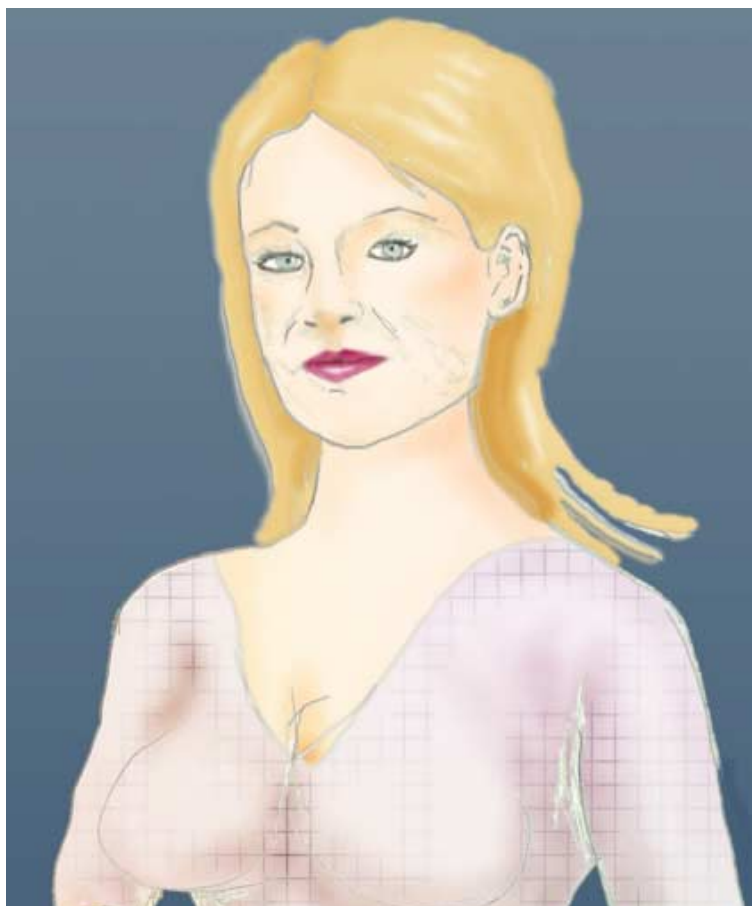




*Reluctant Press* presents:

# Happily Ever After

Dee Dee Perri



ILLUSTRATIONS BY C. PAGANI

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A 'NEW WOMAN' E-BOOK

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# Happily-Ever-After

**Dee Dee Perri**

## Chapter 1

I wouldn't recommend driving non-stop from L.A. to Louisiana to my worst enemy, even with five of us sharing the driving it was a brutal trip. Easily the longest and most tedious part of the drive was from El Paso on the Western most corner of Texas to Beaumont near the Louisiana border. There was just Texas and more Texas and more Texas. Endless Texas. Even Peter, our resident English gentleman, ah sorry, *British* subject was impressed. He said, in his very proper British accent, "I say, old man, the sun never sets on the Empire." He spayed out his hands as if to encompass the vast sweep of land, "This must be the Queen's own, eh?" He had a point. After twenty-three hours of driving, we were *still* in Texas. The sun, now a bloated, red disk hung in the rear view mirror. My legs felt like jelly and my brain was certainly turning to mush.

"If it is Peter, she's welcome to it- all of it." My ass felt like it was welded to the leather seat.

The arid landscape had gradually turned more lush over the last eight hours. The car's air conditioner working frantically, was now no match for the heavy, moisture saturated air. As the humidity climbed, my exhaustion followed like a zombie. "We should be in Orange in about an hour." Announced Tommy who was currently riding shotgun. In his hand he held a portable Global Positioning device, one of the electronic marvels of the current age. High overhead, in space, was a navigation satellite and that wee little device was talking to it- well for most younger people that technology was pretty mundane by now but for me, it still bordered on magic. Of course I had my own G.P.S. mounted on the dashboard of the Land Rover with the blinking curser, us, moving ever so slowly toward Orange. Still well out of the field of my display was Houma Louisiana, roughly our goal.

"Thanks Kid." I said. The 'kid' was Thomas Davis or more generally Tommy, the son of my boss's boss, Dr. Davis, Assistant Superintendent of L.A. Schools, East Los Angeles

district. I hadn't really wanted to bring Tommy along, well to be truthful, I hadn't wanted *any* of them along. On a treasure hunt, the fewer the better at least when it came to dividing up the loot. But the fact was, the vehicle belonged to his dad and well, my old Ford Fairlane probably would not have made the trip and the place we were going, a four wheel drive might prove to be essential. I taught U.S. history at Cleveland High in East L.A. and- well, teachers, like me, couldn't afford a Land Rover- enough said? Peter Marlborough our English gentleman was, like me, an impoverished history teacher and an avid Civil War buff. Both of us knew about the gold and silver looted from New Orleans just before the city was captured by the Union Navy late in eighteen-sixty-one but I was the one with the map. And to be completely honest, he'd black mailed me for this opportunity to come along. Ok so I had ah- borrowed the map from old Bitterman's collection and Peter knew it. Like I said, blackmail.

Asleep in the back, was my ex-wife Elizabeth and her current lover John Burkman. Needless to say, the sight of the two of them intertwined, cheek-to-cheek, did nothing for my growing discomfort. A reasonable person might ask why I'd bring along her and her current squeeze, especially since I was still bleeding inside from the rupture of my marriage and, to be frank, I still had unresolved emotions regarding 'Liz', more black mail. Or to be correct, I couldn't fund this trip 'and' make my alimony and child support payments. The promise of immense returns and her natural greed had conspired to convince her to forgo the latter monies ah- temporarily. Having said that, she wasn't about to let me out of her sight until the gold was in hand. This trip had all the hallmarks of a voyage into Hell. To make a long story short, the sooner we were done, the better it would be. However we were *still* in Texas.

"Pops?" Said Tommy.

I open my mouth to complain. Jesus I hated 'Pops', it made me sound so old and I was only forty and then I thought better of it. "Yeah, Kid." I knew he didn't like that moniker any better than I liked 'Pops'. If it were war, it would be an unrelenting one. The kid wasn't exactly a kid. He was at least twenty-five. A complete zero, he'd flunked out of a community college, not an easy thing to do, and then hunkered down at his folks place- forever. I'm sure his old man was only too delighted to exchange this Land Rover for a few days relief from the leech that continued to suck from his mother's tit. Well the latter description is a slight exaggeration; Mrs. Doctor Davis was as flat as a counter top where it counted.

Tommy tapped his finger on his G.P.S., "I think I can save us about two hours total."

I was all for that, even one less minute in Hell would be a blessing. My eye flicked up and took in the image from the rear view mirror. Liz was nuzzling John's neck now and worse, John's hands were moving under Elizabeth's blouse. In spite of myself I couldn't help but watch another man fondle my wife's breast- err, ex-wife's breast. I finally pulled my eyes away. I know it sounds horrible, but my cock was tenting my pants. Like I said, I had some unresolved emotional issues with Elizabeth and having endured nearly a year without sexual congress, you might say I had a hair trigger in the sexual response category. "How?"

"We'll cross a bridge about a mile after we leave Texas- OK? Take the next right. It's not much of a road but it goes like an arrow, East by South-East."

"Right." Again my eyes sought and found the image of Elizabeth in the back seat. Her leg now over John's. If they weren't dry humping, I was blind and deaf. I wished John luck, Liz was hard to 'bring off' under the best of circumstances and this hardly seemed the latter. In the next instant, she started to mew and then do that quiver thing she did. Fuck, she *was* cuming, quietly yes but cuming nonetheless. "Yeah." I croaked, my mouth became suddenly extra dry, "The sooner the better." I flicked on the radio and turned the hick country music up until the sounds from the rear were inaudible.

The two of them were once again asleep even before we took the cut off- thank God. I hadn't felt terribly adequate before we started this trip and nothing since then had done anything but throw my ego into free fall. I gratefully shut off the radio as we passed a sign that stated we'd finally escaped Texas and then, a few moments later, we crossed a bridge. Thank God! "Here?" Tommy nodded. I could see he wanted the radio back on. Fuck 'm.

The short-cut road was straight like a spear thrust into the piney woods but that was the best you could say for it as the trees gave way to swamp and the latter edged ever closer to the narrow black top track until it threatened to overlap the road itself. One quick jerk on the wheel and me and my problems would be over. Truth, there wasn't a lot of love between me and the others in this expedition, Liz being the exception- well only in the twisted, relentless desire I carried which was clearly *not* mutual. I held on to the wheel and fought off that insane desire as the last of the day light vanished. The absence of a proper twilight was do, no doubt, to the canopy of mosquitoes and other insects through which we were currently plowing. I half imagined that if I only open the window for a moment, tomorrow someone would have found our bloodless corpses in the Rover. On impulse I tapped the button and my window started down.

"Hey." Yelped Tommy. "It's hot enough in here as it is *asshole*."

"Right. Sorry." I said as I closed the window. "Kid?"

"Yeah asshole?"

"This thing have radar?"

"Huh?"

I nodded toward the swamp on our right. A bank of fog was rapidly building. No not just building, it seemed to have detect us and had become predatory. The thick mass rolled toward the narrow road like it had intelligence and purpose. "Fuck." I muttered as I took my foot off the pedal and lowered our speed. Within seconds, visibility dropped to about three feet or about a half foot beyond our bumper. "So much for the short cut Kid." As the speedometer dropped to ten and then five miles per hour, and even that seemed too fast, I said, "I can't drive in this." Just at that moment, looming out of the swirling mist, blue neon lights appeared. "I don't know about you guys. But whatever that is, we're going there."

~oOo~

"Whatever it is, it's not English." Muttered John.

"Creole." Added Peter. "It's a mix of..."

"I don't care what they speak." I interrupted, "These crawdads are simply awesome."

"Euuuu." Responded Elizabeth but from the faces made by the others, she could have been speaking for all of them. "How can you eat them? They're nothing but... insects."

I picked up one and waved it over my plate. "Think of them as small lobsters OK? You sure you don't want to try one?" I looked at each of them in turn. There were no takers. "Californians." I swore and then I caught Peter's eye. "Sorry, excluding you of course Peter."

"I think I lost my appetite." Added Elizabeth as she tossed down her napkin. The fact was her plate looked almost clean enough to put back on the shelf.

As if in response to Elizabeth, John stood up, "I'll see if they have our cabins ready." Instantly Elizabeth stood up and in the next second the other two joined them.

"I'm not done yet." I called after them, which produced absolutely no reaction. As the screen door closed behind them, I let out a long sigh. What was I concerned about? I'd had enough of the four of them already to last a lifetime and then some. When the waiter brought the check over I realized just how important scoping out the cabins really was. They'd suckered me again. Lunch and endless tanks of gas and now I was springing for dinner. I snapped down a credit card and exhaled in relief when the waiter picked it up without comment. One never knew if they'd take Master Card in the boondocks... and if this wasn't the boonies, nothing was.

I was alone. Oh I could hear someone banging pots and pans in the kitchen shortly after the waiter fled the floor but as I looked around, there wasn't another soul in sight. There is nothing quite so lonely as an empty restaurant in the middle of a swamp. I pulled the treasure map from my coat pocket and unfolded it. I had already memorized every detail in that crudely drawn illustration. I'd also studied modern area maps of the same local. A hundred forty plus years since this image was drawn, most of the landmarks were either gone now or modified. And this was the delta where rivers, streams and land moved about as much as if they were alive. The closer I got, the more certain I was that I would find nothing. Certainly no gold. Why was I here then?

I could feel the self-pity welling up inside me. I try to get in a couple hours of that everyday, self-pity that is. Lately I'd had more frequent opportunity and more adequate causes than usual. Even before Elizabeth had left me, taking Paulie my son with her, things had been going tits up. Teaching in a ghetto school wasn't the fulfilling experience I'd hoped. Wanting to be Mr. Chips while working with gang-bangers was simply... a joke. A very bad and often a very dangerous joke. The salary sucked, no matter what the Republicans might say. The working conditions were deplorable and the city... East L.A. was a universe apart from the Westside and the beaches. We had drive by shootings and smog, they didn't. I'd worked long and hard for this? Why couldn't things be like they were in fairy tales huh? Whatever happened to happily-ever-after?

I was really just getting into a good wallow when a hand descended lightly on my shoulder. I jumped, of course. Who wouldn't have? As I turned my head, a tightly packed evening gown, full of lush woman, swept past me and then descended on to the chair opposite me. The gown looked like a prom dress from the fifties. Pink gauze hung over an under garment of white shinny material. Both the gauze and the shinny material clutched

the bosom, descended a short distance to her waist and then flared out like a great, big flower blossom. The latter 'skirt' was held out by layers upon layers of petty coats. Truly not of this era.

And then I saw that face. Awesome. A beauty in her own time. Unfortunately her time had ended approximately fifty years earlier. No, I am not being entirely fair. She was truly a magnificent creature, held together by God only knows what but were she ah- forty years younger I would have been in love. And, given my recent sexual history, I could have faked some interest in a woman surely old enough to be my grandmother. But alas, once I saw through the layers of makeup, there was no doubt of the ravages of excessive age. Pity too, for there was a sparkle in her eyes that I liked. And she smiled. "You really shouldn't do that you know."

"Excuse me?" I said, "Do what?"

"Tracy Murdock." She said my name but it came out as a rebuke.

"Ah- do I know you?" Of course I must, she'd just called me by name, right?

"No." she said as she held out her hand to me across the table, palm down. "I saw your name on the credit card receipt." She fluttered her lashes like a coquette.

I took those fingers of course, hardly more than touching their tips before she pulled her hand away again. Her old face bloomed into a wide smile, "I'm your fairy god-mother."

OK. That was it. Sitting across from me was a kook. Actually an old kook but what difference did that make? "R-right." I said as I pushed back my chair and started to rise.

"Don't leave." She commanded and held up her hands. Her face darkened. "After I came all this way..."

"From... where ever it is that fairy godmothers come from, right?"

"Yes, of course Tracy. Now you just sit down." She said briskly as she pulled a small handbag from her waistband and then sat it squarely in front of her.

Just then the overhead lights in the restaurant flashed off and then back on again. And to make sure that I understood, it happened again and then again.

"Ah- I think the management is telling us that we have to leave the restaurant ma'am."

I stood up and in the next instant she was beside me, her arm in mine like we were a pair of lovers. Around us swirled her full skirt and a couple dozen yards of petty coats.

"Ah- ma'am?"

"We are not done Tracy. Your room?"

"Absolutely not." I replied. Of course she ignored me.

~oOo~

A bare bulb hung in the middle of the tiny, dingy cabin featuring a decor that had to be late nineteen-forties at best. The linoleum on the floor, a black and white checkerboard pattern was nearly worn off exposing the black under coat. Both the bed and the floor sagged

symmetrically toward the middle of the space. All and all the room matched my general mood. The fact that there was a crazy, old broad holding court at the small table next to the bed was almost inconsequential. I was exhausted but the hot, humid and musty air that filled the room suggested that it would still be a while before I'd be able to sleep.

"Ma'am," I said hoping that she'd take the hint, "I really am *very* tired."

"Hmm." She responded as she retrieved her purse from her sash once more and sat it down firmly on the table. She opened the purse and looked inside. "Hmm." She added as she continued to stare into it. Without looking up at me she added, "Between once-upon-a-time and happily-ever-after, there is a lot that has to be done."

"Ma'am?"

"Being a fairy godmother is a lot more challenging than most mortals realize."

I just nodded my head dumbly. Maybe if I said nothing she'd grow tired of this game and... leave. Just then a wild animal shriek cut through the heavy humid night air. My gut did an instant double flip and then bile filled my mouth. *That* was Elizabeth and there was no doubt in my mind now as to what she and her lover were doing at the moment. A bed was now frantically thumping against our common wall. It was a futile gesture but I closed the cabin door behind me and did the best I could to focus my attention elsewhere. "Ma'am?"

"The truth is," the woman added with a shrug of her shoulders, "all of my clients up to now have been young and female."

"Like Cinderella." I added with a nervous laugh.

"Precisely Tracy. Precisely. True love. Prince Charming, you know. It's all relatively simple. Males are such ah- visual creatures. Give her a good figure, a pleasant face and package the lass in a stunning gown... bingo."

"Yeah." I said, not really listening. With each thrust, each thump of the bed next door, Elizabeth shrieked. And worst of all she'd never responded that way with me, not even on our wedding night. I watched the old woman reach into her tiny purse. My interest suddenly bloomed as her hand and then wrist and then forearm disappeared into the tiny bag. I mean like the purse was maybe two-three inches deep and nearly her whole arm was inside it now as she rummaged around. I couldn't help but lean forward to get a better look. There was just no way that...

"Mr. Murdock!"

"Ma'am?" I jerked back.

She looked angry. "A gentleman does *not* look inside a lady's purse- *ever*."

"Sorry." I mumbled as I took another step back.

She went back to her search. Now she began to pull items out. A long, ivory wand, three foot in length if it was an inch, a fancy mirror and a dozen or more bottles and 'stuff' of a totally unknown character. And still she was not done. "Ah-hah!" She exclaimed as she pulled forth a small flask with pale blue-green fluid inside. A frown wrinkled her face after a few moments as she looked at the latest discovery more carefully before she



shrugged and went back to her search. Eventually she retrieved a second flask of blue-green fluid. She held up the two flasks. "Turquoise?"

"Huh?"

"Which is *more* turquoise Tracy?"

"I don't know." I muttered and shrugged. I never had much of an eye for colors. Blue-green was green-blue...whatever."

She snorted, "It's this one I'm... ah- sure." She held it toward me. "Drink it."

"Huh?"

"Tracy you weren't even on my rounds tonight. What I mean is that I have numerous clients to attend to and ah- well others need me too my dear." She stood up and looked as if she was about to leave. "Here take it."

"Ah-," I stood there holding the flask. "What's it for?"

She rolled her eyes, "Between once-upon-a-time and happily-ever-after, OK? The first step."

"To what?"

Her features softened, "Tracy, life has handed you the gunky end of the stick long enough OK? That's what the fairy godmother business is all about, bringing a bit of justice into an unjust world. Love to the unloved." She spayed open her arms wide, "*Romance*" she said as if that were the central, driving principle of the universe.

"Gosh. What *exactly* does *this* stuff do?" I said waving the flask in her face.

"Oh- *that*?" She laughed, "It'll help you get a good night sleep. Tomorrow begins to-night hmm? And then, happily-ever-after." She said with finality in her voice.

I gulped and nodded realizing that I hadn't actually said anything about what was *really* wrong with my life or to be more specific how much I wanted Elizabeth back. "You read minds?" I asked. After all happily-ever-after has got to start with something I reasoned. "I mean if you could just do something about my ex-wife... Elizabeth." I sputtered to a halt. I don't think she was really listening to me. She seemed too occupied with waving her wand in the air. Her old face crinkled with her concentration.

And when she was finally done, "I'll check on you later in the week and make whatever fine adjustments may be necessary Tracy. Remember, happily-ever-after?" And then... she was gone, not like out-of-the-door gone but gone like in 'poof', she'd simply vanished into the night air.

"Huh?" I gasped as I spun on my heels. My heart was racing. Forget about the old gal's purse, that act alone was pretty un-believable but her exit was beyond comprehension. And then I heard the bed in the next room begin to bang against the wall again. A man shouldn't have to listen to his wife being fucked by another man even if she was an ex-wife. I drank the potent right then and there.

~oOo~

"DIE AND GO TO HELL!" I hollered and the knocking at my door abruptly stopped, thank God. It must be morning I concluded. Another day in paradise. I tried to catch another ten zees, a few winks more but sleep, like my lost youth, had fled. Perhaps it was because my face was buried in the ancient linoleum? "Christ." I swore as I rolled over on my back and stared up at the ceiling wondering why I'd chosen to sleep on the floor and then it came back to me; the crazy old woman and... my confused thoughts were rudely interrupted.

"Sir?"

"Holy shit." I swore as I jerked up into a sitting position and looked in the direction of that voice. "Peter?" I said in confusion. "What-in-the-hell are you doing in my room?"

"Ironing you shirt sir."

And he was doing precisely that, ironing a shirt that is. "Ah Pete, what's with the monkey suit?"

He jerked up, tugged at what appeared to be a gray waistcoat and then carefully adjusted the sleeves of his tux. I mean it was one of those old style tuxes with tails. "Sir?" He responded; his long, narrow nose now pointed toward the ceiling. "Is my attire unsuitable sir? A gentleman's gentleman..." He stumbled to a verbal halt. "Sorry sir. I'll change at once." He spun on his heels as if to leave.

"Ah- no." I said now more bemused than confused. "That will not be necessary Pete." I waved my hand. Peter was perfect, of course, to play the part of a gentleman's gentleman; the essence of the English valet came ah- naturally to him.

Peter Marlborough stopped and turned. I half expected the all too familiar superior smirk to appear on his face, but it didn't. Indeed he looked as somber as a judge. "Should I have your bath drawn now sir?"

I laughed, "A bath? In this dump?"

Poor Peter looked positively shocked. "Sir?"

There was no proper bathroom in this ancient, run down cabin or was there? Stunned I sat down on the edge of the bed. If Peter could be compelled to wear a monkey suit and, even more impressive, act subservient to me... "Ah- that sounds fine Peter, just fine."

"Very good sir." He said.

I watched him cross the room and open a door that surely had not been there last night. An old fashion, high-sided copper tub stood waiting. What had the old woman said, tomorrow was going to be a big day. For what? If she'd done this to Peter... I leaped to my feet and headed outside. "Elizabeth?" I called out.

My companions had all shifted into an appropriate role, apparently. It was a bit startling to see Elizabeth's current squeeze, John Burkman in the role of my personal bodyguard. Well he was big enough and now, like Peter, seemed highly subservient to me personally as he raised a knuckle to his forehead in a salute. His eyes said it all. The bulge under his suit coat suggested the presence of a large handgun and the way he hovered just

behind me was enough to put me off my feed especially since what I really wanted to do was to talk to Elizabeth, his girl friend, privately. "I need to see Elizabeth."

"Sir? Yes sir." He didn't move. Indeed he seemed to inch closer and then nodded to the right.

It was Elizabeth all right. She had enough makeup on to play the part of an English whore but the outfit was pure French or more specifically, that of a French maid. Overly thick artificial lashes fluttered before she cast her gaze downward. Submissive? Like I'd never seen her that way, certainly not with me. "Elizabeth?" My stomach gave a lurch. What ever the old gal had planned for me today, it didn't include Elizabeth, least wise not precisely at the moment. My ex-wife, cleavage and all, minced forward on long, spiky heels driven by even longer legs encased in black meshed nylons- I mean she was a complete package and *nothing*... zip happened between my legs. Everything a man might want to see wiggle on a woman was wiggling and I knew that she would be pure putty in my hands and yet... *nothing*. Fact is I was horny as a bull, that hadn't changed, and yet here was Liz, a fetish wet dream and pliant no doubt and I felt absolutely no urge to jump on her bones.

"Sir." She said with a noticeable quiver in her voice. Her gaze flickered up to meet mine and then locked on and held firm. Her pupils dilated, her nostrils flared. She was hot, ready and apparently *hopeful*? Now was the time to strike. If this was the beginning of happily-ever-after...

"Elizabeth." I said. I realized a mere nod of my head toward the door behind me and she would go inside and... do what ever I might want. Desire should have been blooming inside me, but it wasn't. Seconds passed and then her eyes glazed over as her lusty hopes died. I could actually see that for heavens sake. She wanted me to make a move. "Damn it." I swore out loud in frustration at my own reaction. I too was part of the script. She recoiled from my curse as if I'd physically assaulted her. "Sorry." I blurted out but I was too late to undo the damage. Her sweet eyes were again masked by her eyelids as she lowered her gaze. "What I mean is..." I had no idea of what to say. I turned away from her. "John?"

"Sir?"

"Where's Tommy?"

"Preparing the vehicle sir."

"Right." I muttered. Of course Tommy would be my driver. I turned back to take my bath. As John closed the door behind me I heard him admonish Elizabeth to have the master's Tea ready. Truth? I was still waiting for the happy part of happily-ever-after to start. There was something decidedly unnerving about the events of this morning. Being forced to play a role, even if it was the role of master, wasn't much fun. And all I really wanted was Elizabeth, or did I? Perhaps my fairy godmother had something better up her sleeve. I took a quick peek out the window catching a brief glance of Elizabeth's sweet tush under that short, nearly horizontal skirt, the mincing walk and the swaying hips and thought otherwise. "Whatever." I muttered, at least today had started out better than the previous three hundred days. I had nothing to lose. Right?

There was something oddly out of place this morning as I continued to stare out of the cabin window to the sounds of running bath water. The sun was low in the West. It wasn't morning but rather late afternoon and John had said something about Tea? What happened to the day, hmm? "Peter?"

"Sir?" He said as he finished brushing off my tuxedo jacket. Brightly polished shoes sat on the floor beside the bed.

"You happen to know our schedule for the ah- evening?"

"Of course sir. The Royal Ball at the castle tonight."

I stiffened. "Of course." I muttered under my breath. A Royal Ball how... appropriate. I looked back outside, it wasn't Louisiana anymore. The thatched roofs on the surrounding building had a distinctly medieval European flavor; ditto the narrow cobble stone street that now lay just outside the compound. It was then and there that I realized that I was dreaming. "Royal Balls and fairy godmothers indeed." I muttered.

"Sir?" Peter responded.

"Ah nothing. Is my bath ready Peter?"

~oOo~

"How do I look Peter?"

"Smashing sir, simply smashing."

I stared at the image reflected back from the mirror. I had to agree with Peter. The thick mane of hair that rode astride my skull made me appear ten years younger. That it was red and not my natural brown had hit me at first as a bit ah- much but then the color did seem to enhance my natural skin tones remarkably well. I made a note to myself that when I awoke, which I surely would eventually, I would get that hair transplant I'd thought about and hey, a dye job as well. I felt like purring. But then I always looked good in a tux, right?

I turned so as to catch my reflection in profile. The stomach and love handles were either gone or compressed by the cumber bun and with the jacket's padded shoulders I had acquired at least the semblance of the manly torso. "What do you think Elizabeth?" I said as I turned away from the mirror.

I was rewarded with a blush and a quick nod of her pretty head. That alone was worth the trip, so to speak. I was more than half tempted to simply send the men out of my room and take that sweet thing in my arms. I didn't need no stinking Royal Ball. I opened my mouth to do precisely that but only air issued forth.

"Sir?" Responded Peter anxiously.

I shook my head. I was no more capable of retreating from my current role than were the others. Happily-ever-after didn't require a Royal Ball or a princess but alas in this dream it did. Some of my self-satisfaction leaked out like air from a balloon and now I was properly deflated, "I guess its time to go. Thomas, my carriage if you please."

## Chapter 2

He was a big man, broad shouldered and a bit of a hick I concluded as I gave my incidental companion a quick once over before looking up and down the line that had formed going into the central court of the castle. Far up ahead a herald was calling out the names of the guests as they entered the keep and just beyond the entrance there was a silver arch. I nudged my companion in the side with my elbow, "You see that?" I said rather breathlessly.

"Huh?" The big man responded and then turned his eyes toward where I was pointing. "I didn't see a thang pardner." He said in a heavy Texan draw and then added, "Name's Bunkerfeld, Buford Bunkerfeld." He shoved a ham-sized hand in my direction.

I ignored the offered hand and just nodded toward that silver arch, "There's another couple going through right... now." We both let out a short gasp. There was nothing extraordinary about the couple as they had approached the arch but then, after a brilliant flash, what emerged on the other side was nothing short of awesome. The plain Jane had become a fairy Princess and likewise the ordinary Joe was, ah- vastly improved in the looks department as well. The line abruptly stopped before surging forward again. That's when I took his offered handshake belatedly. "Sorry. Glad to meet ya. Tracy Murdock, I teach history back in LA, that's Los Angeles California." I added though the latter seemed entirely irrelevant under the current circumstances, it being a dream and all. As I let go of his hand, "What's with the cowboy boots anyway Tex?" The big man shrugged. The truth was, it was those boots that marked the big guy as a real hick. I mean, give me a break, a tux and brown cowboy boots. "You know where the term 'cowboy' comes from, Cowboy?" I flashed him a grin. The hick shook his head, "South Carolina and about a hundred years before the Revolutionary War." My intellectual demonstration fell on deaf ears apparently for the good old boy was more interested in that silver arc ahead so I added, factually correct of course, "The really old black male slaves who weren't able to do heavy labor any longer, the 'boys' took care of the 'cows' get it."

The next thing I knew, my feet were off the ground. The lug had wrapped a meaty fist around my throat and pulled me up, eyeball to eyeball. His breath, slightly sour from stale beer, blew into my face but the smell was the last thing on my mind as I saw death in his eyes, mine.

"You stinking piece of shit." He hissed. His hand tightened around my throat and the world started to go black. "Oh what the fuck." He snarled and then eased me back down to the ground and pulled his hand away. "You-all just another fuck'n loser." He said in a loud voice and then turned to leave the line and then thought better of it. He crossed his arms and stared straight ahead, pointedly ignoring my existence.

"I'm sorry," I croaked as I straighten out my tux and then moved as far away from the big man as I could. "Jesus I was just..."

"Put a cork in it asshole." Said a voice from behind me.

"Huh?" I said turning around only to face a ninety-pound weakling. Small, narrow features on a pasty face were looking up at me. "Come again?" I said taking comfort in the fact that this pipsqueak was not my physical match.

"You just try to pull shit on me like that buddy and I'll clean the floor with you."

"Uh-huh." I nodded as I stifled a laugh. The little mouse was just demonstrating his manhood in front of the quarter ton babe that was beside him. And then it struck me, right between the eyes. Up and down the line, there was nothing but boy-girl couples. I spun around looking toward the front. More of the same and that silver arc was getting closer and closer. The dream had abruptly become a nightmare. "HOLY-SHIT!" I yelled out and then dove to the side. Fairy godmother or not, I was out of here.

~oOo~

She could have been an exact twin of my fairy godmother except she was younger, middle aged and not ancient. But for all of that she looked exhausted and, frankly, at her wits end. She sighed. "What do we have this time?" She pulled at her nineteen-fifties prom dress and pushed back an arrant strand of hair that had fallen in her eyes before looking at the cowboy and me. She didn't have to look very long to discover the nature of the problem. "An extra Prince Charming I see." She started to leaf through the guest list. "Which one of you is Miss Tracy Murdock?"

"Ah- that would be me ma'am."

"Right. A last minute add on. Hmm. And I take it you're not female, correct?"

"Yes ma'am, I mean no ma'am I'm decidedly not of that gender. Somebody must have screwed up processing the request."

"And you must be Mr. Buford Bunkerfeld then." The cowboy just nodded his head. "It says here you were in the process of committing suicide before we located you."

"Yes'um. I was sucking on the wrong end of my o' shot gun when that nice lady appeared. I guess I should' a pulled the trigger when I had the chance."

"None of that talk here young man. Not on my watch." She let out a long, exasperated sigh before turning her eyes on me. "I'm a bit surprised that you are here Mr. Murdock considering you're not even a virgin."

"Huh?" I said as I turned and looked at the cowboy beside me in an entirely new light. "You're a virgin Tex?" I said incredulously and perhaps with a trace of scorn in my voice.

"Enough of *that* Mr. Murdock." She said sharply and then stung me with her eyes. "While it's true that most of our clients are virgins living in a total romantic vacuum, I suspect that your current romantic situation is ah- utterly devoid of promise. Well Mr. Murdock are you going to deny that?"

I gulped. She had me there. If the last few days were any indication, my relationship with Elizabeth didn't have a chance in Hell. Who was I kidding, *it didn't have a chance in Hell period*. I caught Tex looking at me with a smirk. "Ma'am, I guess you could be right."

"You guess I could be right?" She laughed. "We're never wrong not when it comes to romantic love, boys." She waved her hand in the general direction of the silver arc. "Now why don't you two just get yourselves through the portal and... have a good evening together. And... trust me, we know what we're doing OK?"