

FLOATING CANDLES

She wasn't sure when he first asked her. He had asked her to be there at 6 PM. The question seemed simple enough to him. "Would you like to stop by my place Thursday at six for a really luxurious gift?" They'd been friends for some time. Even so, from the way her eyebrows arched and her pupils constricted, he knew the alarm bells and flashing lights were going off with a vengeance. All of which was exactly as he intended.

Her astonishment was followed instantaneously by a hundred unasked questions. She finally settled for, "What is it?"

"It's a gift," he said again.

"What kind of gift?"

"Show up and find out."

"Are you serious?" she asked.

"I'm serious," he responded.

"You're not going to tell me what it is?" she asked again, looking out from under scrunched up eyebrows.

"No. I will tell you that I doubt if anyone has given you anything like it before. I can almost guarantee that you'll never forget it."

"Gaud! This is insane!"

"Yep. See you Thursday, about six."

He'd left her then. Not at all sure that he'd see her on Thursday.

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The bell rang at ten minutes after six. When he opened the door there was more defiance than cordiality in her greeting.

“This better be good,” she said as she walked past him.

“May I take your coat?” he asked.

She put a target lock on his eyes as he reached for her coat. He smiled and turned to hang it up.

“How was work?” he asked.

“Don’t ask.”

“I’m asking,” he prodded.

So, she told him. The first glass of wine took the edge off her voice. He listened. Like many working women, who are both single and mothers, there was very little slack. Her life was filled with expectations and lists of things to do, and never enough time with her children, and no time for herself. When he had seen her eyes last week he knew she was about two deep breaths away from being overrun by life.

Halfway through the second glass she kicked her high-heels off and curled her feet up on the couch. By the end of the second glass she was beginning to see the humor in some of the events she was describing. She sat on one end of the couch. He sat on the other, turned toward her, holding his first glass of wine still half full. He saw the recognition in her eyes.

“Wait a minute,” she said, setting the wine glass down on the coffee table. “Just what is it you have planned for this evening?” She tried to make the question semi-defiant or at least assertive. She didn’t quite pull it off.

“I told you what this evening was,” he said, “a luxurious, memorable gift.”

She started to ask a question but the wine jumbled the thoughts on the way to their becoming words. Her eyes focused on his with the intense candor women reserve for situations when they really need to know. He smiled at her, placed his own glass on the table, stood up and walked into the kitchen.

“I happen to have here two steaks that have been marinating since last night,” he commented. He pointed over her shoulder as he continued.

“Through there is the bedroom. Take a right and you’ll find the bathroom. There’s a bottle of chilled wine beside the tub and a dozen scented candles. You’ve got an hour until dinner is ready.”

When she realized that her mouth had dropped open, she recovered with a won word exclamation, “What!”

He could tell she was wishing she hadn’t started the second glass of wine. She tried again.

“You invited me up here to take a bath?” Her tone was approaching the incredulous.

“No. I promised you a luxurious, memorable gift. A long hot bath with chilled wine and scented candles floating in the water is only part of it.”

“I don’t believe this,” she said as she put her feet on the floor and launched herself through the bedroom door. She reappeared in the doorway less than a minute later. Her tone and affect one of amused disbelief.

“You’re serious.” Part statement. Part question.

He smiled at her across the room.

“There’s a lock on the bedroom door and another on the bathroom. If you want to change there are some shirts in the top dresser drawer. Dinner will be ready in an hour. Enjoy.”

She shook her head, lowered her eyes, smiled and turned back into the bedroom. He heard the door lock click behind her. He smiled. It was going well. He recovered his wine glass from the coffee table. Topping it off, he went to work on dinner. From time to time he caught glimpses of sounds from the other room...a musical note or two being hummed. A giggle.

His wardrobe was reasonably conservative. All of his work shirts were either white or blue, button down broadcloth. At six feet five, two hundred and twenty pounds, his shirts would make an adequate dress for many women. That’s what he was counting on. He was right.

The bedroom door opened just as he was putting a bowl on the table. The hot bath had relaxed her. Another glass of wine had mellowed her. His shirt fit her better than he ever could have imagined. The shoulder seams fell half way to her elbows. The tails struck just above her knees. The sleeves were rolled up and up and up. Whether intentional or not, she had not buttoned the top two buttons.

There is a special way a woman walks when she is relaxed and very sure of herself as a woman. That’s exactly how she moved to the dining table. He pulled her chair out and seated her. Offering her a napkin and filling her wine glass. She accepted the napkin and smiled as the bubbles searched for the surface.

Light jazz played softly in the background. The words between them were few and softly spoken. Mostly they ate, sipped their wine, drifted with the music and looked at each others’ eyes. Once, near the

end of the meal, as he was cutting a piece of steak, he looked up to say something. Whatever was on his mind was immediately forgotten. He was looking directly into her soul through the most softly wanton eyes he had ever seen. Just before he melted she let him go, looking down and smiling to herself. When he could breathe again he realized that, already, this was a memorable evening.

His place was high up and faced west. When the sky was relatively clear mountain peaks were visible. This evening the mountains were only dimly discernable in the distant mist. Walking around the table he pulled back her chair and held her hand as they stood looking out across the city. When he put his arm around her shoulder she leaned lightly against him and seemed to purr.

He sat on the couch. She sat next to him, bending her legs beneath her and resting her head against his shoulder. The creative, free-flowing, personal tones of Michael Tomlinson and Scott Cossu softly textured their sense of one continuous moment. The kaleidoscopic pastels of an evening sky entertained them. She smiled and hummed and let herself go.

When he was sure that she was asleep, very gently, he rose from the couch. He lifted her in his arms, and carried her into the bedroom. He placed her on his bed and covered her.

He lit a large scented candle so that she would not be startled awakening in a dark room. Then he went out, closing the door softly behind him.

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He smiled and hummed to himself as he cleaned up the dishes. What an enjoyable evening. He was just beginning to nod off as he sat on the couch with a final glass of wine. The bedroom door opened quietly. She was dressed again. The color and cut of her clothes were considerably more austere than the tone of her eyes. She looked timid and a little uncertain.

“It’s late,” she said.

“Yes,” he agreed.

“The sitter didn’t know...”

“I already called for you,” he interrupted.

She paused, seeming to be embarrassed.

“I’m sorry,” she said.

“For what? Didn’t you enjoy yourself?”

“Oh, yes. I haven’t felt so relaxed.... and I can’t remember when I slept so...” Then she knew. She looked intently, directly into his eyes.

“This is exactly what you had planned, isn’t it,” she asked?

“Exactly.”

He stood and, after helping her with her coat, she put her arms around his neck and kissed him.

“I’ll remember... Thank you,” she whispered.

“You’re welcome.”

After she had gone, the last rays of sunlight diffused into glowing mist with his last sip of wine. Content. Sometimes, what a woman appreciates most is a long hot bath, floating candles, a cool glass of wine and a few hours of uninterrupted sleep.