

## To Have & to Hold

The sun fell slantwise over cold, black earth on the autumn afternoon she found the doll. Tawny was digging in her garden, turning the clay-rich soil for next spring's bulbs, when her spade struck something with a bone china *clink*. She abandoned the spade for the soft dexterity of fingers, and poked and pushed the dark dirt around until the pursed, glazed lips of a doll's head kissed her fingertips; then she carefully unburied the toy from its crypt.

Porcelain does not erode at the same rate as homespun cotton clothing. Therefore, while the white china face and hands were intact (minus a minuscule chip at the left ear where Tawny's spade had knocked a conical chunk loose), and the articulated wooden body, though stained and sodden, was sound, the doll was otherwise 'naked.' Not that she had much for which to be ashamed. Her plain torso lacked even the suggestion of a womanly figure, and the space between her legs was similarly smooth. Most of the hair--likely human--was also rotted away. What remained stood up in spiky tufts around a so-smudged face, a sweet red smile.

Tawny set the doll beside her and went back to work, tucking papery root bulbs into their winter-long beds. Only once the sky was steeped the color of passionflower tea did the thirty-year-old collect her tools, cradle the doll in the crook of her arm, and call it a night.

Inside her 800 square foot house, tiny even for one person and really little better than a cottage except not as quaint, Tawny set about cooking dinner. As the potatoes panfried, the red wine breathed and the doll, propped against the glass bottle, watched. By the time Tawny drained her first glass, she was talking to the thing, whom she'd since named Isabelle, the way cat ladies talk to their felines or crazy people to no one at all. Just empty space and the shadows that move at the corners of their eyes.

After the second glass, Isabelle sat on the couch next to Tawny and laughed at all the punchlines in the sitcoms Tawny binge-watched in the evenings. Like they were best friends, just two young women, maybe roommates, on a random Wednesday night with no care in the world. This, after Tawny had explained the concept of TV to a 19<sup>th</sup>-century creature. "Yep, they're real people, but they're not that small and they're not actually in the room with us. Imagine ..."--inspiration suddenly dawning—"imagine photographs that move! Yeah!" Tawny nodded vigorously at her own thoughtful analogy and Isabelle seemed to accept it placidly enough. At 11:00, Tawny went to bed alone, leaving the still-dirty doll on the couch.

The following morning, Tawny overslept her alarm, likely due to the midweek wine consumption. She awoke in a fog, so thick-headed she couldn't be bothered to panic at the lateness of the hour. Stumbling through the foyer, looking more put-together in a pencil skirt and silk blouse than she felt, she grabbed her purse and some cash for coffee on the way, and stepped into the blinding October sun. Tawny pulled her jacket tight as a crisp breeze cut through her exposed skin, and made a mental note to pick up candy for next week's trick-or-treaters.

Despite her mild hangover Tawny smiled. It was autumn. Bright and orange and smelling of wood smoke and singing the crackly leaf song of shedding trees. It was, she thought, the most wonderful time of the year.

Her buoyant mood was further bolstered at work when she arrived to find a single flower waiting for her on her desk. The flower was code, an untraceable message from a lover to his mistress. Kyle was thirty-five, dark-haired, and gorgeous in a perfectly playboy way. He was a partner at the same law firm for which Tawny clerked. He'd made partner three years ago. He'd been married for longer than that.

Tawny told herself it was the ideal situation, really. She got all the perks of a relationship without having to endure any of the drama. When Kyle was with her, he never mentioned Kayla. Nor did he whine about work. He devoted all his attention to her and all his energies on pleasing them both. Plus, Tawny regularly received flowers ... every time Kyle wanted sex.

Suddenly she felt anxious. That meant Kyle would be coming over right after work, and Tawny wouldn't have a chance to tidy the cottage. How had she left it? Gardening tools on the table. Last night's dinner dishes on the stove and in the sink. Grass-stained jeans and a ratty sweater in a crumpled heap in the hallway, where she'd begun stripping mid-walk to the shower. Shit. Would he even notice? *Of course he will*, Tawny berated herself. The man changed suits halfway through the day if he thought his current one had developed too many wrinkles during the course of the morning. He got haircuts *twice* a week. Kyle took the adage 'cleanliness is next to godliness' quite seriously indeed. As a result, the man was very near a god.

Tawny stifled a giggle, her anxiety forgotten in the memory of how Kyle looked naked. He said once on the days he came to her place instead of to the gym like normal, that they had to make sure to work up a good sweat. He still needed to get his exercise in, after all, and the ruddy color painting his cheeks by the time he went home was always more convincing that way. He never stayed the night. Tawny and Kyle rendezvoused only when Kayla, managing editor of the

*Sable Island Scene* magazine, had business dinners of her own to attend, intimate dinners with only a colleague or a client or two, where Kyle's absence would not be felt. Lately their illicit trysts had been occurring once, maybe twice a month. No word passed between them at work, no note or wink or smile or otherwise untoward communication; no planning or promises. Tawny simply showed up to the office as usual, and sometimes there was a flower on her desk.

On flower days, the work day always drug like a slug mired in its own mucus. Tawny would, in the hours between eight and five, become increasingly aware of her own body, its aches and appetites. Of the anticipatory dampness decorating her inner thighs, at once annoying and undeniably pleasurable. All that Thursday Tawny squirmed in her seat and wondered with genuine curiosity if everyone got this excited about sex. Did Kayla, Kyle's wife? Did she think about him from the moment they parted in the mornings until they met again over dinner, congratulating herself on bagging the most eligible bachelor in Somerset County? Tinging Tawny's curiosity was just a whisper of guilt, a tiny voice quick to remind her that Kyle was another woman's husband and Tawny herself little better than the quintessential secretary stereotype. She pouted for just a second before her gaze fell on the flower again: a chrysanthemum this time, in a slender vase at the corner of her desk. Tawny's answering grin was face-splitting.

Tawny fought the rush-hour traffic on the causeway home with the finesse of a Hollywood stunt driver. Emboldened by the urgent need to hide the evidence of her occasional slovenliness before Kyle had a chance to prosecute her in her own home, Tawny wove through the cars, cutting off more than one driver with an uncharacteristic inconsiderateness. The honking horns barely registered over the pounding of her blood, however. *My*, Tawny reflected at a red light a little later. *The things we do for sex.*

As Tawny pulled onto her road, a light rain began to fall. The moisture in the air dropped the temperature from a crisp 51 to a downright cold 43. Her tires squealed across the wet pavement pulling into her driveway, and Tawny added one more chore to her psychic checklist: *build fire*. Maybe Kyle would take her on the floor just in front of a roaring fireplace, all animal passion and the sweat of superheated exertion. For the twentieth time that day, Tawny grinned.

Sprinting into the kitchen, Tawny tossed her keys on the counter and stopped dead. Something was very, very wrong. Either she'd woken up in the middle of the night and slept-

walked around her house, cleaning every surface 'til it shone ... or her personal fairy godmother had waved her magic wand and presto! Dishes done! Tawny's hands hung at her sides the way her jaw hung—limply, and wide open, their palms-forward gesture one silent question: how? Racking her brains for the events of this morning and then last night, Tawny supposed it *was* possible. Maybe she'd drunk more than she'd realized. The wine bottle was nowhere to be seen. If she'd finished it, she very well could've stumbled around cleaning without re-call. And this morning she'd forgone breakfast for coffee and aspirin. She hadn't even entered the kitchen in her slog from bedroom to garage.

Weird.

Craning her neck to peer through the open French doors that spilled kitchen into living room, Tawny negated the last rational option her bemused mind could conjure by ascertaining that her big-ass flatscreen still sat on its cheap IKEA stand. The TV had been a Christmas gift from Kyle, and in the event of a burglary it would've been the first thing to go. *Seriously?* Tawny chided herself. *A thief that would steal your dirty dishes alongside a flatscreen? You need more sleep.* She rolled her eyes then jumped at the sound of more tires on wet driveway.

*Kyle!*

He blew in cursing the rain--which was now a downpour--and the cold—which had his breath spouting in hot little gusts. Just walked right in like it was their house, and Tawny—his home. (She could dream, anyway.) Then he saw her, still standing in the middle of the kitchen, and he spread his arms, a grin brightening his face. She went to him, was enfolded by him, and the warmth that blossomed in the spaces where their bodies met was comforting, and familiar, and goddamn sexy.

So long as she let Kyle dictate the rules, and never asked for anything *more*, there was nothing about which to fight. No place for jealousies, or hurt feelings. No place, that was, for Tawny herself, for the emotions she couldn't keep from welling up when they made love, because it *was* love, and she ... well, loved Kyle. But to bring that up, to assert herself in any dominant way other than the sometime-use of handcuffs, was to find herself suddenly grinding against a wooden wall, Kyle having checked out, shut down, reminding her that she was just a distraction. A distraction he could appreciate, no doubt, and did—why else the flat screen, or last month's little necklace? A silver bird pendant flying away in the manner Tawny often longed to.

But in exchange, she was allowed no demands, and he in turn demanded nothing else. Only compliance.

“It smells good in here,” Kyle murmured into her hair. He made a show of inhaling deeply. “Or is that just you?”

She smiled against his chest, then tilted her face up shyly to meet his. “I lit some candles. Grapefruit.” She kissed him lightly. “And I thought we could make a fire.”

“Oh, doll,” he breathed. “You bet your fine china ass.”

Doll. It was the pet name he’d always used. Thursday night, however, it sent Tawny’s thoughts back to the garden, to *that* doll.

“Oh!” Tawny exclaimed. “You won’t believe what I found last night.” Taking his hand, she led him into the living room. “Her name is Isabelle. She must be 100 years old.”

Tawny gestured at the couch; Kyle stared at Tawny nonplussed. “And what exactly am I supposed to be looking at?”

“The d—” Tawny began, but stopped when she turned to face the empty couch. “Well. She *was* here.”

Kyle was already kneeling by the fireplace, stacking kindling in a tight square shape. “Where’s your lighter, babe? I’m on a schedule.”

It might have lasted only 15 minutes, but the time Kyle spent inside her felt like hours. He was slow and methodical, present to her and the moment in a way that Tawny relished but had not previously experienced. He refused to come before her, and they often came together, his manipulations of her body the very thing that ultimately sent him over the edge, too.

In the glow of the fire, sweat glistened on their brows. Kyle held her, marveling aloud for the 200<sup>th</sup> time how perfectly Tawny fit in his arms. *Doesn’t that mean anything?* she wanted to accuse him every time he said it. *Or am I really just a puzzle piece to you, a what-hole-does-the-round-peg-go-into problem, easily solved with a little bit of experimentation?* Tawny stiffened, but knew better than to say anything. She tried to just enjoy the sensation of human contact.

Too soon, Kyle pulled his wet chest from her back, disentangling himself and standing. “I’m going to shower. Join me?” He extended his hand invitingly, but Tawny was comfortable where she lay. Unlike Kyle, she wasn’t always quick to send down the drain the smell of them on her body. She shook her head; he shrugged and walked down the hallway to her bedroom.

The “pop” of the fire coincided with Kyle opening the bathroom door, but she clearly heard him pulling back the shower curtain, and the startled sound that followed. “What the--?” Kyle yelled. “Tawny? What the fuck is this thing in the shower?”

“What thing?” she called back, loathe to have to get up. But he was insistent: “Come here!”

She took her time about it at least, wrapping the afghan from the couch around her quickly-chilling shoulders. She’d have to turn up the heat. She shuffled her way to the bathroom, then stood looking over Kyle’s shoulder.

In the end, she couldn’t blame him. The red clay from the garden did look remarkably like blood. It had mixed with the water during her shower Wednesday night and splattered and smeared across the tile walls.

“What’d you do, roll in the mud like a pig?” Kyle asked disdainfully.

Tawny rolled her eyes. “The water will wash it off.” She made to move away.

“And *that*?” Kyle’s voice stopped her. Tawny followed his gaze to the tub’s back corner.

“Isabelle!” Tawny said, incredulous. Now how the hell ... Had she brought the doll into the shower with her last night? The premise didn’t make much sense. But then not much about Wednesday night did.

Tawny grabbed the doll, noting as she did the light water damage to the wooden body, but how much cleaner the porcelain face and hands were. Frowning, she carried Isabelle into the bedroom. Behind her, Kyle turned the faucet on full blast.

Friday morning brought the first signs of wilting to Tawny’s single pink chrysanthemum. Its elongated petals, drooping like so many strained noodles, hung over the flower shop’s green business card, obscuring “Lolita’s” such that only “it” was visible.

“It” indeed. The “thing” that hung over her life gray and bloated as the morning’s clouds, leftovers from the ferocious storm. After Kyle had gone, the skies had really let loose, dropping their wet and splashing guts onto the earth. The attendant lightning and thunder had woken her a few times, pitting her sleep with inconstant dreams and half-lucid visions. At one point she’d startled awake sure that someone had just crawled into bed beside her. “Kyle?” she’d whispered, stupid with sleep, into the dark. But her groping hand had fallen only on pillow. In the end,

between the lulling spells and the squalls, Tawny hadn't slept more than a couple hours combined. It felt worse than Thursday morning's hangover.

Sarah, Tawny's coworker and legal secretary to the firm's other partner, interrupted Tawny's reverie by sitting her chubby self directly on Tawny's desk, making the flower quake in its vase.

"Earth to Tawny," Sarah teased.

Tawny flicked her eyes up to Sarah but did not respond.

"Geez. What happened to you?"

"Huh?" Tawny asked uncomprehendingly.

"The bags under your eyes are heavier than the ones I carry out of Nordstrom Rack."

"Just tired, I guess."

"Oh, I get it. You were up all night boning Mr. Man." Sarah wiggled her eyebrows suggestively.

For a second Tawny panicked. Could Sarah know?

"I mean, that's what the random flowers are about, right?" Sarah indicated the sad chrysanthemum.

"What's it to you?"

Sarah looked surprised at Tawny's tone. "Uh, nevermind. My bad."

*Cool it*, Tawny reprimanded herself. She managed a weak, apologetic smile.

Just then, Kyle breezed through, looking impeccable and smelling even better, both his can-do grin and plentiful sex god pheromones at full wattage. Leaning over Sarah's desk, Kyle tucked a stray strand of hair behind her ear, whispered: "Perfect," and left her blushing furiously in his wake. At Tawny's desk he dropped a stack of files with an impertinent thump, setting the sticky notes surrounding her computer monitor a-flutter. "I'll need the Jamison motion by noon."

To his retreating back Tawny mouthed, "Aye aye, sir!" with a mock salute. Sarah noticed and laughed. Kyle's spine went rigid. His smile when he turned was sickly sweet. "Pray tell, what's so funny, ladies?"

Sarah quailed at once, but Tawny, her irritation compounded by a serious lack of sleep, felt emboldened and careless. She hit Kyle where it was sure to hurt the most. "Sir—your pants," Tawny said, discreetly miming toward her own derriere. "You might want to find a mirror."

And it was true—Kyle’s trousers were torn, split right up the rear seam. How very unlike him. Of course, he’d have a spare pair or two in his office, but the incident nevertheless tickled a tiny part of Tawny, the side that secretly yearned to see Kyle lose control, even a little bit, even just once.

When Tawny was twenty, she’d spent Friday nights at the bars, flashing a fake ID that no bouncer in that college town had checked too closely. She’d drank then like she had no liver the cheapest of all well liquors, until she’d found a guy to spot her drinks the rest of the night. If they had gone home together afterward—fine. At twenty, youth had been plentiful and consequences (serious ones, anyway), rare.

Another decade later, however, it was amazing how things had changed. Now, so long as Tawny had a glass of red wine to accompany that weekend’s made-for-TV movie, she never really thought she was missing anything. Her work at the law firm was meaningful and secure. The few men and women she called friends were loyal. Kyle and an assortment of devices kept her libido in check.

And yet. Kyle demanded compliance. How many letters removed from that was *complacence*? When, Tawny mused during a Chester Cheetoh commercial, had her life become simply ‘enough?’ She shifted uncomfortably on the couch. This wouldn’t do.

Flipping the TV off, Tawny donned her ratty sweater and went out to the backyard garden. It was 7:00 pm and pitch black. She unhooked the camping lantern from its place by the door and sent its fluorescent white-blue light soaring into the night. Walking across the yard, her shoes squelched in the mud from Thursday night’s storm, and she was glad she’d brought a towel on which to kneel. Tawny hung the lamp on the shepherd’s hook that also held the bird feeder, spread the towel, and sank to the spongy ground. She planned to pick up where she’d left off with the bulbs.

But when Tawny plunged her spade deep into the garden plot, something about the action sent a surge of wild satisfaction so strongly coursing through her suddenly hot blood that she did it again, and again, and again, stabbing the earth, wounding it ... because she could, and because the earth did not wound back, did not cry out piteously or sob or bleed. Just took the punishment, undeserved though it may have been, like a man, stoic. And Tawny realized she really wanted to hurt the man. Kyle. In his perfect suit that hadn’t been so goddamn perfect today. Each time she

plunged the blade deeper, the clay gave and then resisted, the way belly fat over chiseled abs might give and then resist.

Tawny wore herself out in this way. Worn out, it's hard to feel anything but tired.

Saturday morning Tawny treated herself to a leisurely run along the coast. Though she'd started out freezing, her breath puffing out behind her like a steam engine, by the time she hit Tomtauk Point she'd sweated through her sweats. Tawny stood at what felt like the edge of the terrestrial world, hands behind her head, deliberately slowing her breathing, and let the gray dawn salt sting her face with weary gratitude. It was something, all right, to be alive. To have a body that bent to your will and performed so effortlessly. When nothing else at all felt like it fit, at least her skin did.

A half-mile from home, Tawny spotted the car in her driveway: a sleek black Saab, all Kyle's. *What's this?* Tawny wondered, shocked at the breach of conduct. Never without a flower, and never on the weekends. Weekends were "family time." She kicked it in the last five hundred yards, arriving at her driveway rather breathless again. *In broad daylight, too*, Tawny marveled. *Wonders never cease.*

She went in through the unlocked front door and called Kyle's name immediately. He didn't answer. She began to check the rooms one by one—a quick chore in a quaint cottage. Tawny started when she walked into the bedroom and there he was, naked, sprawled across the comforter, his chest chiseled and his penis flaccid—a state she didn't often encounter.

"Unnhh," he moaned, his eyelids fluttering.

"Why didn't you answer when I called?" Tawny accused. "And anyway—what are you even doing here?"

His strong arm gripped her wrist and pulled her down on top of him.

"Kyle, stop. I need to shower first," she tried to protest, before the sour smell of whiskey drove her own sweaty scent from her nose. "Are you drunk?" she couldn't stop herself from exclaiming. This was also new. Kyle never drank. It would've interfered with his cool.

Kyle pulled her deep into a kiss, and Tawny made a face against his mouth. He tasted stale and metallic, like he'd recently been sick. "Water," she muttered into his face. "Let me get you some."

She came back a minute later with the Brita pitcher, two glasses, and a bottle of Tylenol. “Drink up, big boy,” she said, as outside the sun finally burned through the morning fog. A bar of sunlight fell across his heavy-lidded eyes, unfocused. *Great*, Tawny thought, shaking her head inwardly. *When he sobers up he’ll be pissed--at me, for seeing him this way*. At least the front of the Saab hadn’t been smashed in. If he’d managed to drive, perhaps it wasn’t that bad.

Kyle surprised her then, shoving his lips roughly onto hers, pushing her back onto the bed, overpowering her as easily as he always did. His eyes refused to focus for longer than a second at a time, but he knew where he was. “Tawny,” he breathed, and the sour smell was back. “Oh, Tawny.” He buried his face in her neck.

Tawny waited for the customary kisses, the wet suck of a hungry tongue at her jugular. But the wetness she felt there would soon dry into salt, and Tawny realized, again with shock, that Kyle was crying. What in God’s name was going on? “Oh, Tawny,” he repeated, miserable, sounding like a spoiled little boy who hadn’t gotten his way. “Kayla . . . Kayla left last night. I think . . . I think she’s having an affair.” And he actually *sobbed*, a pitiable noise had it not been accompanied by the loud and violent sucking back of snot.

Tawny rolled her eyes but didn’t say a thing. With her sex god sniffing into her chest, what was there to say? *Tough luck, you cheated first?* Should she not in fact be rejoicing at Kyle’s unexpected freedom? Free to be with *her*, Tawny, all weekend long; to actually stay the night. Mulling over her possible windfall, Tawny began to stroke his back soothingly, making gentle shushing sounds in his ear. On top of her, he grew hard, and she spread her legs a little, inviting him.

Kyle sank into her, a whole and sudden weight. He moaned. Began to move. The way he mashed his face into hers, Tawny might’ve questioned if he could feel anything at all, feel *her*. Tawny. But maybe what he needed was not Tawny per se, merely somebody. *A body*. Beneath him, Tawny’s torso stiffened and went smooth. Grew the fine grain of vintage walnut, well worn. Her fingers, initially clutching his back, fused. They *cupped* his back now. Perfect porcelain lips accepted his kisses but could not kiss back.

Kyle passed out.

When he work later that afternoon, Tawny was not in the bed. He wanted to tell her his dream over mugs of mint tea. Tell her how she’d become a doll. His doll. Tawny would’ve smiled.

Monday morning Tawny was not at her desk. Kyle asked Sarah if she'd seen her; negative. He shook his head, muttered something about reliable help, and walked back to his office like a self-important pigeon: breast over-stuffed with righteousness, left finger bare of ring.

He halted in the doorway, having noticed the gift Lolita's had delivered. It sat on the corner of his desk perky as a secretary.

A single Bird's-foot Trefoil. Yellow.

Kyle didn't know whether to laugh and tip his hat in concession or ball his fists at the goddamn *nerve* of the woman. Could Tawny be trusted to cover her tracks as thoroughly as he did?

Stepping lightly into the room, wearing a smart suit, looking fiercely beautiful ... Kayla closed the door behind them. "Happy birthday, honey," she said sweetly, and tossed him a shoebox. Dumbfounded, Kyle opened the thing. Stared mutely at Tawny staring mutely back at him, her face a pretty porcelain pucker. "To have and to hold," Kayla said. "Forever."