his business partner, who lay near death in the hospital. How could that have happened? Hearing her voice in his head, imagining her hands on him? What kind of sicko was he?

Shame was not a familiar experience for him. Shame would have suggested he cared, which he usually didn't.

Yet he'd conjured such a strong fantasy that he could *see* her kneeling in front of him, her soft pink lips sliding over him until he'd been lost in a mind-bending release. He hadn't even had to help himself along, the power of the fantasy was enough.

Why was his mind torturing him with this now? To show him what he'd missed, and what he'd never have again, with anyone? He set the uncomfortable questions aside and opened the door, taking in Amy's voluptuous form, sheathed by the sexy dress she wore. Nothing on underneath it, most likely. Like him, she knew what she was here for.

Why did that leave him cold?

He remembered Emily's slight frame, her straight brown hair and lack of make-up. He'd teasingly called her Vanilla Wafer since they met in

college, but really he'd always enjoyed her fresh appearance. She was pretty. Natural. It matched who she was on the inside, too.

Now the image of her small, pert breasts with those dark brown nipples, hard as pebbles as she'd rubbed against him in the shower, was carved into his imagination. But that's all it was, his mind working overtime. Some kind of guilt-induced fantasy.

Still, it had been real enough to nearly bring him to his knees.

He smiled far too widely. "Hey Amy, c'mon in, have a drink with me," he invited her brightly.

Amy stepped inside and took his chin in her fingers and planted a lipstick-heavy kiss on his lips, drawing back and searching his face. "Gavin, you don't look so good."

He pretended a playful affront, all the time fighting the urge to back away. "Well, that's a hell of a greeting."

"Gav, I know you. I heard about Emily. I'm so sorry. It sucks."

He pulled out of her hold, walking over to the bar. "Yeah, it does. But life is for the living, right?" He smiled again, and she shrugged, nodding as he motioned with the bottle of Scotch to ask if she wanted to join him.

She took the glass he offered her, and sipped. "You know, I always thought you two might be. . .you know. . . ."

“Me and Em?” He feigned shock. “No. We were friends, mostly business partners. We set a strict rule about that at the beginning of our friendship.”

*Stupid, stupid rule*, a voice in his head mocked.

“Good,” Amy said with a sly wink. “So I don’t have to feel guilty about getting you naked and doing all kinds of nasty things with you tonight?”

*Yes, yes you do*, insisted the voice, which had him frowning.

“Not at all,” he agreed smoothly, wondering why guilt was pinching at him. He had nothing to feel guilty about.

“Perfect,” she said as she stepped up closer, not-so-subtly letting her breasts brush against his chest, her nipples already forming hard points against the thin fabric. “Because I have such naughty plans for you,” she promised, winking at him over the top of the glass.

*This isn’t right, for you or for her*, the voice in his head insisted.

What? Was he developing a conscience at this late date?

Gav paused before turning away, knocking back his own drink and shaking his head at the damned voice in his head that wouldn’t go away.

“Gav, what is it?” Amy asked.

“I don’t know. . . I just. . . Amy?”

When Gavin turned, Amy was on the floor, passed out. Panic and disbelief gripped him and he rushed to her side.

“Amy, Amy! Hey,” he shook her lightly, felt for a pulse, and was relieved to find it strong and steady. Sliding his hands underneath her, he carried her to the sofa and set her down carefully.

What the hell was happening? Women were dropping everywhere around him.

“Amy, hey. . .you in there?” he said softly, pushing the titian red hair back from her flawless skin. Her green eyes refocused on him, and he exhaled in relief.

“Thank God,” he said. “You fainted. Are you okay?”

“Not exactly,” Amy said in a strange tone of voice, breathless. A shiver worked its way down his spine. There was a familiar glint in her eyes that didn’t look like Amy at all.

“Amy?” he repeated with a growing sense of trepidation. Something was very wrong.

“Not Amy, Gavin. I know this is going to be hard to take, but it’s me, Emily.”

\* \* \*

*“Holy-fucking-shit,”* he yelled, pushing away from the sofa where she looked at him from her prone position.

“What the fuck are you trying to pull? What kind of sick joke--”

Emily frowned. She’d expected him to be shocked, or disbelieving, but his anger surprised her. This wasn’t a picnic for her, either, but there was no way in hell she was going to stand by and watch while he put it to this blonde bombshell all night.

*Life is for the living, huh?*

Thanks a bunch.

“Gav, what are you doing?” Emily asked. “Why is Amy here? I was with you in the shower only an hour ago, but still you need her?”

It was hard to hide the hurt and jealousy that stung as she asked the humiliating question. She’d never made a move on Gav because she’d always been afraid she wouldn’t be enough for him. She wasn’t a supermodel or an expert lover.

His eyes narrowed suspiciously, and he put more distance between them. “How can you know. . .there was no one here an hour ago but me.”

“I was here. You know it. You saw me, you’re just unwilling to believe it.”

Emily looked down at Amy's considerable cleavage, pushing her hands up underneath those humongous breasts. "Holy crap, these things are *heavy*. I'm glad I'm small, though I never thought I'd say that," she said, smiling ruefully.

It was clear that Gavin didn't appreciate the humor.

"Amy, stop it. I don't know if you took something before you came here, but--"

"Listen, Gav, it's *me*, Emily," she cut him off. "What will convince you? You *know* I was in the shower with you, and that I wouldn't let you drink that scotch in your bedroom. I know you felt, and saw, me when I sucked your cock, as much as you don't want to believe it. It's really me in here," she said gently, putting one hand on the bar as her head swam.

He swore, lifting a shaking hand to his hair and looked away.

"I don't know how I managed this, but I don't think I can do hold on to her for long. I just had to find a way to make you listen."

"Listen? Why? I'm obviously completely fucking insane!" He ran his hands through his hair until it was nearly standing on end, which he always did when he was stressed.

Too bad, Emily thought. Almost dead trumped stressed, so she forged ahead.

Backing him up against the bar, she almost tripped in the four-inch heels that Amy had worn. “Damn, how does she walk in these things?”

Emily stared down at Amy’s manicured feet, then back at Gav.

“I know it’s weird, believe me, it’s weird for me, too. At the hospital, I just. . .floated out of my body, and I could watch it all. I saw you, how you kissed my forehead and pushed my hair back before you left. It was sweet. I saw how upset you were in the shower, and I had to go to you. Had to. . .help.”

“That’s what you call that?” he said with a laugh that wasn’t at all humorous.

“Be nice. Remember of the time you were flirting with the guy in Houston – he was dressed like a woman, and you were too drunk to tell?” she reminded him with a devilish smile. “I saved you from making a very grave mistake,” she said.

He sent her a sidelong look. “How can you know possibly about that? Em would never have told you. We agreed no one would ever know about that.”

“That’s right! Amy can’t know. So you have to believe it’s me in here. I never told anyone,” Emily said. “I do know you, and we know each other’s secrets. Like the time I dared you to wear a pair of women’s panties right

through the closing for the MacMillian,” she said with a grin. The idea of Gavin in her hot pink satin undies never failed to slay her.

His face changed, and she knew that had finally convinced him. His eyes softened with emotions she was afraid to name. “How is this possible? It is really you. Em?”

“Yeah.” She swayed a little. Time was running out.

“How?”

“I don’t know. But I know one thing.”

“What?”

“When I touch you, when I’m with you, I feel alive again. And I don’t know if it’s my last chance,” she choked, tears clogging Amy’s throat and the room spinning slightly. She wiped her eyes and frowned at how her mascara and eye shadow wiped off on her hands. One reason that she never wore make-up.

The world tilted a little, and she stumbled. “I need you to be there for me, Gav.”

Gav reached out to steady her, though he didn’t say anything.

“I don’t know how it works. I come and go. If I come to you, you have to know it’s really me. You have to believe, Gavin.”

She felt herself separating from the physical body, being kicked out of Amy's house, as it were.

"I don't know-" Gav said, the doubts reaching his eyes again as he backed away.

"Don't do this, Gav, okay? Don't be with her tonight. Wait for me," she said. "I don't know how long, but I'll be back."

"Dammit, I must be nuts," he said, looking away, rubbing his hands over his face.

"My family will be here tomorrow. That Living Will is going to be read, and I won't have much time. You tried to save me before, at the beach. Can't you try one more time?" she said, pleading with him as something yanked at her consciousness, hard.

"Save you? How?"

She didn't have time to answer as her connection to Amy was closed down, like switching off a light.

### *Chapter Three*

Possession took a lot of energy, apparently. Emily didn't materialize again until the middle of the night, spending the hours in between in some unknown place she couldn't remember. Stepping into Amy's body hadn't been fun, and she hadn't even known if it would really work, though some instinct had driven her forward. All she knew was that she couldn't let him sleep with that woman.

The emptiness inside of him had swamped her when he'd answered the door. The bleakness in his eyes. Gavin was hurting, trapped in a shell of a life that he needed to escape. Emily might be next to dead, but Gav had been walking around that way for years. He just didn't realize it.

It was because of Theo. She'd always known that. He'd lost his brother the year he graduated high school. She'd lost Gwen, and it was one of the things that bonded them. One night when he'd come into the bar where she worked part-time and was drinking far, far too much—alone—she'd taken his keys and sent him home in a cab.

He'd come in the next night to get his keys and thanked her. She'd found out it was the third anniversary of his brother's death in a car accident, and she'd shared her own loss with him, too. That had been the beginning.

The connection they shared made her different, she guessed, and was why he never saw her like the rest.

He'd never told her why, but Emily knew he felt responsible for what happened to Theo. Maybe because he was the older brother, she didn't know. She always wondered why, since it was an accident, but then again, that was Gavin. He thought he had to be in control of everything. He probably thought he controlled life and death, too.

In her case, maybe he did.

He blamed himself for what happened to her, too, and he would never let himself be happy unless she could convince him otherwise. He was passed out, naked in the bed, sheets twisted around his legs. But he was alone, thank God. He must have sent Amy home.

Poor Gav. Her heart went to him, swelling with emotion. Maybe she was here to help him. It made her even more determined to reach him. She'd been numb with loss after Gwen had died, and it had been the first in a series of losses that made her zip up her emotions. Now it was time to let them free, and to get Gavin to do the same.

Approaching the bed, she knelt at his side, leaned in and kissed him. Fluttering touches all over his body, following her hands with her lips, she

eventually saw herself form again, and looked up to see his eyes watching her, too.

“You waited for me,” she whispered.

“Yes.”

“Thank you.”

“How can this be, Emily?”

What was there to lose? Her soul? His? This was the only chance she'd have to save them both.

“I think it's because we need each other. I know I need you. I've wanted you so much for so long, loved you for so long, and could never tell you. At first I tried, Gav, to get over you. I went out with other guys, but when I was with them, I was still thinking of you,” she admitted, sitting back with him against the pillows, but making sure she maintained contact with his skin.

“I've loved you forever.”

“You mean you wanted to sleep with me?” he said starkly.

“That, too. I did want you, yes,” she admitted. “There were moments I thought you wanted me, too. Like that night in Boston when we danced?”

He nodded. “I couldn't be that way with you, Em.”

“I know. You know, that was the first time I seriously considered seducing you, but I chickened out. I was afraid you'd push me away. I

wanted to do for you that night what I hadn't done for anyone else—what we did in the shower earlier.”

His eyes sparkled in the dark, his lips parting slightly at the memory. “I thought I was dreaming.”

“Do you dream of me?”

“Sometimes,” he admitted reluctantly. “We spend a lot of time together, and you're beautiful. How could I not?”

She blinked in surprise. “You think I'm beautiful? You always called me plain. Vanilla.”

He frowned. “No, I called you sweet. Vanilla wafers,” he said huskily. “They melt on your tongue.”

“Oh,” she said, never having thought about it that way, and a delicious heat licked at her at the thought of melting on Gavin's tongue.

“Would you have rejected me if I'd tried to seduce you?” she asked.

“I don't know. Maybe. I like to think I would have, for the sake of our friendship. I don't understand what you want from me, here, Em.”

“I think I need to make things right. To do what I wasn't brave enough to do in real life. You're my reason to live, Gavin.”

He pushed back against the headboard, sitting upright. “Emily, don't say that. You know me. You know I'm not that guy. Not for you, not for anyone.

But especially not for you.” He sighed. “You have so many more better reasons to live.”

She leaned in, raised her hand to his face, brushing her thumb over his lips. He didn’t pull away. “I don’t believe that. There’s more to you, Gav, than you let anyone see. But *I* see. Maybe you know that, and it’s why you could never let me close.”

“Emily--”

“I know you don’t love me. That’s okay. You want me, though,” she said, looking into his eyes as she wound her hand around the back of his neck, taking his mouth in a kiss that communicated everything that had been bottled up for too long. “Maybe, if we’d had enough time, you could have loved me. . . .” she said, but didn’t allow him to answer.

They’d done enough talking.

She massaged his cock with her other hand and he sprang to hardness within seconds. Slipping his hands down her arms, he pushed her back slightly, staring for several long moments, as if trying to convince himself this was really happening as his eyes slid over every inch of her.

She was confident in her exposure in a way she never would have been before, and she let him take his fill. In fact, she stretched her arms up over

her head, providing a sensual view, luxuriating in his gaze. He'd said she was beautiful, and she was going to let herself believe it.

"I don't know what to do," he said vaguely, his eyes traveling over her.

"Oh, I think you do," she said against his skin, smiling.

"You're so lovely," he breathed, trailing a finger down her collarbone and letting his fingertip graze the hardened tip of her breast. Emotion suffused his expression, more than he probably realized. It made the ecstasy of his touch even sweeter. Gavin felt more for her than even he knew.

It was bittersweet, given the situation, but Emily chose to focus on the sweet.

"I need you, Gavin. There's so much I fantasized about doing with you."

She pressed his hand against her breast, enjoying his hot touch to her cool skin. "Don't stop touching me. If I don't come back, I want at least to have known this."

Before she could open her eyes, his mouth was on hers, hard and hungry, sucking her tongue deep into his mouth as his fingers plucked at her nipples.

"Oh, Gavin, yes," she sighed, arching into his touch.

She couldn't stop touching him, opening to his kiss, unable to get enough. He pulled back, slipped a finger under her chin, tipped her face up to his.

“If this is all a dream or some fucking hallucination, I don't care. I'm here. I'm yours. I do need you, Emily. So show me, Em. Show me what *you* need.”

His declaration set her free, made her giddy. Climbing over him, she teased his cock at the hot entrance to her body, rubbing lightly but not giving into the urge to take him inside. Not yet.

“We've spent too much time controlling how we feel, holding back,” she said. “I need you to lose control, Gavin. To give yourself to me, completely.”

She straddled him, watching raw hunger replace his smile. He arched upwards, seeking her, but she didn't allow him entrance, not just yet.

“I'm so hungry for you, Gav” she said, honey dripping from her body over the length of his erection. She moved so that he slid along her clit instead, shivering with the sensation.

He moved, sliding beneath her, his shoulders pushing her thighs farther apart. She sighed in approval, worried for a moment that he was leaving her, but nothing was farther from the truth.

His fingers were a little rough, in a good way, as they parted the pink lips of her sex to his kiss. She cried out as he blew against her, nuzzling her tender flesh, red hot bolts of desire to race up her body, blanking her thoughts. The idea that it was Gavin doing this to her sent her over the edge almost immediately, and his husky laugh against her skin told her he liked it, too.

“I have a few fantasies about you, too, Em. You’ll never forget, and neither will I,” he murmured against her thigh, sinking his teeth into soft flesh for a moment as if to mark her.

“Yes,” she agreed, panting, rocking against his mouth with no shame or inhibition. She held tight to the headboard, her head falling forward as her body throbbed with the pleasure he offered. He worked her with a thoroughness that proved he was a patient man and an expert lover, bringing her to the edge several times, only to leave her begging.

Seeking even more sensation, she freed one hand to touch her breasts, but gasped and had to grab the headboard again as he pushed his face so fully into her crotch that he nearly raised her up off the mattress.

“Fuck me with your tongue, Gav,” she demanded, but it sounded more like a plea than a command.

He opened her more widely, diving his tongue inside, and a spasm of quick, hot desire made her whimper at the shallow penetration. It was warm and wet, perfect, and yet not enough. She wanted every part of him inside of her, his tongue, fingers, cock. . . all of him.

Tension spread in a sizzling path from where he prodded her with his mouth outward to her limbs, slowly taking her over. She trembled from head to toe, barely hanging on before everything tightened and then let go, her entire body shuddering for what seemed like minutes on end.

*God bless a man who knows how to give a slow orgasm,* she thought.

Emily moaned and arched her back with sinful pleasure, bowing forward again and peeking down to watch him buried between her legs, letting the vision of him there add to her pleasure.

He sucked her clit into his mouth, biting the sensitive nub lightly, the lazy, indolent aftermath she'd been enjoying turning sharp and pure, another climax leaving her so shattered she feared she'd disappear again, evaporating from the sheer intensity that jack-knifed through her. She cried out and collapsed, boneless, nearly toppling them both. He sank his fingers into the tender skin of her bottom more tightly, keeping her in place as she rode it out.

When she opened her eyes, finally getting her breathing under control, he was kissing the insides of her thighs, worshipping her body as if he could focus on nothing else.

“That was incredible,” she told him. Even more incredible, she was fully there, now, her body as real as his.

“And you’re delicious. If I’d known you’d be this hot in bed, I would have taken you years ago,” he said bluntly, apparently happy to stay down between her thighs, nuzzling her pubic hair with his chin.

“You didn’t think I’d be any good?” she asked, a little hurt.

In spite of his claims to the opposite, she knew she *was* plain next to the glamorous woman he usually hung out with.

“I didn’t let myself think about it. Much, anyway. You were Emily. My friend, my business partner. You weren’t like. . .” he seemed to think better of what he was going to say, but she knew.

“I wasn’t like all the other women you wanted to fuck? Women like Amy?”

“There weren’t that many,” he said, pushing upward so that they were face-to-face again, looking abashed and then catching her disbelieving look.

They both burst out laughing.

“Okay, okay, there *were* a lot. But you were always different. I respected you. I liked you. You were smart and serious, you know? Classy. And you were my friend. I don’t have many, Em. I couldn’t risk losing you over sex.”

“That’s the one thing we can’t control,” she murmured, noting his use of the past tense.

“No. There were times. . .like when you wore that black dress to the Realtors’ Christmas Party? You took my breath away. . . .” he drifted off again, looking up at her as if remembering.

Caught up in the moment, she realized the fuzziness she was feeling wasn’t from their intimate sharing. She lifted her hand in front of her face and saw that she was fading away, again. Panic rose. She saw it in his face, too, as he tried to grab her hand and his went straight through hers.

“Why is that happening? I believe, Em. . .don’t go,” he said urgently.

“Kiss me, Gav,” she said, knowing she sounded a little desperate, too, but she didn’t care. Had she been wrong? Was this just a last chance at wish fulfillment?

She’d thought if she could make him believe, she could find her way back to the living.

Maybe not.

His big hands curved over the edges of her jaw, encompassing her cheeks. He was so close, pressed up against her, touching her so tenderly that emotion pierced through her, love taking over.

God, how she loved him! Why didn't she tell him when she'd had the chance? She'd make sure he knew now.

His lips were sweet, a little salty from having his mouth on her, and it chased away the fear as lust took over. His erection pressed up against her, and she sighed as she wiggled against him. The kiss grew deeper, a gnawing ache gripping her body.

“Inside me, Gav, please. . . .”

He wasted no time, his hands on her hips as he levered her downward and she didn't need to ask again as he buried himself in the hot, wet nest of her sex.

Wordlessly, his hands slid into her hair, cradling her carefully as they met in a kiss that couldn't go deep enough. She shifted, concentrating on how he filled her, his thickness stretching her in the most wonderful ways. They fit perfectly.

She moaned inside of his mouth. He moaned back, starting slow rocking movements that picked up pace too quickly. She needed this to last, and took

control, slowing them down, clamping her thighs hard around his hips to control the thrust.

He became even harder as his excitement rose, filling her completely, and yet she wanted more, her clit tickling along the rough hairs that covered his crotch as she deepened the connection. Rubbing her tongue against his as she lifted back up, then lowered, ever so slowly, she knew this must be heaven.

The delicious friction of his velvety skin dragging against every inch of her sensitive insides nearly brought her to tears. Lifting up again, she plunged back down, taking him hard this time and making them both cry out.

They were soaked in the heat of the moment as they moved together in perfect rhythm, breaking together with a mutual sigh as her body clutched his at the same moment he poured into her. Still, as wonderful as it was, she knew he was holding back. Keeping some little part of himself out of reach.

“Oh, Gav,” she said softly as they stayed connected, kissing each other’s faces, lips, and anything else they could reach.

“Don’t worry,” he said as his arms tightened around her. “I’ll keep you here. Whatever it takes,” he whispered, notes of emotion blending in his promise.

“I love you, Gav,” she whispered against his lips, her forehead resting on his. It was enough to know he heard, accepted. She needed him to know, just in case.

Her eyes drifted over his shoulder as they rested, and she saw a black and white photo on the shelf. Theo. He looked so much like Gavin it was scary, but with darker coloring.

“I like that picture of Theo. I never noticed it before.”

“You were never in my bedroom before,” he said, nipping her ear as his fingers found her nipple and pinched, making her gasp.

“What other fantasies would you like to explore?” he said against her skin. Her body responded, but her soul knew he was just using her now to avoid talking about Theo, about the things he was feeling.

“Gav, you never forgave yourself for him. Don’t you think he’d want you to?”

He pulled back, gently pushing her off and sliding his legs over the side of the bed, standing. He set his hands on his straight, powerful hips and looking down at her. His brown eyes had cooled, his sensuous lips tight and flat.

“Can we just drop it, Emily? This is about us, you – not Theo.”

“I think *this*,” she argued softly, “is about a lot of things.”

He paced in short, staccato steps by the side of the bed, as if deciding. Then he stopped, staring at the portrait.

“How can I forgive myself? It was my fault,” he said in a flat monotone that belied the pain.

She could see how tense he was, how he held himself in check. Always in control, never missing a beat, unflappable. It made him a good business man, but it was a brittle shell, starting to crack.

“Why?” Her voice was thinning, and she knew she was fading again. Dammit! She couldn’t leave him now.

She walked behind him to nuzzle his back, pressing her cheek against his shoulder, running her hands over him. As she absorbed the touch, life pulsed back.

“You never told me what really happened. Why you punish yourself so much for his death.”

His shoulder-blades lifted and lowered under her cheek as he sighed heavily. “We were out at a party, having a good time, and he wanted to leave because his ex girlfriend showed up. He wanted to drive, and I said no. I wasn’t that drunk, and I wasn’t about to hand over the keys to my car. We were arguing in the car, and I took my eyes off the road. . .you know the rest.”

He was standing so stiffly, so ramrod straight, that she hugged him tighter, trying to absorb the pain if she could.

“And?”

“What and? He was dead at the scene,” the words gushed out on a raw note. “That’s all there was to it.”

“Gav, you lost control for a moment, didn’t pay attention. You made a horrible mistake, sure. It’s human. You can’t punish yourself forever. You can’t be in control of everything, every minute. Bad things happen – you can’t punish yourself for them all.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about,” he said harshly.

“I know any number of things could have happened. You could have as easily swerved into the other lane and no traffic could have been there, or you might have handed the wheel over to Theo and the same thing could have happened, or worse. He would have been the one to take his eyes off the road, and who knows? You both could have been killed.”

“That would have been better,” he said darkly.

“No! You don’t mean that. You have to forgive yourself,” She paused, knowledge swelling in her heart. “Theo doesn’t want that. He wants you to be happy.”

He looked at her in wary amazement, and she nodded, begging him with her eyes to trust her. She knew it was Theo speaking to Gav, through her, through her heart. That was it, she knew. Why she was here. Because like his brother, Gavin would punish himself for losing her, too. And he needed to stop.

Emotion welled inside of her as she tried to communicate the words that would allow him to heal, to forgive. She turned him around, tasting tears as she kissed his lips. His eyes were raw with emotion as he looked down at her.

“What about you, Em? How can you forgive me? It was my idea to o surfing,” he said in defeat, pulling away. “I knew you had reservations, but it was always about the damned business.”

“Hey,” she said, pushing his hair back and kissing him softly, needing to keep in physical contact. “I went because I wanted to. I wanted to be with you. I knew my limits, Gav, and I ignored them. It was stupid, but it wasn’t your fault. You tried to save me. I love you for that,” she said, pouring her heart out, willing him to accept it.

He shook his head.

“Gavin, don’t deny me making my own decisions--responsibility for my own life, and my own. . .well, death, if it comes to it. Theo made his own

decisions, too. You can't walk around carrying these burdens. You have to let them go," she said softly, framing his face in her hands, kissing him softly, then more deeply, infusing the touch with all that was stirring inside of her.

Morning was breaking outside the window; they might not have much time left.

"Why me? Why should I be here and you aren't? Why not Theo?" He asked, his eyes bright with unshed tears that ripped at her heart.

"I don't know. Things are what they are. But you need to believe that you deserve to be happy," she sighed into his mouth. "I want you to be happy. So does he."

"*You* make me happy. You're the only decent thing left in my life, Emily," he said roughly, wrapping his arms around her and pushing her back against the wall, something breaking inside of him. "The only thing that ever really mattered, and I never let you know. I never said a damned word."

It was as if a wire snapped, the barriers crashing down as he let loose, plundering her mouth with a semi-violence that took her breath away. He was everywhere, pressing against her, pushing her back against the wall and pinning her with his thigh between her legs, pressed temptingly against her hot, wet flesh and making her shake with need.

“Yes, Gav, yes,” she moaned into his ear, her hands wound into his hair.

She met his passion with her own, as well as acceptance as the emotion buried inside of him exploded. She arched against him, opening herself to him and letting him take what he needed and getting what she needed in return. Digging her nails into his back, she lost control, too, scraping and coming hard against his thigh as he told her all the things he wished he done with her, to her.

“I need you, Emily,” he said, panting.

“I’m yours, Gavin. I’ll always be yours,” she promised. She wanted him to know he could completely let go, and it would be okay.

He picked her up, hoisting her against the wall as he wedged between her legs and planted himself deep inside of her, thrusting fast and without preamble, meeting her eyes and letting her see him without pretense. He swept both of them away in a fit of fucking so intense she felt tears stream down her face from the perfection of it.

It didn’t last long, and he ground into her, shouting her name, throwing his head back as his climax claimed him. Her heart nearly burst, watching him. His chest heaved, and he kissed tears away as he made his way back to her lips, the salty taste on his tongue.

He was buried deep, still hard. He gathered her in closer, pulling her away from the wall and sliding his hands down over her backside, hoisting her up. She wound her arms around his neck, holding tight as he moved, still thrusting into her.

“Em, I can’t get enough,” he said, almost apologetically.

“I want more. Take what you need,” she reassured breathlessly, hoping she could hang on just a little longer as daylight peeked more brightly over his shoulder.

She wrapped around him and held on for dear life, literally. His hands dug into her backside as he fucked her relentlessly, catching her gasping lips in a kiss so he could suck her tongue inside of him as well.

Did she need to breathe? She felt her ass muscles clench first, gripping a slick finger that he’d slid inside, little quakes of pleasure starting there, moving outward, pulling an animal cry from her lips as she wrenched away from the kiss and sank her teeth into his hard, muscled shoulder.

He kept going, and she didn’t think she could come again, but when her eyes met his, they didn’t look away until went with him, both of them exhausted and trembling as they fell back to the floor.

“I love you,” was all she said, over and over again as he loosened his hold and pulled her into a gentle hug.

He held her, neither of them saying a word. Balancing his forehead against hers, he leaned down to kiss her tenderly, finally sated. She tasted his tears mingling with hers, her heart full. His emptiness was gone, now, too.

The sun started to break through the window, cutting a bright path through the curtains, across the floor to where they sat.

“I don’t think we have much time,” she said.

“No, you can’t go. I want everything with you Emily. I love you, too” he said, a light illuminating his features as if the morning was shining inside of him, too. “I’ve always known I could only love you. I never thought I deserved to.”

She held on to him tightly, almost afraid to believe she was hearing the words. Gavin loved her.

But it wasn’t, was it? She wasn’t real. A familiar shimmering took hold of her, the light fading as she stayed there in his arms.

“Em?” he said, his voice strung tight with a note of fear. She looked up, trying to hold on to him, but her arms slipped through.

“I think I have to go,” she said, her eyes traveling to the phone that was ringing at his bedside, her heart breaking but also easing with the acceptance of what was to be. She’d done what she needed to do.

“No,” he said fiercely, still trying to hold on, but there was nothing left of her to hold.

She’d let him know how she felt, and she’d helped him make peace with his past. She knew he loved her. Even if only for this minute, she knew.

“I love you, Gav. Always will. Remember, be happy,” was all she had time to say.

## *Chapter Four*

Emily's brain felt like it was being put through a meat grinder as a glaringly bright light stabbed at her repeatedly.

“Shut it off – shut it the fuck off!” she said, crying out as another shard of agony pierced her skull, wedging itself into her brain.

“Ah, she's coming out fighting,” someone said almost teasingly, the light receding as did the pain. “That's good.”

*Good? Where she'd been was good. Being with Gavin was good. This was not good. This was cold, sharp and painful.*

Emily tentatively opened her eyes. Everything was numb and hurting all at once. The pinpoint of light receded as the doctor flicked off the penlight and shoved it in his pocket.

“Welcome back to the world, Emily. You gave everyone a scare. Lost you again, but you fought your way back. I think this time you're going to be okay.” He smiled, and then looked across the bed. “There are some people here who are very happy to see you.”

She couldn't respond, still gaining her focus on the room around her.

“Just a few minutes,” he added to someone else, stepping out of sight.

The white world of her hospital room was blurry and foreign. It took several minutes to turn her head from one side to the other, and when she

finally made it, she saw the tearful, smiling faces of her parents by the bedside.

“Hi,” was all she managed, sounding croaky, still confused. How did she get here? Hadn’t she been at Gavin’s?

Gavin?

She looked around the room, but he wasn’t there. Disappointment and loss was as sharp as the pain from the light.

Worse. It didn’t go away. Losing Gavin hollowed her out in the way she’d always feared it would.

“Is Gavin here?” she asked her parents, who fussed and soothed, but they didn’t know anything about Gavin.

*A dream. Just some fucking drug-induced dream,* she thought bitterly.

The sense of loss deepened, tears streaming down her face until she was sobbing. Her poor parents, obviously confused, calling the doctor. She couldn’t even feel guilty that she couldn’t be happier. She couldn’t think of anything except that Gavin wasn’t here. She wanted the dream back.

“Hey, stop that Em,” she thought she heard him say.

She opened her eyes slowly, sniffing.

Gavin, a mess in his old ripped jeans and a tee-shirt—the ones she’d seen on the floor by his bed--stepped inside. Everything was out of focus,

her world blurry, but she couldn't take her eyes away from him. She needed to touch him, unable to tell what was real anymore. He hadn't been there, but now he was.

He looked tired, with shadows under his eyes and his hair poking every which way. Not like Gavin at all. Gavin was always picture perfect.

He said something to her parents, who paused for a moment, then smiled. Her mother stopped crying. Her father patted him on the shoulder.

"Gav?" She reached out, and felt his hand take hers.

He was here, she thought with great relief. She should have known he would be, even if the rest was just a dream.

"Hey, sweetheart. How are you?"

*Sweetheart?* "My head hurts."

"I'll make sure they give you something."

"No. . .nothing to put me to sleep. I want to stay awake," she said, fighting with fear. "I don't want to go away again," she said weakly, tears falling again.

This was horrible. She wanted to be back with Gavin, like they were, but he was here, and she was alive. . .the reality of it slowly dawned.

She was here. So was he. A second chance.

“Gav. . .I have to tell you, I have to-” her voice was urgent, but her words were still slurry.

“Hey, hey there. . .shhhh. It’s okay,” he said, leaning in, his hand stroking her forehead, her cheek. “I’m not letting you go anywhere, okay? Not anymore.”

His touch distracted her from the pain. Gavin never touched her like this. Occasionally a gentlemanly hand at the small of her back or her elbow, but that was it. Professional, appropriate touches. Not the kind they’d shared in her dream, which were not appropriate at all.

“I’m so glad you’re back, Em. When the phone rang,” he started to say, but then his own eyes filled and his voice choked. He didn’t look away, though. He let her see. Everything.

“I thought I’d lost you. When they told me you’d crashed, that you were gone, I thought I’d died too, Em. I couldn’t lose what we’d just found,” he said, leaning in to brush his lips over hers. He grinned, shaking his head.

“Look what you’ve done to me,” he said emotionally.

Her eyes went wide. Now she was the one who was afraid to believe. “It was real? It wasn’t just a dream?”

“It was totally real. I don’t know how, and I don’t care, but it was.”

He lifted his shirt, showing the marks where she'd dug in her nails when he'd taken her up against the wall. It made her smile, then laugh, until her head hurt again too much to bear.

"I can't believe this. You. . ." she held her breath, almost afraid to say the words, but he knew.

"I love you. I love you so much it hurts, Emily. You were right. How could I let myself love you, when I didn't even think I deserved to live, after losing Theo? I needed to accept what happened with him and know he forgave me. And that you did, too. Knowing that you could love me, that you wanted me, it made it possible for me to let go. Forgive myself."

She smiled, then laughed, with the joy of it, wincing. The pain was still gripping her, but she almost didn't care – pain meant she was alive, and she was here with Gavin, and he was telling her that he loved her.

"And when you're well, I think we have a lot of catching up to do, so hurry with that, will you?" His tone was teasing, but so tender and sexy she couldn't look away.

"I love you, Gavin. There are so many things I didn't have time to share with you. I'll never hold back again. You. . . saved me."

He kissed her fingers and looked at her with all the love she could imagine in his eyes. "No, babe. I think it was the other way around."

She took his hand, and looked at how their fingers wrapped together, the touch warm, solid.

This was real.

If you enjoyed BARELY THERE, check out TWO PERFECT, now available on Kindle and Smashwords!

Excerpt from TWO PERFECT, Samantha Hunter

Eva's shadow lover, to this point only a presence, a body that merged with hers, now had a name, a face and a voice.

They sat in an ornate bedroom - not hers - that featured a four-poster bed at the center, surrounded by marble and gilded décor. The chair she sat on was generously cushioned in rich, purple velvet.

Eva remembered this room from a book she had read. She had loved the author's descriptions of the sensual quality of the materials as the hero had pressed the heroine into the mattress, the way the gold scrolling around the edges of the room had seemed to burn as they made love.

"Your mind creates the space where we meet," he said.  
"These are your fantasies, the reflections of your emotions, needs and desires."

"You can read my mind?"

No doubt it was the effect of her dream, but his body seemed almost golden, muscular and honed to one perfect stretch of muscle. Dark blonde hair brushed the back of his neck and fell down across eyes that held on to hers, his smile wicked.

"Not exactly, but I knew you were wondering by how you looked around the room, and at me."

"So you are Simon," she stated more than asked.

"In the flesh," he said with another smile. He was fully naked and quite aroused, she couldn't help but notice.

"How do you. . .how are we. . .?" she sputtered, too many questions clogging her mind at once as she clenched her fingers and fought the urge to reach out and touch him. How could she still want so much after what she'd just experienced? But her desire seemed on auto-pilot with Simon. When she was around him, he made her want almost continuously.

"I'm dreaming you," she said aloud, more to convince herself than anything. "This is just some manifestation of my very messed up sexual problems."

"No. I simply inhabit your dreams, which are really not dreams at all, but where we meet for pleasure. I am a spirit bound to the quilt."

She shook her head. "I'm sorry. What?"

"The quilt. I am bound to it. I can't remember how it happened, a curse I think. It's been a very long time," he said huskily, sliding his hands in between her legs, his fingers stroking her thigh from hip-crease to her knee, repeating the long, hypnotic strokes.

"Why are you here with me?"

"You own the quilt" he murmured as if it were obvious, his lips following the path of his hands until she was trembling.

"I need to know—"

"Shhhh," he said as his lips moved to the tender flesh of her sex. His tongue darted out, swirling and tasting, sucking and lapping at Eva until she was writhing beneath him, other orgasm ripping through her. They were starting to feel easy, as if coming was like breathing.

She tried to clear her mind, looking down at Simon, who stood, hard and ready. There was sadness and loneliness behind the desire in his eyes that plucked at her heart, cooling her ardor. Who was he, really?

"You mean that you are imprisoned here, forever?"

"Yes, I think so. Time has no reality for me. No history, no future. All I know is this," he said, leaning in to kiss her, his tongue running along her bottom lip. "I was put here to serve whoever owns the quilt, and I receive no pleasure for myself except in fulfilling them," he added.

"You really must have pissed someone off big time for that to happen," Eva observed.

He chuckled softly. "I think I must have, though I can no longer remember," he admitted, shrugging massive, muscular shoulders. "I don't remember anything, except for the moments I am with you."

The way he delivered the words in his voice velvety was like a touch all in itself. His eyes drifted over her appreciatively, warming her in a way completely different from how he had heated her up otherwise.

Her memory flashed with the similarly admiring look Greg had bestowed upon her.

"Um, thank you, but. . .you're not real."

"I am as real as the blanket, and the pleasure you feel when you sleep beneath it. As real as the pleasure you feel with your lover," he said, sounding just slightly put out. "I can help you please him. I know you have doubts, though you shouldn't. You're perfect, Eva."

Shows how much he knows, she thought with a grunt.

Eva fought to keep the conversation on track.

"Speaking of that, how come I saw you when I looked at him?"

"Our images merged in your mind's eye, and you saw us as one for the moment. Don't worry. I can't possess him, and you aren't crazy. But I can help you to enjoy it more when you are with a human lover, and to help you over your inhibitions."

"You knew I was worried about that?" She shook her head. "Oh right, you're in my head."

"I'm not in your head, not in the way you mean, but I can feel what you need, your pleasure, and your pain," he said again, giving her one of those drugging looks. "I want to take away the pain."

Before she could say anything else, his strong, hands were massaging her back. She stretched into the touch, loving how his fingers massaged and soothed, but it wasn't Simon.

Simon was gone. She opened her eyes, blinking tiredly as the wonderful massage continued.

Greg.

"Hey sleepyhead," Greg whispered in her ear.