

# the Knight of Her Life

*Karen B. Valentine*

"Everything looks just perfect, Louie," Sarah declared happily from the doorway of the back room of the Monkey Bar.

The Frenchman stepped away from the elegantly set table and clicked his heels with a bow. "I am glad that it meets with mademoiselle's approval."

Nodding, she walked in and picked up one of the shiny china plates to glance at her reflection in it. "I only hope I look half as good," she stated, giving herself a critical appraisal.

Louie gazed with admiration at her tall, willowy figure clothed in a frilly new, green patterned dress. "You need have no fear on that account, ma cherie," he assured her. "You are such a vision of loveliness tonight that you have me wishing I were a few years younger myself."

"Thanks," she smiled, hugging him affectionately. Then, checking her watch, she frowned and lifted it to her ear to see if it was still ticking. "What time do you have, Louie?"

His eyes danced with amusement. "About five minutes later than the previous time you asked me."

She sighed as he gently patted her shoulder.

"Do not worry, Sarah. I am certain that your knight in shining armor will be here momentarily."

Letting out a small laugh, she asked, "Am I being that obvious?"

"Only to those of us who are not blind," he grinned. "You are like a schoolgirl about to go out on her first date."

Embarrassed, she lowered her eyes. "Oh, Louie. I never knew how long three weeks could be. I missed Jake a whole lot more than I thought I would.... I guess I'm starting to realize just how much he means to me."

"'Absence makes the heart grow fonder', eh?"

She smiled back up at him. "Something like that."

"Are you going to tell him how you feel tonight?"

Instantly flustered, she stammered, "Uh...n... no...of course not. I -- I couldn't do that. That would be too...uh..."

"Sensible?" he offered, raising an eyebrow.

She gave him a look. "It's just not done, Louie."

Nodding, he began to rearrange the flowers on the table. "Not by the two of you, at least."

Her voice softened. "Anyway, I was thinking more along the lines of showing him instead."

A little gleam came into his eye. "Ah, I see."

Catching his insinuation, she said pointedly, "No, you *don't* see. What I mean is that the dinner and the candlelight and my new dress ought to give him the hint, don't you think?"

Looking thoughtful, he placed his index finger against his lips. "Hmmm. The last time Jake took a hint was...1927, I believe."

"Louie!"

"Pardon," he gave in, raising his hands resignedly. "I agree. It is none of my business. If you both wish to play your little game forever, you may be my guests. Right now, I am concerned only for my beef bourguignonne. So, if you will excuse me, I must go see to it." With a short bow, he left for the kitchen.

Watching him go, she sighed heavily. "The only trouble with our 'little game'," she mumbled to herself, "is that nobody ever wins."

Just then, she was startled by the sound of breaking glass and splintering wood coming from the direction of the bar. Quickly turning toward the doorway, she entered the room to find that the noise was the result of a wild fist-fight, and she was just in time to watch in awe as one of the combatants flew head-first through the swinging doors.

"What in the world is going on?" she asked Gushie, who was calmly tabulating the damages on a sheet of paper.

"Jake's home," he answered simply, as if that were all the explanation needed.

She exhaled deeply and made a face. "I should've known. Was that him who took a nose-dive out the door?"

"Yeah," he nodded, chuckling softly at the memory of it.

"What's it all about this time?"

"Who knows? It usually doesn't take much of a reason."

Rolling her eyes, she shook her head. "Well, when he's finished thrashing around in the dirt, would you please tell him I'm waiting for him in the back room?"

"Sure," he replied as she turned and stalked back to the table.

"At least he's finally here," she muttered under her breath, trying to soothe her irritation. "And, after he gets this out of his system, we can still have a nice evening. I just wish that, for once, he'd learn to go in and out of a door like a normal person, and..."

"Hiya, Sarah," murmured a soft voice from behind her.

She quickly turned to see Jake standing in the doorway, grinning sheepishly at her. Even with his disheveled appearance, the three-day growth of

stubble on his chin, and the faint smell of gasoline clinging to him, her heart still leaped as she gazed at him speechlessly.

"Gushie said you wanted to see me?"

Recovering a bit, she indicated the table with her hand. "Oh...yes. I -- I thought we might have a nice quiet dinner together..." She paused, giving him a little smile. "But, I guess you and the word 'quiet' just don't mix."

Glancing down at his tattered clothes, he flashed her a shy grin. "You should see the other guy."

"I'd rather not," she declared wryly, taking a seat.

"Hey, that's quite a spread," he said approvingly, staring at the table. "What's the occasion?"

Trying to act nonchalant, she replied, "Oh, nothing special. I just thought you might be hungry after such a long flight. And, since you've bought me a few meals in the past, I decided to return the favor."

"Well, thanks," he nodded gratefully as he sat down. "I am pretty starved."

She tried not to show her dismay while he reached into the pocket of his flight jacket for a cheroot and lit it by the candle in the middle of the table. "What're we having?" he asked, taking a puff.

"Beef bourguignonne." She held her breath while the smoke wafted past her. "And, a few other surprises that Louie's whipping up."

"Oh," he mumbled with obvious disappointment.

"What's wrong?"

"Uh...nothing. Beef whatchamacallit is just fine."

"But, not to you," she stated evenly, reading his face.

"No...really," he protested unconvincingly. "It's great." But her stare finally wore him down. "Well, it's just that I was sorta hoping to have a..." He shook his head. "No, never mind."

"A what?" she asked in exasperation.

"A steak?" There was a hopeful twinge in his voice.

She forced a smile. "Sure. It's okay. I'll tell Louie."

As if on cue, the Frenchman entered the doorway, carrying a bottle of champagne. "Ah, cherie," he said, seeing only Sarah at first. "I have come to inform you that Jake is home. He has left his calling card in my bar."

Smiling patiently, she gestured across the

table.

Spotting his friend, Louie gave him an eloquently raised eyebrow.

"Hiya, Louie," Jake offered timidly.

"Welcome back, mon ami. It was getting much too peaceful and quiet around here without you."

Jake smiled sheepishly as Sarah made her request. "Jake would like a steak instead of the beef, Louie, if that's all right."

Eyeing him disapprovingly, the bar owner held the bottle out to him. "I hope the *wine* is to your satisfaction?"

Taking it, Jake fumbled hesitantly. "Uh... sure. It's okay, only..." He paused when he saw the intimidating expressions on their faces. "It's okay," he repeated, raising his hand and smiling disarmingly at them.

"Only *what*?" they demanded in unison.

He glanced downward. "Only...I was kinda dying for a beer."

Louie looked at Sarah, and she nodded resignedly. "Please bring Jake a beer, Louie, but I'll have a little champagne, thank you."

After pouring her a glass, he bowed stiffly and headed back to the bar.

Jake shuffled uncomfortably. "I don't want to be any bother."

Sarah decided to let it all pass. *Nothing* was going to spoil this evening. "Oh, no. Don't be silly. Anything you want is fine. I guess I should've asked you first."

They exchanged smiles, but a deafening silence began to come over the room.

Clearing his throat, Jake looked around, trying desperately to think of something to say to break the ice, but Sarah finally did it for him.

"Did you have a nice trip?"

"Yeah, but not a real productive one. After dropping that charter off in the Solomons, I started checking around for some of the parts we needed, but the few I could find set me back plenty. Corky and I have been working on putting them in ever since I first got back, but I decided to let him finish it up while I came in to get something to eat. That's when that 'ape' in the bar tried to tear my head off. Guess I must've said something he didn't like."

Instantly identifying with the "ape", Sarah's eyes narrowed as she stared at Jake. "Just how long have you been back?" she inquired with an edge to her voice.

"Only about an hour or so. Why?"

She tried to put on a placid facade, but she

couldn't hide her growing resentment at the knowledge that he hadn't exactly broken any speed records to come in to see her again after all that time. "No reason," she replied, her eyes fairly dripping with icicles as Louie walked in again.

"Your beer, monsieur," he stated formally, placing it next to Jake's plate. "The cook has pronounced that the steak will be ready in about a half hour. Does that suit?"

Jake nodded self-consciously, and Louie turned to Sarah. "Would you like me to hold your dinner until Jake's is ready?"

"Sure. Waiting is what I do best."

Noticing the look on her face after Louie's departure, Jake decided he'd better think of something to say to brighten her up, even though he didn't have the faintest clue what was bothering her. "That's a swell dress you've got on. Is it new?"

She smiled, the compliment thawing her out a bit. "Yes, it is. I bought it when I took a boat trip to Tagataya a few days ago to cheer myself up."

"Why'd you need cheering up?"

Realizing she'd just trapped herself, she hesitated for a moment. "Uh...I...well...I - I guess I missed you a little," she admitted finally, looking shyly into his eyes.

"Yeah?" he asked with a soft smile.

She nodded, hoping that he'd say the same thing to her.

But, before he could reply, one of the bar regulars popped his head into the room. "Hey, Jake. We're gettin' a poker game up out here. Want us to deal you in?"

Sarah stared open-mouthed at the intrusion, but Jake flashed him a grin. "Not now, Joe. I'm about to eat dinner. But, maybe right afterwards, okay?"

Nodding, the man ducked back out again.

Recovering her composure somewhat, Sarah tried to sound pleasant, but there was a hint of testiness in her tone. "Jake, I was sort of hoping that you and I could take a nice long walk around the lagoon after dinner."

"What for?" he asked, innocently curious.

She inhaled deeply before answering through clenched teeth, "To see the view."

Letting out a short laugh, he waved the air. "Aw, c'mon, Sarah, if I've seen the lagoon once, I've seen it a million times. Besides, I'm pretty beat. I think I'm probably just gonna turn in early tonight."

No longer able to restrain herself, Sarah rose from her seat and walked over to him, picking up



her champagne glass on the way. "Do me a favor, Jake," she snapped, pouring it over his head. "Next time you see the lagoon -- why don't you jump in it!" Then, turning sharply on her heel, she strode furiously out of the room.

He stared after her in disbelief, gesturing helplessly with his arms. "What did I say?" he asked the air.

Shoving people aside, Sarah irritably bullied her way across the noisy barroom.

Just entering through one of the swinging doors, Corky smiled at her approach. "Hiya, Sarah! Guess what? Jake's home!"

Without a word, she banged past him, making the door fly back with such force that it almost came off its hinges.

Jumping out of the way to avoid being clobbered by it, Corky's eyes widened in awe as he watched her storm off. "Guess she already knows," he mumbled softly.

"Three weeks!" she exclaimed to herself while climbing the outside stairs. "I waited three weeks for that! Well, no more! I've had it! I'm through! He can go off to Timbuktu for the rest of his life for all I care!"

Throwing the door open with a thud, she marched into her room. "From now on, I'm only going to worry about doing my job here, and that's *all!*"

As if to reinforce that declaration, she reached under the bed to pull out her radio, set it up, and angrily tapped out her report.

Down in the bar, Louie entered the back room to find Jake standing next to his chair, soaking wet, and staring blankly at the doorway. "What on earth happened to you, mon ami? And where is Sarah?"

Jake shook his head, his mouth hanging open in bewilderment. "Beats me, Louie. One minute we were having a pleasant conversation, and then, the next thing I know, she's dumping champagne on me and barreling out of here like a runaway freight train!"

"What did you say to her?"

"*Nothing*, I swear!"

"Then, perhaps *that* is the reason."

Jake's confused face turned toward him. "Huh?"

"Mon dieu," Louie sighed. "Sometimes it amazes me that you have come this far in life, and yet, you know nothing about women. Did you think to tell Sarah that you missed her during all this time away?"

He hesitated. "Well...no."

"Did you say how truly lovely she looked this evening?"

"Well, not exactly, but..."

"Did you at least mention taking a little stroll with her in the moonlight after dinner?"

"Well, she said something about that, but I..." It all slowly began to dawn on him, and he looked at his friend with chagrin. "You mean, this whole thing was supposed to be..."

"Her way of showing you how glad she was to have you back," Louie finished with a meaningful nod. "She planned on having a romantic evening with her returning knight in shining armor, but, it seems that all she got was..."

"Me," Jake sighed, glancing at the floor guiltily. "Boy, sometimes I can act like a real dope."

Two sharp barks emanated from the doorway, causing Jake and Louie to turn.

"You don't even know what we were talking about," Jake argued defensively to Jack.

The little dog made a huffing sound and sat down defiantly.

Glancing at Louie's amused expression, Jake said, "Okay, okay. Even if he's right, what am I going to do about it?"

"I suggest you go right up to her room and try to straighten things out."

"What am I supposed to say? I'm sorry I made you pour champagne on me?"

"I am sure you can do better than that. She has been angry at you before, but you have always managed to talk her out of it."

He sighed heavily. "Well, I'll give it a shot, Louie, but I've got a feeling this is gonna be a long one."

Patting him on the back, the Frenchman escorted him into the bar and watched him walk off. Turning to Jack, he asked, "Perhaps I could interest *you* in some beef bourguignonne?"

Licking his chops, the little terrier sent out two resounding barks and followed Louie into the kitchen.

From his barstool, Corky looked up at his friend in surprise. "Gee, Jake, how'd ya get wet?"

"It's a long story," Jake answered wearily, reaching to take a deep swallow of the beer his friend offered, glancing toward the stairway with trepidation. "Save me a tall, cold one, will you, Corky? Something tells me I'm gonna be right back."

"Sure, Jake," he replied calmly as Jake started up the steps. By now, the little mechanic was fairly used to the strange antics of his two

friends.

Inhaling deeply, Jake stood in front of Sarah's door and gave it a light knock.

"Who is it?" she called out sharply.

He cleared his throat. "It's me."

"Go away, Jake!"

"Could you just come to the door for a minute and talk to me?"

"We have nothing to say to one another!"

"If you'd just let me explain..."

Pulling the door open, she glared at him, her emerald eyes flashing. "I'm no longer interested in your explanations or in your company. So, go back to fixing your precious plane, or your barroom brawls, or your...your steak supper! I don't care! Just leave me alone!"

"But..." is all he got out before the door slammed in his face. Staring at it silently, he sighed and turned to go back down to the bar.

Don't get me wrong -- I'm not bragging -- but, in my time, I've known my share of women. So, it goes without saying that I've also had my share of misunderstandings. My usual method of dealing with them was to wait a few days until the storm blew over and then try again. But, with Sarah, I could never be really sure if the storm was going to blow over or not. I don't know -- maybe, in a way, that was part of her charm. But, one thing I *did* know, if I didn't do something pretty fast, I was going to have 'Typhoon Sarah' on my hands for quite a while, this time.

Walking dejectedly up to the bar counter, Jake sat down next to Corky and signaled to Ahmed for a beer.

"Any luck?" Corky asked.

"Yeah...*bad*," he replied humorlessly, picking up his bottle to take a sip.

"Don't worry, Jake. She'll come around. She always does."

He nodded weakly as Louie strolled over to them.

"Ah, Sir Jake, it appears as though you have lost the Crusade this time, non?"

Giving him the eye, Jake uttered dryly, "I'm beginning to wish I did have a suit of armor so I could hide in it."

Louie placed a sympathetic hand on his shoulder. "The path of love is never smooth, mon ami. Sometimes you have to slay a few dragons along the way."

Suddenly, Jake's face lit up and he snapped his fingers. "That's it! Louie, you're a genius!" Grinning widely, he patted his friend's arm and jumped off his seat. Glancing around, he spotted the man he wanted to see and bounded off toward him.

Corky and Louie exchanged looks as they watched him go.

"What do you make of that, mon ami?"

"I dunno, Louie," Corky shrugged, reaching for his beer. "I guess Jake's cookin' up another one of his wild schemes."

The Frenchman rolled his eyes. "May heaven help us all."

Early the next afternoon Sarah was alone in the bar, sitting at the piano, and glancing over a few new songs. Looking up when she heard the squeak of the swinging doors, she frowned to see Jake entering the room.

At his approach, she got up to leave, but he gently grabbed her arm. "Hold on a second, Sarah. I've got something exciting to tell you."

Her frosty stare at his restraining hand caused him to quickly let go, but he still tried out a boyish smile.

"There's not a thing in the world that you could say that could possibly excite me," she stated flatly, turning to stalk away.

He feigned a resigned sigh. "That's too bad. Oh, well, I guess I could always ask Corky if he wants to go with me to see the one-night-only appearance of Marty Lynn and his orchestra at the Starlight Room on Tagataya tomorrow night."

Halfway across the floor, she stopped in her tracks and turned around again, her eyes opening widely. "Did you say Marty Lynn...at the *Starlight Room*?"

"Yeah," he replied casually, waving the tickets in the air. "But, since you're not interested..." Starting toward the door, he hid his smug smile from her view.

"Uh, Jake. Wait a minute. Maybe we do have a few things to discuss."

As she walked over to him, he turned around to face her, and, after looking at each other's expressions, they both burst out laughing.

"How can a girl ever stay mad at somebody like you?" she asked with a smile.

"Oh, I don't know. You seem to be able to do a good job of it from time to time."

Giving him a sideways glance, she said coyly, "Well, that's only when you act like an insensitive clod, not when you have tickets to the Starlight Room."

Grinning, he exclaimed enthusiastically, "Wait'll you see what else I've got set up for tomorrow! I not only got the orchestra tickets, but I also made reservations for rooms at the hotel, dinner at a fancy French restaurant, and..."

"You were pretty sure of yourself, weren't you?" she interrupted, her eyebrow rising expressively. "I haven't agreed to go yet, you know."

Staring at her in dismay, he shuffled nervously. "Well, I -- I just thought..."

"That you could just waltz in here with all of your big plans, and I'd fall helplessly at your feet."

"Uh..." was all he could think of to say.

Unable to keep a straight face, her eyes twinkled in amusement. "Well, you were right," she declared with a soft chuckle.

Smiling sheepishly, he glanced down at the floor, realizing that he probably deserved that. "Listen, Sarah, I'm really sorry about yesterday. I guess I just wasn't thinking."

She gave him a soft smile and touched his arm. "No, it was my fault. I over-reacted. I should've known you'd be tired."

Putting his hands on her shoulders, he looked into her eyes. "What d'ya say we forget all about it?"

"That's fine with me."

His expression changed to a grin. "Good, 'cause I don't think Corky's much of a dancer."

Laughing, they gave each other an affectionate, reconciliatory hug.

The following day, Sarah heard a knock as soon as she finished packing.

"Just a minute," she called out, snapping the latches on her suitcase shut. Bringing it with her, she opened the door and smiled to see Jake standing there.

Removing his hat with a sweeping flourish, he said cheerily, "Ah, m'lady, your carriage awaits."

She stared at him in bewilderment. "What?"

"Sir Jake, your humble servant, at your service," he replied with a bow.

She watched him speechlessly as he picked up her suitcase and offered his arm.

Finally finding her voice while they walked down the stairs, she gave him a skeptical look. "Are you sure you're sober enough to fly?"

He laughed. "You wanted a knight in shining armor, didn't you? Well, today, you've got him."

"Are you serious?"

Stepping onto the pier, he cast her a shy glance and a nod. "Uh-huh. Besides, I've always kinda fancied myself as a knight, anyway. At least, that was what I was trying to be on the day we met, when I thought I was saving you from your manager." Grinning ruefully, he rubbed the back of his neck. "The only trouble was, I didn't realize then *who* needed saving from *whom*."

"Well, you should've been wearing your helmet," she smiled back.

Chuckling, they relived the memory of their infamous first encounter in their minds. But, when they reached the workshed, their thoughts were quickly dissipated by several loud bleating sounds, as if some poor dying animal was making its last pleas for mercy.

Jake winced a bit but had to stifle a grin while Sarah directed her startled eyes toward the end of the wharf.

There, standing next to the *Goose* with a trumpet in his hand, was Corky, his face as bright red as the material emblazoned like a coat-of-arms across his chest--material that looked suspiciously like one of Louie's old tablecloths. Beside him, dressed in a dog-sized version of the same attire, Jack let out a loud howl at the offense to his ears. Then, growling, he gave the mechanic a scathing one-eyed glare.

"Don't look at me," Corky protested earnestly. "This was Jake's idea."

Sarah turned to Jake, a look of total bewilderment on her face.

"Our heralds, of course," he explained matter-of-factly, as if he couldn't believe she couldn't figure it out. "Hit it again, Corky!" he called out to his friend.

Rolling his eyes, the mechanic let loose with three more loud blasts on the instrument as Jake offered his hand to help Sarah step down to the lower deck.

Stopping at the bottom of the stairs, she spotted a long runner of red carpet leading from where she was standing all the way up to the side hatch of the plane. She turned to Jake with a coy smile. "You know, I could very easily get used to this sort of treatment."

"Please don't do that, Sarah," Corky begged with wide, pleading eyes as Jack let out a sharp bark.

Laughing at their expressions, she flashed Jake a little backward glance. "Knowing Sir Jake, I don't think you two need to lose any sleep over the idea."

"Hey, that's true!" Corky blurted out cheerfully, while Jack sounded out his agreement.

Jake cast her a wry look. "Is this the appreciation I get for trying to give you what you

wanted?"

"I'm sorry, m'lord. Are you going to have me drawn and quartered?"

He smiled. "Not now. The entertainment part comes later."

Chuckling, Sarah curtsied and Jake bowed. Then, he gave her a helping hand into the plane.

Listening to the sound of rippling laughter coming out of the hold as Sarah and Jake made their way up to the cockpit, Corky looked down at his outfit and exchanged a sideways glance with Jack.

The little dog let out a strange sound that was neither a 'yes' nor a 'no' -- it was more like a 'what?'

"Ya got me," Corky replied, shaking his head. "I gave up tryin' to figure those two out *months* ago."

Over the noise of the *Goose's* engines roaring to life, two emphatic barks resounded through the air.

Humming a cheery little tune, Jake strolled through the hallway of the refined hotel on his way to Sarah's room. Dressed in his spiffy white suit and carrying a bouquet of flowers in his hand, he exuded the confident air of a man who knew he was about to make a great impression.

Knocking lightly, he tightened his tie and stood straight, waiting expectantly for her arrival.

As the door opened, he immediately bowed. "Well, Lady Sarah, are you ready for the night of your..." But he stopped short when his eyes landed on her dress and widened at the sight of a lot more cleavage than they'd ever seen before -- at least on *her*. Quickly straightening up, he directed them to her face and, awestruck, finished his sentence with a feeble, "...life?"

She'd never looked more beautiful, standing there in a shimmering gown of turquoise satin, its plunging neckline held up by two thin shoulder straps. Her shiny auburn hair was set in cascading shoulder-length curls -- one side pulled off her face a bit with a few tiny wisps hanging in front of her ear. The bright blue-green gemstones on her necklace and dangling earrings were matched only by the sparkle of her eyes, and they and the dress combined to give her a dazzling radiance -- rendering him speechless as he gazed at her.

Pleased at his spellbound expression, she smiled and pointed to the flowers. "Oh, Jake. How sweet. Are those for me?"

Trying hard not to stare, but not succeeding too well, he held them out to her. "Uh...yeah, I -- I hope you like them."

Taking them, she breathed in their delicate fragrance. "Mmmm. They're lovely. Thank you."

Still dazed, but making an attempt to recover, he gave her a small nod of acknowledgement. However, the only words he could force out of his mouth were, "*Another* new dress?"

She smiled shyly. "I guess I needed a lot of cheering up."

His eyes swept her up and down appreciatively. "Well, it's doing a pretty good job on *me*, too."

His gaze made her slightly uncomfortable. "I sort of bought it on impulse. Do you think it's a little too much?"

Shaking his head, he managed a small grin. "No...*too much* isn't exactly the way I'd put it."

She reddened a little. "I -- I could go back and change. I brought along another dress in case I chickened out of wearing this one."

"Oh, no, don't do that," he protested quickly. Then, flashing her a shy smile, he added, "I think I kinda like this one."

She returned his smile, realizing that he was probably as nervous as she was. Backing slowly into the room, she said, "Well, then, let me go put the flowers in some water, and I'll be right with you, okay?" Hesitating a moment, she looked into his eyes. "You know...you look pretty terrific yourself tonight."

Shrugging bashfully, he watched her turn from the door. But, as she walked away, he noticed that the back of her dress dipped all the way to her waist, exposing what seemed to him to be miles of smooth, white skin. Tugging at his tie, he swallowed hard, casting a pleading glance heavenward. "Help?" he mouthed out wordlessly.

A short time later, as they came through the doorway of an exclusive-looking restaurant, they were greeted by a tuxedo-clad maitre d' who bowed graciously to them. "Bon soir, mademoiselle, monsieur. What may I do for you?"

"We have reservations for dinner -- eight o'clock -- name of Cutter."

The man checked his register. "Ah, oui, monsieur. This way, s'il vous plait."

Following him through the rows of candlelit and flower-adorned tables, Sarah spotted a suit of armor standing against the far wall. "Friend of yours?" she asked, casting Jake a backward glance.

Seeing it too, he smiled. "Yeah. As a matter of fact, he recommended this place highly."

"Well, he would. After all, they named it after him."

"Huh?"

"Le Chevalier Vaillant. It means The Brave Knight. I thought that was why you picked it."



"Well, actually, Louie picked it for me. I guess that was his little joke. How did you know what it meant?"

"French was my best subject in school. What was yours?"

"Baseball."

"That and getting into trouble, I'll bet."

His eyes twinkled at her. "Actually, I've only majored in *that* since meeting you."

Before she could make a proper retort, they reached their destination.

The maitre d' clicked his heels and made a sweeping gesture. "A round table as per your request, monsieur."

"Thanks." Jake handed him five francs.

"A round table?" Sarah asked after the man departed.

"Of course." Jake held her chair out for her. "What else would a knight sit at?"

Chuckling softly, she sat down. "You're really going all out, aren't you?"

"My mom always told me anything worth doing is worth doing right."

She smiled warmly at him as he sat across from her. "I think I would've really liked your mother."

Sobering a little, he glanced at the table. "She would've really liked you, too."

Feeling the touch of Sarah's hand on his, he looked back to meet her gaze, watching the reflection of the small flame from the candle play in her soft, caring eyes. Yes, his mother would've been very glad he'd found Sarah. *Almost as glad as I am*, he thought to himself.

The waiter approached with the wine list. "Aperitif, monsieur?"

"What?" Jake asked, coming back to reality as he glanced up at him. "Oh...yes. We'll have some Bernardini, thanks."

"Very well, monsieur."

The man bowed and walked away, and Sarah smiled affectionately at Jake. "You remembered about my father and me at Hillary Gardens, didn't you?"

Grinning, he replied, "Yeah, especially the part about how you started giggling after only a few sips."

She eyed him coyly. "Why, Jake Cutter, you're not trying to get me drunk, are you?"

"Who, me?"

He was met by a knowing sideways glance.

"Now, Sarah. How could you think such a thing? Would a knight do something like that?"

"Sure," she replied, her eyes twinkling. "How do you think they got little knights?"

Their short laughter was interrupted by the waiter, who stopped to give them their drinks and menus.

When he left, Jake opened the menu, his eyes bulging a bit as he stared at it.

Studying hers, Sarah looked puzzled. "I don't see any prices on here."

Jake coughed involuntarily. "I do."

Seeing his expression, she declared, "You know, I'm really not very hungry. Maybe I'll just have some soup."

He realized what she was trying to do. "Don't worry, Sarah. Tonight, money is no object. In fact..." He reached to take her menu. "Allow me."

The waiter responded to Jake's up-raised hand. "May I take your order, monsieur?"

"Yes. Let's see... We'll start off with the fumet de poisson. Then, we'll have some escalopes de veau Viennoise, pommes persillees, riz au beurre, a little salade d'endives, and for dessert -- meringue glacees. Oh, and to drink, some Burgundy -- Chateau Margaux, 1925, oughta do it."

The waiter looked quite impressed. "Oui, monsieur."

After he was gone, Sarah stared at Jake in wide-eyed disbelief.

"Well, you don't have to look so amazed," he stated with mock indignation. "I know a little something, too, you know."

Trying to recover, she gestured apologetically. "I -- I'm sorry. I -- I just..."

"And, besides," he interrupted, grinning sheepishly, "I asked Louie what to order before we left."

Pursing her lips, she tried to narrow her eyes, but lost it as they both broke into a laugh.

The expensive wine having done its work, Sarah and Jake emerged from the restaurant two hours later feeling quite warm and mellow as they stepped out onto the moonlit sidewalk.

"Do you want me to try to find another hansom cab?" Jake asked with a smile. "Or should I see if there's a fiery, white steed around here somewhere?"

Smiling back, Sarah sighed contentedly and glanced up at the sky. "No, even though it was



fun, I think I'd rather walk this time. It's such a beautiful night, and it's only a few blocks back to the hotel. And, anyway, I need to walk off that delicious meal before I can do any dancing."

"It was good, wasn't it?" he agreed. "I'll tell you the truth. I didn't have the faintest idea what I was ordering. I was just glad they didn't bring me a newspaper and an old shoe."

Chuckling, they linked arms and strolled to the edge of the curb, but lying in the way between them and the street was a gigantic puddle of water.

Glancing down at it, Sarah turned to Jake with a mischievous gleam in her eyes, letting them slowly fall to his jacket.

Catching her intent, he felt slightly uneasy. "Let's just go around, okay?"

She pretended to pout. "Well, that's a find thing for a knight to suggest. Would Sir Walter Raleigh say 'go around'?"

"Sir Walter Raleigh doesn't have to pay to clean this suit."

Grinning at him, she allowed him to lead her a little further up the block before they crossed over.

Not long afterwards, the elaborate ironwork doors of the hotel elevator opened, and they stepped out into the lobby of a beautiful ballroom, feeling as if they'd just been transported to another world. Staring all around in awe, they hardly noticed the immaculately dressed club manager as he approached them, politely inquiring about their tickets. They were both too enthralled by the splendor of what they saw.

From its perch high atop the exclusive South Seas Plaza Hotel, the Starlight Room offered a dazzling panoramic view of the city lights below through its large picture-windowed walls. In addition, its breathtaking furnishings, the ornate, well-stocked bar, and its much-deserved reputation for showcasing the finest names in entertainment, all served to make it the most fabulous nightspot in the Marivellas. But, it was the high-domed, paned-glass ceiling from which it got its name that was its major claim to fame and the main reason why it had become the place to go for an unforgettable evening. Through it, the stars and a few tiny strategically-placed lights twinkled down on the small glass tables that encircled the dance floor, reflecting themselves over and over again in the highly polished surfaces, making the room gleam like a sea of diamonds. The dance floor itself was a clever mixture of blue and white, giving Jake and Sarah the illusion in the dim floor lighting that the vast crowd of couples was actually swaying among the clouds as the sweet strains of the world famous Marty Lynn and his orchestra drifted across the room to them.

Jake was almost in a trance until the club manager's loud cough and extended palm broke him out of it. "What?" he inquired, still slightly

dazed.

"Your tickets, monsieur."

"Oh...yeah...tickets..." Jake frantically patted his pants and then his jacket while Sarah looked on in rising alarm.

Finally, with a sigh of relief, he pulled the coveted envelope from his inside pocket, and Sarah started breathing again, flashing him a little wry smile as the manager showed them to a table next to the dance floor.

Like a child in a toy store, Sarah's wide eyes wandered over the entire room as she sat down. "I can't believe I'm really here. It's like a dream come true."

Thoroughly enjoying her starry-eyed expression, Jake grinned while she continued.

"You know, when I first came to the Marivellas, I asked Sam to try to book me into this place. But, I guess I just wasn't good enough."

"What did *they* know?" he asked, looking a little starry-eyed himself as he gazed at her.

Lowering her eyes, she traced the edge of her napkin with her finger. "It's okay. I know I'm not much of a singer."

"That depends on who's doing the listening." He smiled warmly as she glanced back up at him.

Her face brightened, and she returned his smile while the waiter approached them.

"Something to drink, monsieur?" he inquired.

Turning to Sarah, Jake asked, "More wine?"

"Oh, yes, that would be heavenly."

"Burgundy, please. Chateau Margaux, if you've got it."

With a nod, the waiter departed.

"I've been meaning to ask you. How are you affording all of this?" Sarah gestured with her arms. "This evening must be costing you a fortune."

With a small wave of his hand, Jake replied glibly, "Ah, it's nothing. I made a good investment recently."

"In what? Safecracking tools?"

He shook his head. "No, an ace high straight."

She let out a short laugh. "You mean to tell me that you did play cards the other night with that guy who barged in on us...uh...I forget his name?"

"Joe Perry. The worst poker player in the South Pacific. Good loser, though," he added with an appreciative nod.

"You must've really made a killing."

"Not really. Just a coupla hundred bucks."

She looked at him curiously. "But, didn't you want that money for the *Goose*? I thought you said it still needed some more parts."

"It does." He glanced downward before looking back into her eyes, his voice soft. "But, I thought maybe you needed this more."

Deeply touched, she rested her hand on his, her smile saying more than words ever could.

Their reverie was interrupted by the arrival of the wine, and, after the usual tasting ritual, Jake pronounced it to be perfect. The waiter poured them each a glass, then left the bottle in an elegant silver container next to the table.

Taking a long sip, Sarah eased back in her chair, her eyes drifting absently toward the stage.

"They're really great, aren't they?" Jake gestured with his head toward the orchestra as he lifted his glass.

"They sure are." She was unconsciously tapping her foot to the rhythm. "It's been a long time since I've heard some good music from home."

"I heard them play at the Coconut Grove a few years back. Really had the place jumpin'."

She turned back toward him. "I tried to catch them a year or so ago in London when they were doing a European tour, but the tickets were all sold out before I got there."

He nodded ruefully. "I know the feeling."

"What do you mean?"

"They were all sold out here, too."

"Then, how did you get them?"

Taking another sip of wine, he shrugged mysteriously. "We knights have our ways."

A frown came over her face as a sudden realization hit her. "Oh, Jake, don't tell me you got them from that...that...Tony Cockroach."

He laughed. "Currachia," he corrected her.

"Whatever. From what I've heard, it's the same thing. He's the biggest crook in town."

"Yeah, but he's always got the goods."

"What did you have to do -- mortgage the *Goose*?"

"It wasn't so bad -- really. Just fifty bucks in cash and a coupla supply runs over to St. Bordeaux."

"Supplies, huh? I'll bet. He was probably involving you in some kind of smuggling operation or other."

"No, he guaranteed me that everything was on the up and up."

She rolled her eyes. "Oh. Well, I'm sure that the word of a cockroach is binding."

"Why are you getting so upset?" he asked incredulously.

"Because, for once, I'd just like us to have a good time without wondering what's going to go wrong. I don't want to end up having to visit you in jail."

He smiled confidently. "Don't worry, Sarah. I know what I'm doing. I've handled his type before. Besides," he added gently, "seeing the look on your face tonight makes it all worthwhile."

Softening, she allowed a grudging smile to return. "Why are you doing all of this for me?"

He glanced away momentarily. "To try to make up for all the times I've taken you for granted in the past." Shyly, he looked back at her. "I guess I just wanted you to know that I think it's kinda nice having you around."

Her eyes glistened a little. She knew how hard it was for him to be candid about his feelings, and she didn't quite know what to say except, "Thanks."

He nodded, but then his face broke out in a mischievous grin. "Of course, if you *really* want to thank me, there is something you could do."

Her eyes narrowed into a playfully suspicious look. "What's that?"

"How about a dance?"

Caught off-guard, she stared at him, looking almost a little disappointed. "That's all?"

Seeing her expression, he shrugged innocently. "Unless you can come up with something better?"

Smiling, she rose from her seat as the few bars of "I Can't Get Started With You" filtered over to them from the stage. "C'mon," she laughed, reaching for his hand. "I think they're playing our song."

Grinning, he took another swallow of wine, then allowed her to pull him out to the dance floor.

As the vocal began, they assumed the usual dance position, but stopped for a moment to exchange amused looks at the irony of the words:

*I've flown around the world in a plane,  
I've settled revolutions in Spain,  
And, the North Pole I have charted,  
Still, I can't get started with you.*

Chuckling, they gave each other a spontaneous little hug and then resumed dancing, staying out on the floor through two more slow songs.

After that, the band livened things up with

the swinging up-tempo "One O'Clock Jump".

"Think you can handle this?" Jake asked with a grin.

"Just try me."

Grabbing hands, they launched into a fast jitterbug, surprising each other at how good they were. The couples around them began to move back to give them more room, until, soon, the entire crowd was standing around watching them and clapping to the beat.

Spurred on by the enthusiasm of the crowd, to say nothing of the several glasses of wine they'd already consumed, Sarah and Jake started to really let loose -- at least as far as her dress would let her -- doing several dips, twists, and other tricky dance steps that drew appreciative responses from the audience. Even the band got into the act, drawing the song out a little longer to allow them to really put on a show. But, finally, the song ended, and, at the last high note, Sarah twirled breathlessly onto Jake's knee to the rousing applause of the crowd. Smiling warmly at each other, they stood up and nodded bashfully to the audience while the band leader hurried over to them.

"You two are terrific!" he declared, shaking their hands as the crowd dissipated. "How long have you been dancing together?"

"About twenty minutes." Jake glanced sheepishly at Sarah. "Unless you count a minute or so of 'Royal Garden Blues' a couple of months ago."

She smiled, remembering their impromptu little quick-step to Louie's Slam Willis record.

"How'd you both like to lead off the next song?"

"No, thanks anyway," Sarah said timidly, only then starting to catch her breath. "I think I need to sit this one out."

"Okay," he grinned, patting their arms. "I guess we'll see you out here later, right?"

They both nodded shyly as he walked away.

Turning to Jake while they strolled back to their table, Sarah smiled happily. "How do you like that? We're a hit. Maybe we should take our act on the road."

Smiling back, Jake held her chair out for her before sitting down himself. "Where'd you ever learn to dance like that?"

She gave him a teasingly indignant look. "Well, we have heard of dancing in New England, you know. We don't spend all our time tapping maple trees and shoveling snow."

Laughing, he reached for his wine glass. "I guess not."

Taking a sip herself, she sent her eyes wandering around the room again. "This place is kind of magical, isn't it?"

He shrugged playfully. "Well, it's not Oogie's, but I guess it'll do."

"You know what I mean -- the atmosphere. It makes you want to...oh, I don't know...show off a little or something."

"Maybe that's because it sorta reminds me of a giant goldfish bowl."

"Could be." She took another glance around. "But, I'll bet even the Rockefeller's goldfish don't have it this good."

Grinning, he picked up the wine bottle to refill their glasses. "What d'ya say we have a toast?"

"To what?"

"Oh, how about something really original like -- 'to us'?"

Raising her glass to his, she smiled into his eyes. "I'll drink to that anytime," she murmured softly.

After they each took a drink, Jake said, "Sounds like the music's slowing down a bit. Are you game?"

"Sure," she declared readily as they rose from their seats and headed back out to the dance floor.

A few hours later, while the band was taking a break, Sarah and Jake were sitting at the table, finishing up another bottle of wine. Having danced nearly every dance, they were both a trifle exhausted, but the wide smiles on their faces showed how much they were enjoying themselves -- and also how well the wine was working.

"I haven't danced so much in a long time," Sarah sighed while Jake filled her glass. "Not since..." She hesitated, her smile fading as a quick vision of the party she attended with Ted Harrison on the night her father was murdered flashed by in her mind.

Looking up when he heard her pause, Jake saw the suddenly far-off look on her face and got concerned. "What's wrong?"

She shook her head, attempting to rid herself of the memory. "Oh, nothing...I guess I'm just a little tired, that's all."

He sensed that she was covering up, but he didn't press it. Reaching for her hand, he gave it a comforting squeeze. "Do you want to leave?"

His gesture brought a smile back to her face. "What? And miss the grande finale everyone's talking about? Not on your life."

"What grande finale?"

"According to the people we were dancing next to before the break, the band has a new song that's supposed to be really wonderful. They're going to

play it at the very end."

"What's it called?"

"'Serenade in Blue'. Sounds pretty, don't you think?"

Gazing affectionately at her, his eyes took in her beautiful blue gown. "Yeah."

Catching his meaning, her momentary sadness was forgotten.

Suddenly getting an inspiration, Jake quickly rose to his feet, announcing, "I'm going to go see if the band'll take a request. I'll be right back."

Staring at him in bewilderment, she asked, "Wait a minute. What are you going to ask them to play?"

Grinning mysteriously, he walked away, calling out over his shoulder, "You'll see."

With a good-natured shake of her head, Sarah leaned back in her chair and reached for her glass. Taking a long swallow, she sighed contentedly and closed her eyes, feeling the warmth of the wine enveloping her. *If only every night with Jake could be like this*, she thought to herself wistfully. Chuckling softly, she remembered the night that had led to this one, realizing that there would probably be a lot more of those than ones like this. But, somehow, the future didn't really seem to matter just now. Tonight was all she wanted to think about.

Opening her eyes, she looked toward the bandstand and watched Jake talking to Marty Lynn, flashing a bright smile at him when he glanced in her direction. "What on earth is he doing?" she asked, half-outloud. "Auditioning?"

When he returned to the table, he looked like the proverbial cat who swallowed the canary.

"What's going on?" she asked him suspiciously.

His expression changed to little boy innocence. "Oh, nothing. Why?"

"I've seen that look before, Jake Cutter. You're up to something, and I want to know what it is."

Sitting down, he opened his mouth to protest, but was interrupted by the sound of the band leader's voice coming through the microphone.

"Ladies and gentlemen, may I have your attention please?"

While the crowd quieted down, Sarah cast a look at Jake before directing her eyes to the stage. She wasn't sure she wanted to hear what was coming next.

"We've just been informed that sitting in our audience tonight is a lovely singer from an establishment on one of the neighboring islands."

The color drained out of Sarah's face as she stared helplessly at Marty Lynn and then at Jake. *Oh, my God...he didn't...* she pleaded, searching his attempt at an impassive face.

"We're hoping she'll come up here and honor us with a song. Let's hear a big round of applause for Miss Sarah Stickney White!"

"Oh, my God...he *did*," she muttered in shock as the audience started to clap.

"C'mon, Sarah, your public is waiting." Jake rose from his seat to help her up.

She couldn't move. "B--but, Jake, I -- I can't go up there. You know I really can't sing."

"Sure you can. Besides, it was your dream to sing at the Starlight Room, right? Well, it's a knight's job to make dreams come true."

Slowly getting to her feet, she swallowed hard, glancing at Jake for encouragement.

"Knock 'em dead, Sarah," he said with feeling, affectionately squeezing her arm.

She nodded faintly at him. *If I don't die first*, she thought as she cautiously made her way toward the orchestra.

There she was greeted enthusiastically by Marty Lynn. "So, Sarah, you're not only a dancer, but a singer, too. A lady of many talents, eh?"

She gave him a half-hearted smile. "Not too many."

"What song would you like to do?"

Running through her repertoire in her mind, she remembered the one she had been rehearsing at the piano the day before, and her face lit up a little, thinking of the words. "Do you know 'It Had to be You'?"

The musicians nodded, and, taking a deep breath, she stepped up to the microphone while they began the introduction. Staring out across the glittering sea of faces, she felt her nervousness giving way to a rush of excitement. Directing her eyes to one special face, she flashed Jake a grateful smile and began to sing the song directly to him.

*It had to be you. It had to be you.  
I wandered around and finally found  
the somebody who  
Could make me be true, could make me be blue  
And even be glad, just to be sad,  
thinking of you.  
Some others I've seen, might never be mean  
Might never be cross, or try to be boss,  
but they wouldn't do...*

Knowing the lines that were coming next, she hesitated for just a moment, afraid that she might reveal too much of her feelings in her eyes but, his eyes were holding hers in place, and she couldn't make herself turn away.

*For nobody else gave me a thrill,  
With all your faults, I love you still.  
It had to be you...*

She smiled fondly at him.

*Wonderful you.  
It had to be you.*

Joining in the warm applause, Jake gazed at her in admiration.

You can say what you want about Sarah's singing, but, that night, no one ever sounded better. Oh, sure, maybe part of it was the wine, and I guess the atmosphere helped but, there was something more -- a certain look I saw in her eyes. Maybe she was right. Maybe that place *was* magical. All I knew was that I was beginning to think that there might be something to this 'knight' business, after all.

Acknowledging the crowd with a shy nod, Sarah cast a quick glance toward the stars as the face of a beautiful, red-headed woman came back to her from the past -- a woman who, many years ago, gave up a promising singing career to marry an enterprising, young archaeology student. Sarah's eyes grew misty, picturing her sitting at the piano with her little auburn-haired daughter, singing duets for a small group of friends. As the memory started to fade, she blinked back the tears. If only her mother could've seen her right then, she would've really been proud.

Breaking into her thoughts with a congratulatory handshake, Marty Lynn offered some words of praise, which she accepted with gratitude. Walking back to the table, she was met by a beaming Jake.

"You were terrific!"

She tried to look annoyed, but she couldn't hold back a wry smile. "I should be furious with you for pulling a stunt like that." Her smile softened as a little mistiness returned to her eyes. "But, instead, I just want to say 'thanks'." Lightly kissing his cheek, she sat down again.

He grinned broadly. "Hey, you know -- I think I'm starting to like this 'knight' stuff. Do you have any other dreams that you'd like me to make come true tonight?"

Taking a long swallow of wine, she raised her eyebrow in a flirtatiously seductive glance. "I'll let you know."

Catching her look, he gave her one of his own. "Promise?"

Her eyes twinkled as she drained her glass. "I promise."

Letting out a soft chuckle, Jake picked up the now empty wine bottle. "How much of this stuff have we had, anyway?"

"Including dinner? I guess about three or four bottles." Waving her hand, she smiled impish-

ly. "But, who's counting?"

Smiling back, he said, "I have a feeling we'd better start. It looks like somebody's getting a little tipsy here."

She laughed. "And, it's a darn good thing, too, because I'd hate to think that I made a fool of myself out there for any other reason."

Gently reaching for her hand, his expression turned serious. "You really *were* great. I want you to know that."

The sincerity in his eyes made her sober a little. "Thanks," she murmured softly.

Feeling the air getting heavy between them, Jake tried to lighten things up. "What d'ya say we hit the dance floor again?"

She knew what he was doing, but she was too happy to mind. "I'm ready, if you are."

Holding hands, they strolled out to the floor and began swaying slowly to "When the Lights Are Low".

Soon, the evening's entertainment came to a close as the orchestra finished up the last soft strains of "Easy to Love". Out on the dance floor, Sarah and Jake joined in the thunderous applause for the excellent job the band had done that evening.

Marty Lynn took the microphone as the clapping died down. "Thank you, everyone, for the rousing welcome you've given us on our brief stopover here on Tagataya. As we continue our Far Eastern tour, I'm sure the memory of your warmth and kindness will remain with us throughout the rest of our trip. And, now, we'd like to leave you with something to remember *us* by -- our new farewell song, 'Serenade in Blue'."

Turning around, he raised his hands to the orchestra, and the ballroom suddenly went dark, leaving only the illumination of the stars and full moon to light the dancers' way.

As the melody began, Jake took Sarah into his arms and looked down at her smiling face, noticing how the soft glow of the moonlight made her seem even more beautiful than before. While they danced closely together, a look came into her eyes as she gazed up at him -- the same look she'd had earlier when she was singing to him, and, suddenly, he felt as though he was falling into those eyes as the wine, the atmosphere, and the haunting lyrics of the song wove a spell over them.

*When I hear that Serenade in Blue,  
I'm somewhere in another world  
alone with you...*

To them, the other dancers had disappeared as his arms slowly fell to her waist, and she silently slipped hers around his neck, their eyes locked on each other's faces.

...It seems like only yesterday,  
A small cafe, a crowded floor,  
And, as we danced the night away,  
I hear you say 'forever more'.  
And, then, the song became a sigh,  
'Forever more' became 'goodbye'  
But, you remained in my heart...

Gently, almost imperceptively, her arms tightened around his neck as she rested her head against his shoulder, and he instinctively pulled her closer to him. Closing their eyes, they allowed the music to swirl inside their minds, savoring how good it felt to be together like this. Would there someday be a time, perhaps not too far off, when the words of the song would be all too true? What would happen to them and their little world when the inevitable war came? They didn't want to think about it now -- not tonight. Tonight belonged only to them.

As the melody wound down, they stopped dancing and stood in a close embrace, gazing longingly at one another -- until the floor-lights returned to break the mood. And, although the fateful words they wanted to say remained unspoken, for a brief instant they were written in their eyes before either one could blink them away.

Clearing his throat, Jake let go of her and backed off a bit, trying to put on a casual smile. "Well, I guess that's it for the dancing, but I could use a little more wine. How about you?"

She smiled weakly. "Sure. I'm not ready to call it quits yet, either. Even though, tomorrow, I'm probably going to wish I had."

Walking back to the table, a distant look came over Jake's face as the words from the song ran through his head. Glancing at her after they sat down, his tone turned serious. "Let's not talk about tomorrow, okay? I want this night to last a little longer." *Like maybe forever*, he added in his mind.

She gently touched his arm with her finger. "And, how about *this* knight?" she asked softly. "How long is *he* going to last?"

Her gesture brought him out of his doldrums, and he chuckled a little. "Now, that's hard to say." Looking up, he saw the waiter approaching them. "But, maybe this guy has something that might help."

Bowing in Sarah's direction, the waiter held out a bottle of French champagne. "Compliments of the house for mademoiselle's fine performance tonight."

Exchanging a surprised look with Jake, Sarah stared at the man. "For *me*?"

Nodding, he deftly uncorked it and poured it into two new glasses. "And, may I offer my own personal compliments, as well," he added, bowing again before he departed.

Jake shrugged as Sarah turned to him. "I *told* you you were terrific."

Pulling the bottle out of the container, she read the label in amazement. "Dom Perignon! Gee, I guess I was!"

Smiling, he raised his glass. "To dreams come true."

Her soft eyes smiled back at him as they brought their glasses together with a clink.

An hour later, a burst of hysterical laughter broke the silence of the stately hotel hallway as Sarah and Jake emerged from the elevator arm-in-arm, both definitely feeling no pain. Jake was carrying what was left of the bottle of champagne in his hand while they chuckled and stumbled their way to Sarah's door.

Fumbling with the key, he had a hard time fitting it into the lock.

"Well, come on," Sarah urged with good-natured impatience.

"I can't. The keyhole keeps moving around."

They broke out into a case of the giggles while he made a few more vain attempts.

Suddenly, down the hall, a door opened. "Will you two keep it down!" a man's voice hollered out. "Don't you know decent people are trying to sleep!"

Putting their index fingers to their lips, Sarah and Jake said, "Shhh," to each other at the same time, but that only made them laugh more.

"Drunks!" growled the man in disgust.

Jake tried to explain. "It's not us, mister. It's the keyhole. *It's* the one that won't hold..."

Not waiting to hear the rest of the sentence, the man shut his door with a loud bang.

Turning to Sarah, Jake made a wry face. "Some people have no sense of humor."

In mock indignation, she exclaimed, "How *dare* he slam that door! Doesn't he know decent people are trying to sleep?"

With another outburst of laughter, they returned to the lock, and after a couple of tries, Jake finally got the key in, but, then, it wouldn't turn.

Seeing his look of frustration, Sarah leaned wearily against the wall. "At this rate, I'm going to end up sleeping in the hallway."

"Not at \$40 a night," he muttered under his breath, irritably rattling the doorknob. "C'mon, *dammit!*"

Reaching past him, Sarah gently turned the key, and the door glided effortlessly open. Without a word, she glanced at him, her twinkling eyes saying it all.



Trying to save face, he explained matter-of-factly, "See. You just gotta know how to talk to these things."

Breaking out into a new round of giggles, they stepped into the spacious, elegantly furnished room. Across the way from them, near the bed, a set of French doors opened to an outside balcony, and the moonlight filtering through their lacy curtains gave everything inside a soft glow.

Sarah reached for the light switch, but Jake quickly restrained her. "Uh-uh. Knights didn't have electricity."

Smiling, she watched him walk straight ahead to the dresser to light the small candle that was sitting on top of it. Then, reaching to pick up one of the flowers he brought her earlier, she wandered over to the French doors, idly fondling the stem as she looked out at the starry nighttime sky.

"Care for some more bubbly, my dear?" Jake called out from behind her in his best Charles Boyer.

"Mm-hmmm," she replied absently, following the beckoning stars out onto the balcony.

Trying to clear her head a little, she leaned against the railing and breathed in the stillness, letting a gently tropical breeze caress her face. Gazing off in the distance, she watched the flickering lights of the harbor and listened as the soft melody of a slow ballad drifted up to her from someone's unseen radio. Closing her eyes, she could once again feel the warmth of Jake's embrace as they danced to that last beautiful song, and she began to quietly hum along with the music.

Her reverie was interrupted by the loud pop of a cork, and she turned to see Jake's triumphant expression.

"Did you have to talk to it, too?" she laughed.

Grinning, he walked over to her with the bottle and two glasses. "What are you doing out there?"

Turning back to the balcony, she sighed, "Oh, I was just looking at the view and thinking of how wonderful this night has been." Smiling at him as he came up beside her, she added, "And, how wonderful *you've* been." He glanced down shyly as she continued. "I just can't help wishing that we never had to go back." She paused and sighed again. "But, I guess all fairy tales have to end, don't they?"

Holding up the champagne bottle, he raised his eyebrows playfully. "Not *yet*."

She turned to gaze at the sky while he poured some for each of them.

"They're really beautiful tonight, aren't they?" she murmured softly.

"What?" he asked, handing a glass toward her.

"The stars."

After casting an upward glance, he smiled warmly at her. "Yeah. But, right now, I'd say they have some pretty stiff competition down here on Earth."

Looking dreamily at him, she took her glass and raised it. "To the knight of my life," she proclaimed softly, her eyes revealing the proper connotation.

Shyly, he touched glasses, but before she could take a sip, he stopped her. "Wait a minute," he said, linking arms. "Let's try it the fancy way."

Being a bit unsteady, she moved forward too much and accidentally spilled some on his lapel.

Trying to stifle a grin at his wry expression, she looked at him apologetically. "I never could get the hang of that."

He glanced down at the widening patch of wetness and exhaled deeply. "Obviously."

Giving in to a giggle, she headed toward the bathroom. "I'd better get something to wash it off. We wouldn't want your armor to get rusty."

Shaking his head ruefully, he followed her back inside and put his glass down. "Why is that whenever you get anywhere near champagne, I end up wearing it?"

"Maybe you remind me of a ship," she replied, returning with a washcloth in her hand.

Watching her while she worked on his jacket, he muttered, "With our track record, it must be the *Titanic*."

She broke out into a laugh, but continued wiping.

"Oh, well," he sighed resignedly. "At least champagne doesn't stain."

Without thinking, she asked, "How do you know that?" But, when the realization of his meaning sank in, she smiled up at him.

"Believe me, I know," he declared with conviction.

Her sparkling eyes danced with amusement, and he grinned at her, putting his hands on her shoulders. But, something in that little gesture ignited a spark between them, and the humor faded away, leaving an entirely different feeling in its wake.

Lowering his eyes, Jake slowly swept them over her, finally bringing them to rest on her face, which flushed under the weight of his gaze. Wordlessly, he gently slipped his arms around her, and she encircled his neck with hers, the washcloth falling forgotten on the floor at their feet. Pulses racing, they stood a breath apart, staring intensely into each other's eyes, both sensing deep inside that, if they kissed, this time there'd be

no turning back. But, neither one could summon the resistance to break away.

Slowly, gradually, they were drawn to each other -- totally powerless to stem the tide of emotion that was rising within them begging for release. With the very first touch of their lips, the electricity surged through them, starting a fire burning out of control. Clinging tightly together, they became almost as one -- their bodies pressing so closely that they could each feel the other's heart pounding wildly against their chests. Their kisses grew stronger and more passionate as the intoxication of the wine and the heat of the moment combined to cloud their minds and thoughts. They could no longer remember all the reasons and excuses that always came so readily before or recall how to play their little game. All they knew was that they didn't want this night or this feeling to ever end.

When they finally parted, they gazed at one another breathlessly, both seeing the reflection of that last silent thought mirrored in the other's eyes.

Tenderly touching her face with his palm, Jake leaned to kiss the corner of her mouth and then her cheek, slowly working his way down her neck while his fingertips gently caressed her back and shoulders. Moving her hands into his hair, she tilted her head back and closed her eyes, feeling the tingle of each soft kiss creating its own little flame, building higher and higher until she could hardly breathe.

When his lips lightly brushed against her breast, her mind exploded, and she opened her eyes again to see the room suddenly spinning around her. She felt lightheaded, and her knees were weak. Was it the wine or the thrill of his touch? She couldn't tell. She wasn't very certain of anything at that point except the simple knowledge that, if she stayed where she was, she was going to faint. And, that was about the last thing she wanted to do right then.

Trembling slightly, she delicately freed herself from Jake's embrace and stumbled backwards to the bed, her eyes never leaving his through the whole maneuver.

Hesitating, he watched her lie down, the uncertainty showing on his face.

I couldn't believe it. I kept figuring that sooner or later something had to come along and interfere. What was it going to be? A fire in the hotel? An earthquake? Or, more likely, one of us doing our famous cut-and-run? But, as I stood there, just watching and waiting, nothing happened, and I slowly began to imagine that our 'moment' had finally come. Walking toward her, I couldn't say a word, afraid that the slightest sound would wake me up and prove this all to be a dream...and, maybe, somewhere deep inside, I was a little afraid that it *wouldn't*.

Sitting next to her on the bed, he searched her eyes for the answer to a question he couldn't make himself ask.

She stared at him strangely, seeing his face starting to melt into the soft haze of the room. Reaching out to touch his arm, she tried to bring him back into focus, fighting desperately against a mysterious dark wave that was sweeping her away.

Beginning to lose the battle, she sighed, "I love you, Jake." But, it was as though she heard a distant voice saying it.

Swallowing hard, he took her hand and looked down at it, faltering for a moment. But, the words couldn't be choked away this time. "I love you, too," he murmured softly.

Smiling, she closed her eyes in sweet surrender as he slowly leaned forward to kiss her. But, when their lips touched, she suddenly went limp beneath him, and he backed up in surprise to find her fast asleep. He listened to her even breathing, his eyes open widely. "Maybe my technique could use a little work."

But, gazing down at her lovely, peaceful face bathed in the radiance of the moonlight, he felt a lump rise in his throat. Gently brushing an errant curl from her cheek, he lightly kissed her on the forehead. "Good-night. Don't let the bedbugs bite," he whispered quietly.

She stirred and mumbled under her breath, "Dlelouheaysaythat," before finally drifting off for good.

Grinning, he let out a soft laugh. "I guess that's close enough."

Rising from the bed, he swayed and had to catch himself with the bedpost. "Looks like I need to hit the sack, too," he declared, raising his hand to his head. Stumbling across the room, he blew out the candle on the dresser and started for the doorway, stopping when he got there to take one of the flowers from the vase. Breathing in its sweet scent, he turned to give Sarah one last long look. Then, sighing wistfully, he silently left the room, closing the door behind him.

The next morning, Jake awakened to the sunlight streaming in through the French doors in his room. Squinting, he rose slowly from the mattress and was met by a dull, aching pain in his head. Instantly recognizing the well-known symptoms of a hangover, he put his fingers to his temples in a fruitless attempt to ease the discomfort.

"Boy, remind me to stick to beer from now on," he muttered to himself, staggering to his dresser. "That fancy wine really packs a wallop."

Getting a good look at himself in the mirror, he sighed at the rumpled sight, and reached to grab a comb. Glancing downward, he spotted the flower he'd brought from Sarah's room lying wilted on the dresser, and smiled faintly at it as the memory of the night before tried to penetrate the fog of his mind. Softly humming the melody of "Serenade in Blue", he turned back to the mirror and leisurely ran the comb through his hair. But, abruptly, he froze, paling, his eyes opening widely in panic.

I'm sure you've heard the expression 'With the dawn comes the revelation.' Well, mine came with a sledge hammer right between the eyes that morning. Unless that scene in Sarah's room the night before had all been a dream -- and something about that little dried-up posey told me that it wasn't -- I realized that I had actually said those three fatal words. And, at the same time, I also realized that waiting just down the hall from me was a beautiful determined redhead who wasn't likely to let me forget it.

Closing his eyes, he lowered his head in dismay. "Well, Jake Cutter, let's see you talk your way out of *this* one," he mumbled under his breath, the pain between his temples returning with a vengeance. "She's probably over there right now picking out a china pattern."

Shuffling to the bathroom in a daze, he threw some water on his face and slowly ran his wet fingers through his hair, staring anxiously into the hanging mirror.

What was I going to say to her? How could I explain that, even though I loved her, I still wasn't ready yet for a lifelong commitment? Oh, I suppose I could've dragged out all the old time-worn excuses -- the uncertainty of the future with the war coming, Elizabeth and the way she hurt me -- even my father and his inability to commit to my mother and me. But, Sarah was a smart girl, and she could probably come up with a hundred counter-excuses for every one of mine. Besides, the real truth of the matter was, I didn't have an excuse. At least, not one I could clearly define. All I knew was that I was scared. Of what, I had no idea. So, what chance did I have of making Sarah understand, when I couldn't begin to understand it myself?

It was a different man who walked down the hallway to Sarah's room from the one who had cut such a confident, dashing figure the day before. Jake's step was tentative, his appearance disheveled as he approached her door, clutching the limp flower like a rosary in his sweating palm. Taking a deep breath, he swallowed nervously and raised his hand to knock, pausing for a moment in mid-air.

I could only pray that she wouldn't be too upset, that we could still preserve what there was of our relationship. Oh, I was counting on some anger, and there'd be a few choice words, but, after a while, she'd calm down and begin to see things my way. At least, I hoped she would. But, for now, the thought of seeing the look of ecstatic joy on her face turning into disappointment and possibly tears was enough to make me wish I could hop on a slow boat to China. Whatever was about to happen, something told me that it wasn't exactly going to make me go down in history on the 'Lists of Chivalry'.

Summoning all of his courage, he forced his hand to the door and tried out a feeble smile as Sarah opened it.

Her hopeful, expectant look faded when she saw him. "Oh...Jake. It's only you." She gazed at

him through half-closed eyes.

Taken aback, he stared at her in speechless bewilderment.

With a weak apologetic smile, she clutched her bathrobe tighter, and stepped back to let him in. "Sorry. I was just hoping it was the bellboy with the medicine I ordered for my head and stomach."

Walking inside, Jake got a good look at her, noticing that she appeared to be quite the worse for wear. "Have a hangover?" he asked softly.

She gave him a half-hearted version of the eye. "No, thanks. I've already got one."

He held out the wilted flower in an attempt to cheer her up.

In spite of wincing at the pain it caused in her head, she managed a short laugh. "That's about how I feel," she declared, reaching to take it from him. Casting a woeful glance in the mirror, she made a face. "And, look," she added with a sigh. Turning back to Jake, she tried to smile. "You didn't happen to get the license number of the tank, did you?"

Letting out a soft chuckle, he massaged his forehead. "'Fraid not. But, I don't think it was one of ours."

Nodding wearily, she started to turn away, but he gently held her back by the arm.

"Uh...Sarah..." he began, looking at the floor. "About last night..."

"Oh, listen," she interrupted, waving the air with the flower. "If I said or did anything I shouldn't have, I hope you'll understand. I really wasn't myself last night. I never drank that much before." She shook her head with conviction. "And, believe me, I never will again!"

Staring at her in shock, he asked, "You mean ...you don't remember...?"

She sighed. "The last thing I remember, we were standing over there by the French doors kissing..." Her eyes bulged as his expression sent a jolt of alarm rushing through her. Gaping at him, she searched his face for a sign. "I -- I hope I didn't say or do anything I *really* shouldn't have," she stammered nervously.

Slowly recovering, Jake attempted to reassure her. "U-uh...no...nothing..." Seeing the worried look still showing in her eyes, he quickly made what he hoped was a convincing smile. "Really," he nodded.

She wasn't sure she liked the hesitation in his voice, but, at the moment, more pressing matters were rising to the forefront.

"Excuse me," she mumbled quickly, covering her mouth with her hand as she ran for the bathroom.

Watching her go, Jake's face registered a strange ambivalence.

Sometimes I just can't figure myself out. I'd spent the entire morning trying to come up with a way out of my predicament. And, now, there I was -- completely off the hook. But, for some reason, I didn't feel a real sense of relief. Instead, I felt...well...kinda disappointed in a way. Maybe it had all been a dream. Maybe a subconscious part of me was trying to say that it was tired of playing the game, tired of always running from commitment. I heard that a famous philosopher once said, 'The only thing worse than wanting something is getting it.' I guess some of us were never meant to know what it is we *really* want.

Arriving back in Boragora later that evening, Jake and Sarah had recuperated somewhat from their encounter with the grape.

Stepping out onto the dock first, Sarah cast a sweeping glance around, her face showing a trace of regret. "What? No trumpets? No fanfare? No brass bands?"

Ambling up beside her, Jake grinned. "It's probably a good thing. I'm not sure our heads could take it."

While they strolled down the pier toward the hotel, she sighed wistfully. "Well, I guess it's 'Goodbye, Camelot -- Hello, reality'."

Stopping when they reached the porch, Jake draped his arm around her shoulders and gazed down at her, recapturing in his mind for one fleeting moment the dazzling way she'd looked the night before. "Oh, I don't know. Maybe not," he said softly. At her inquisitive look, she smiled. "I think you're gonna see a few changes around here from now on. You just might be surprised."

Her face lit up hopefully. "Well, I'm sure Louie wouldn't mind reheating the beef bourguignonne...and, there is always that view of

the lagoon."

Grinning, he started to say something, but, before he could, a huge, burly man stepped in front of their path. "Are you Jake Cutter?" he growled menacingly.

Staring up at him in awe, Sarah got that strange *deja vu* feeling that this was the part where she came in.

"Yeah," replied Jake cheerily, turning toward the voice. "Can I help you?"

"I got a little message I want you to deliver to Tony Currachia."

His eyes traveling up the man's massive frame, Jake gulped and tried out one of his best disarming smiles. "Well, you see, I -- I don't really know him all that well. I only..."

The rest of his statement had no chance to be uttered as the giant angrily lifted him off the ground by his jacket and hurled him head-first through the swinging doors.

At the commotion, an eager crowd of onlookers gathered on the porch, hovering around the doors to get a good look after the *man barged his way inside*.

Listening to the all-too-familiar sound of shattering glasses and breaking chairs coming out of the bar, Sarah shook her head and exhaled deeply.

"Mein Gott!" exclaimed the reverend in dismay, running over to her from the church. "What is happening?"

Folding her arms across her chest, she calmly gazed straight ahead, her eyes fixed on the doorway. "Jake's home," she stated with a resigned sigh.



WOULDN'T YOU THINK...?

...someone would have noticed that Jack is either twins or a teleport? He appears in two different places simultaneously in both "Escape From Death Island" and "Ape Boy".

...Jake would know at least a little Spanish, since he's supposed to have spent considerable time flying in Central and South America, not to mention Spain?