

A Loftier Song

by Tanaqui

Edward guided Trish, with a hand on her elbow to keep them together, as they exited the Ohio Theater among the crush of other playgoers. The night air was sharp after the fug inside the theater, although winter had finally started to release its grip on the city as April approached, and the snow and ice had melted from the sidewalks in the past few days. He steered her gently left. "It'll be easier to find a taxi on the other side of the Capitol," he pointed out. "If you don't mind a bit of a walk."

Trish didn't mind at all, glad for a chance to talk to Edward for a little longer. There hadn't been much opportunity for conversation either before the play or during the interval—a disadvantage she'd hadn't considered when she'd offered him a ticket. She nodded her head. "Good idea." She sounded hoarse in her own ears, but he might just think it was the cold.

As they moved further away from the theater doors and the crowd thinned, Edward tucked her hand into his arm, keeping her close as they crossed the road. She didn't mind that either, even if the gesture seemed a little absent-minded and automatic.

"So, did you enjoy the play?" He half turned his head toward her as he asked the question, but didn't quite look at her.

She nodded vigorously. "Yes. I didn't expect it to be so... funny? All that dressing up and mistaken identities and stuff with fake love letters...."

"You didn't?" He sounded surprised.

She shrugged, a little embarrassed. "It's Shakespeare, isn't it?" A glance sideways showed he had his lips pressed together, like he was trying not to laugh. She hurriedly turned the conversation back on him. "Did *you* enjoy it?"

"Very much." He dipped his head at her. "Thank you for offering me the ticket."

She smiled back at him, so glad that she'd been right in thinking it was something he'd like: there'd been such a fuss in the papers, when it was announced that some English company with Royal in its name was going to be touring for the first time since the September attacks, that she reckoned it had to be a big deal for someone like Edward who liked that sort of stuff.

They walked on in silence for a while. A cab whirled by, but he made no attempt to hail it. Instead, he seemed to be watching her. She caught his eye and quickly looked away.

"There was no friend, was there?"

She looked back at him, startled. "What?"

He was definitely smiling at her now. "Your friend who couldn't use the ticket."

She was ready to deny it, to insist that of course there'd been a friend, a family emergency... and then she gave up the pretense. He didn't seem at all annoyed at having caught her out in a little white lie. "No, there wasn't. But I thought you'd enjoy seeing it." She put her hand over his where it lay on her arm. "And I didn't think you'd come if I just asked you."

It was his turn to look a little embarrassed. "Probably not," he muttered. He gave her another shy smile. "But I'm very glad you did."

They looked at each other for a moment, coming to a halt on the pavement, before he cleared his throat and swung away, putting up his hand to flag down a taxi. Opening the door, he said, "It's late. I should see you home. If that's all right?"

Trish nodded, sliding across as she got into the cab so he could climb in after her. She didn't want the evening to end, and she was glad he didn't either.

While Edward pulled the door closed behind him, she leaned forward and gave the cabbie the address to her apartment block. Sitting back, she found Edward settled himself back against the seat as well, his body half angled towards her and his hands folded in his lap. Shadows moved across his face as they drove through the dimly lit streets, making it hard to read his expression as he looked at her. She self-consciously loosened her scarf, feeling suddenly hot now they were out of the sharp wind.

When he spoke, his voice was light and conversational, yet warm. He sounded as if he was genuinely interested and not merely making small talk when he asked, "You didn't study any Shakespeare when you were at college?"

It had come out during one of their recent conversations in the coffee shop—he'd been gently probing into her past, clearly curious about how she'd ended up with J&R—that she'd gotten an associate degree in business studies at a local community college before she went to work for them.

She shook her head in answer to his question now. "I didn't have to do anything like that. I suppose I could have...." She'd been far more interested in the business courses she'd taken; she couldn't even remember now what she'd picked for the compulsory humanities elective. Edward had likely studied lots of Shakespeare, although she'd learned he'd majored in history—something he'd admitted with evident reluctance, dismissing it as a long time ago and then diverting the conversation back to her.

It was a wonder, really, that either of them had managed to find out anything at all about the other.

"We did do one when I was in high school," she said suddenly, surprising herself. "A Shakespeare play, I mean. I don't even remember what it was. Just that it was hard to

understand and boring...."

She could see his smile even in the dim light. "Yes, teachers do tend to do that to Shakespeare." To her surprise, he reached out and groped for her hand where it rested on the seat between them, giving it a squeeze that was muted by the heavy gloves they both wore. "I'm glad you had a chance to find out it can be different. I'm glad I was there to see it."

He let his hand go on resting on hers, and she was thankful for the half-darkness hiding the flush in her cheeks as she realized they were holding hands. She hadn't intended this evening to be a date: they'd arranged to meet at the theater and there'd been no suggestion from either of them they should go for drinks or a meal before or after. And yet, suddenly, it was feeling very much like a date, and she wasn't at all sorry about that.

The cab rumbled on through the empty streets. Neither of them spoke. They didn't need to; enough was being said in the brief moments when their gazes met as they shyly glanced up and glanced away—and then looked back.

The cab made the turn into the street on which Trish's apartment block stood. She found her voice at last. "This is me. Would you—?" She cleared her throat. "Would you like to come up for a coffee?"

Edward's hand tightened on hers. "Thank you, yes. I'd like that." He sounded slightly out of breath.

The cab came to a halt in front of her building. He slid out quickly and offered his hand to her to help her climb out. He held on for a moment longer than strictly necessary, before he turned away to pay the driver.

Trish dug into the depths of her purse for her keys as he followed her up the path from the sidewalk to the front door, close but not crowding her. She liked that, the feeling of him being there at her shoulder but still letting her lead, letting her stay in control. The last guy she'd dated, not long after she'd arrived in Columbus, back in the fall, had taken the keys off her and opened the door for her without asking. Maybe he'd thought it was chivalrous, but she'd found it a little unnerving, as if he didn't think her capable of the simplest acts. For all Edward could seem quite old-fashioned at times, she'd never felt anything but respect from him.

The ride up in the slow-moving, well-lit elevator, with its mirrored walls, was the worst part, neither of them knowing quite where to look. The weight of the invitation, which had seemed so right in the cab, bore down on Trish. She hoped she'd left the place as tidy as she usually did and that she hadn't forgotten anything or left anything out when she'd hurried out of the door that morning. Halfway to her floor, she blurted out, "It's very small. But I was lucky to find it. You know how much pressure there is on accommodation, with everyone moving here after the attacks. Or maybe you don't, being in the Army and them housing you. I suppose —."

"I hear about it at work." He interrupted her gently, making her feel that he was rescuing her, involving himself in the conversation, rather than finding her tiresome. "And the Army commandeering half the hotels and housing complexes in the city has hardly helped."

The elevator doors pinged open as he finished speaking. She stepped out with relief.

Inside the apartment, she was glad to see the only thing that could be said to be out of place was the magazine she'd been reading at breakfast, still lying on the table. She was also grateful that the studio was big enough that the bed was out of sight, hidden behind a curtain that divided the tiny studio into sleeping and living areas. She had a feeling the sight of a bed would have inadvertently sent a message to Edward that she wasn't quite sure she was ready to send and that she was very sure he wouldn't have been comfortable receiving.

She waved Edward further into the apartment, past the small dining table up near the kitchen and toward the two easy chairs facing the picture window. "Please, take your coat off and take a seat. I'll put the coffee on."

He gave her one of his soft-voiced, courteous *thank yous* as he unwound his scarf from his neck, while his gaze took in the apartment with an air of finding it quite satisfactory. She headed back to the kitchen to set up the coffee maker. Once it was gurgling to itself, she turned back to see that Edward had shed his coat and was standing by the window.

He glanced over his shoulder as she came up to him. "It's a wonderful view." They were high enough up that they could see over the nearby buildings to the glittering lights of downtown Columbus and the surrounding districts.

"It is, isn't it?" Trish stopped next to him. "It's why I chose this apartment and not another one they offered me lower down."

They stood side by side in silence for a minute. She was aware of him looking sideways at her. Then he put his hand on her arm, turning them to face each other. He wasn't a tall man, but she still had to tip her head back a little to meet his gaze. He put his other hand up to lightly touch her cheek and she saw him swallow. "May I kiss you?" he asked, sounding like he was very afraid the answer was going to be no.

It was an oddly formal request, but she wasn't much surprised. As she'd been reminded earlier, he could be quite old-fashioned at times. The formality did sit a little strangely with his nervous air, more like a teenager than a grown man with both quite a few years on her and the confidence and authority to command a thousand soldiers, but she didn't laugh at it. Her own stomach was fluttering, just like it had back in high school right before Scott Murray had kissed her for the first time. She nodded. "Please," she whispered, lifting her face and moving toward him even before he began to draw her closer.

His kiss was light, his lips barely brushing against hers before he began to pull away. She put her hand on the back of his head to stop him, her lips chasing his and opened her mouth a little to catch and gently tease his lips as she kissed him back. The fluttering in her stomach

had flowered into a wave of heat as she tasted him, her skin tingling where his fingers touched her face. She wanted more from him and it seemed he was willing to give it, responding to her boldness by deepening the kiss a little more.

They broke apart too quickly for Trish's liking, though she was still breathless and a little dizzy. Still close, she sought his gaze and held it, finding the expression in his eyes contained a hint of uncertainty and confusion, as well as the desire that had been evident before he kissed her.

She licked her lips. "Are you...? Is this what you want?" She lowered her gaze. "If it's a mistake, if you don't.... It's all right."

"It's not a mistake." He tipped her chin up so she was looking into his eyes again. "I just... I wasn't sure it was what you really wanted."

She nodded quickly. "I do. I just... didn't expect you to be interested."

He raised his eyebrows. "Because of Heather?" He hesitated only a little over the name.

She nodded. "And I thought maybe you'd think I was too young."

His eyes crinkled in a smile. "And there was me thinking I was too old for *you*."

"And not smart enough for you...."

"Not true." He shook his head. "You're very smart woman, Trish. Too smart and too full of life for a dull old fool like me."

He'd slid his arm around her waist, pulling her lightly against him. She could feel him trembling, the way she was. She tilted her head a little. "Maybe I like dull...."

His eyes widened with surprise and then he caught on that she was teasing him. His lips twitched into a smile. "I can do dull." He stroked her cheek with his thumb. "And slow. You'll have to be patient with me."

She pulled his mouth back down on to her for another soft kiss. "I can be patient," she murmured against his lips.

She'd waited this long to get this far. There was no need to hurry what would come next.

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