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I welcome all comments from readers (wiseguy35@hotmail.com).

Twelve Nights

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Ted and I had our Christmas celebration on Christmas Eve. It was perfect: dinner by candlelight, with champagne and soft music and a little piece of mistletoe hanging over the table, obliging us to kiss often.

After dinner Ted refilled my champagne glass and cleared the dishes himself. I stood up too quickly; the effects of the extra champagne had snuck up on me and I had to work a little to find my balance. Ted solved that problem by sweeping me up into his arms and carrying me to the bedroom. I hung on lazily with one arm, using the other hand to unbutton my dress.

He laid me down on the bed ever so gently. I put both arms around his neck, pulling him down with me into a long, passionate kiss. His hand finished opening the front of my dress and slipped inside. I hadn't worn a bra, so his hand found and cupped the roundness of my breast immediately.

I felt the warmth and love in his touch and my body responded with heat of its own. I grabbed handfuls of his shirt and peeled it off, breaking off the deep kissing only long enough to get the shirt over his head. I let myself enjoy running my hands up and down his strong, smooth back, feeling the muscles moving as he explored me. As much as I love doing

that, the physical need was taking over -- I had to get his pants off, and quickly.

Ted let me get his belt and fly undone, then he broke free and slid down, out of my reach. His mouth latched on to first one nipple, then the other, sucking and teasing them into aching readiness. His fingers pulled at my panties, so I lifted my bottom and let him slide them off. That gave me an idea: grabbing the loose fabric of his pants between my toes, I pushed them down to his knees. I couldn't see the stiff bulge in the front of his briefs, but after two years of dating and eight months living together, I knew it was there.

I tried to shift down, to get a hand inside his briefs, but he held me firmly. "What's the rush?" he teased lovingly. "We have all night." He used a gentle hand to spread my thighs apart, and then his fingers began probing my center. My muscles relaxed out of habit, getting ready for the pleasure that was to come.

Ted knows my body pretty well, too, as you might expect. One thing he knows especially well is how to melt me with just the right touch inside. When he hits that spot in just the right way, my brain just shuts off and I forget about everything except how good it feels. He also knows that doing that trick kicks my system into passing gear, and usually makes me come so hard and so quickly that I've got no energy left to return the favor. Unless, that is, I've been drinking a little; in that case he can diddle me for as long as he likes, keeping me just on the edge, and I'm helpless to do anything but moan and enjoy it.

So I lay there, moaning and enjoying it, while Ted played my body. His fingers inside me, with his mouth kissing me in all my favorite places, made music in my head. A flutter in my stomach told me that a doozy of a climax was on its way soon. "Inside me, Ted," I pleaded between moans. "Now, please."

The pleasure in Ted's face was obvious. "I thought you'd never ask," he said, grinning the way he always does when he knows he's about to ring my bell in a big way. "Just like this?"

"Just like this," I confirmed. "I'm too blissed out to move much anyway." Ted positioned himself between my legs, and I found enough energy to tease his cock with my fingers for a moment before guiding him inside. He filled me completely, as he always does, and the sensation of him rocking inside me pushed the final set of buttons. My muscles came back to life and locked around him; my hips moved with him all on their own,

matching his rhythm, bringing him into contact with all the right spots. I grabbed onto his back and pulled him closer, hugging him to me as the tempo of our breathing increased.

I came first, gasping and squealing with the release of energy. Ted held me steady, letting me relax into it, staying with me the whole time. Somewhere in the middle I heard him grunt and felt the hot gush of his seed filling me.

We held each other, turning to our sides, while our breathing and heartbeats slowly returned to normal. There was a thin layer of sweat covering us both, its scent mingling with the heady aroma of sex. "We should shower," I suggested half-heartedly.

Ted tucked his face into my neck and took a long, slow breath. "Probably," he agreed, "but I don't want to."

"Me neither." I sighed and snuggled closer to him.

A little bit later, the clock chimed the hour. "Paula?" he said softly.

"Hmm?"

"I'm going to miss you."

"Same here."

We sighed, held each other a little more closely and went to sleep, trying for a little while longer to ignore my packed suitcase at the foot of the bed.

The morning came too soon, cool and dim and rainy. The smell of fresh coffee wafted into my nose and drew me to the kitchen, where I found Ted chopping leftover ham into little tiny bits. "Morning, sweetie," he said cheerfully. "Merry Christmas."

For answer, I tucked myself under his non-slicing arm and snuggled in tightly. "Merry Christmas."

He hugged me. "Ham and cheddar okay?"

"Mm-hmm."

We had omelets and coffee. There wasn't a whole lot to say. Scratch that -- there were all of the normal, happy things couples can talk about in the mornings, but on that morning it all just seemed too trivial. I was feeling guilty for leaving, and Ted was trying very hard not to make it worse.

But we were running out of time. Our eyes met and I sighed. "I'm really sorry," I said.

Ted had a sad sort of half-smile on his face. "I know. It's not your fault; you really don't have a choice."

I nodded. "It's only for two weeks."

"Yes. But it still sucks."

I spent most of the drive to the airport staring out the window, brooding. This was supposed to be our first Christmas together as a couple. We'd both been saving up vacation time so we could spend those days together with no interruptions. Then Sean broke 14 bones in a skiing accident, and my vacation got summarily cancelled.

I work for a small high-tech company. Our one product is a document imaging and management system. It's a world-class product, but not exactly something you can ship to the client in a box and expect them to take it from there -- not if you want them to be happy with it and recommend it to their colleagues, anyway. To get the system into production and properly tuned takes a project manager, a trainer, and a network troubleshooter. Economics being what they are, one person has to be able to do it all.

In our company, there are three of us who know the product well enough to do a distant installation. There's Joel, a genial 40-something guy with a nice family; Sean, a single guy who prides himself on playing hard; and me. When the Fowler, Briggs deal was signed with a first-of-the-year delivery commitment, Sean volunteered to take the job. He had nobody waiting for him at home, no plans for the holidays, no reason to mind spending them on the other side of the country. A long ski weekend in mid-December and he'd be ready to go, no regrets.

When Sean didn't show up for work the first day after his ski trip, we joked that he must have met a luscious snow bunny in Tahoe and lost track of the days. He called in about two that afternoon and got Joel. I saw Joel

start out grinning, then suddenly turn ashen and quiet. He put Sean on hold, tracked down our boss Rose, and transferred him into her office. She called us in later and gave us the story: Sean had lost control on a nasty stretch of the trail, hit a clump of trees, and now had 14 broken bones to show for it. Nothing life-threatening, she assured us, but he'd be out on disability for a couple of months at least. We'd have to rebalance the workload to cover while he was out, starting with Fowler, Briggs.

I had an immediate sense of the inevitable. Fowler, Briggs, Llewelyn and Cole was a big-time DC law firm, the kind that offered its clients political influence as much as, or more than, legal expertise. They were our first A-list client, and their only firm requirement was that the new system had to be operational January 2nd. I was single, on paper at least, with no family in the area; Joel had a wife and 5 kids and a houseful of out-of-town relatives flying in for Christmas. It was obvious which of us would have to go.

Not that Rose was totally oblivious. "I know you and Ted had plans," she told me. "I feel really badly about asking you to change them. I just can't see any other solution."

"Neither can I," I said. "And believe me, I'm trying."

"It's a little irregular," she offered, "but I'll approve the hotel bill if you want to take Ted with you."

"Thanks. I've thought about that, but I'm not sure it's a good idea."

"Either way, the offer's open."

Ted took the news about as well as could be expected: quietly, with a sad look and a few long sighs. "I can't say that I'm not bummed, but there doesn't seem to be any other choice."

"You could come with me," I proposed, very tentatively.

He let me off the hook, though. "No. I've seen what your schedule is like during those jobs. We'd both just get frustrated and angry, and end up worse off than if I stay here."

Ted was right, and we both knew it. Those two weeks in DC would be composed mostly of 12-hour days, including the weekend. When I wasn't at the client's offices I'd be too tired to be much fun. And knowing Ted was waiting for me would take away the one thing that made the long

days bearable -- the knowledge that, in a strange city, I had little else to do with my spare time anyway.

Want to know the secret to getting good service on an airline flight? It's simple: travel on, instead of before or after, a major holiday. The terminal was like a museum in the off-season, with a few clumps of people here and there but nobody in any great rush. There was no line at the check-in counter, no wait for security, no problem finding a seat at the gate. With the plane less than half full, there was plenty of room for everyone and the flight attendants let us have the whole can of soda. Maybe they just felt sorry for us, having no better place to be on Christmas than in the air.

Soon we were landing at Dulles International Airport. The first of many surprises came right there in the terminal. I came out of the shuttle to see a young man in a chauffeur's uniform holding a sign with my name on it. He saw me do a double-take and chuckled. "Paula?"

"That's right. What's going on?"

He smiled. "The dispatcher said you weren't expecting me; I guess he was right. I'm Tony, and I'm here to take you to your hotel. I'm also supposed to give you this." He handed me a small white card. I recognized Ted's handwriting immediately:

*On the first night of Christmas, your true love sends to you ...
A limo ride to finish your trip in style. The driver is under strict orders
to be friendly, but not chatty, and to cater to your every whim.
Relax and enjoy the ride.*

-T

Ted's gift was exactly what I needed. Twenty minutes later I was sitting comfortably in the back of a limousine, sipping a strong Jack and Coke, with soft Christmas music playing in the background. Tony took the scenic route into town, passing several of the monuments along the way.

As we passed the Jefferson Memorial, the intercom clicked and Tony spoke. "Do you want to stop anywhere, or go straight to the hotel?"

I checked my watch: 8:20pm. I'd need a real dinner, but nothing heavy or I'd never sleep properly. "Just to the hotel is fine. I'll do the tourist thing some other time."

We pulled up in front of the Hilton a few minutes later. Tony saw me opening my purse and shook his head. "It's taken care of," he said. "Have a great time in Washington." The bellhop already had my bag, so I said goodbye to Tony and followed my things to the front desk.

Once I was settled into my room, I got out my cell and called home. Ted answered on the second ring. "Hello?"

"Hello," I said, in my best husky voice.

He laughed. "How was your trip?"

"The flying part, better than usual. The limo ride was wonderful -- I was really calling mostly to thank you for that."

"More than welcome, honey. Did they send the 50-year-old matron to drive you, like I asked them to?"

I could hear the teasing tone in his voice, so I went with it. "No, she couldn't make it," I taunted him. "Instead, I got this incredibly sweet guy named Tony. He's a Chippendale model in his spare time. He wanted to know whether I was naughty or nice."

"And what did you tell him?"

"I told him that's between me and Santa, of course!" We both giggled. "I'm beat. I'm going to get something to eat and then call it a night."

"You do that. I love you, Paula."

I smooched the phone enough to let him hear it. "Love you too, dear."

One of the things Sean, Joel and I have noticed is that the degree of difficulty we'll have on any job can be predicted within the first half hour on site. By that yardstick, I figured I'd be lucky to make it through with my sanity intact.

Most of that first half hour was spent standing in the lobby while a confused security guard tried to locate someone to come down and sign me in. We went through my meager contact list, getting voice mail greetings or nothing at all. We got out the Fowler, Briggs phone directory and worked our way through that: office manager, facilities manager,

various administrative assistants. On maybe the eighth call a human being finally answered but, judging by the part of the call I could hear, they had no clue as to who I was or what I was there for. I was told to have a seat and someone would be down.

My eventual rescuer was a frazzled-looking twenty-something guy named Jeffrey. He signed me in and took me up to the top floor. "I'm supposed to take you straight up to Mr. Cole," he explained. "Most of the other folks that know anything about the new system aren't here, being the day after Christmas and all."

"But you do know about it?" I asked hopefully.

He shook his head. "Not really. I know we're supposed to be getting one, and that it's supposed to go in this week, but that's all. I'm just a PC tech; they don't tell me much."

"I'll bet you've seen the hardware, though," I said, seeing an opportunity.

"Nope."

"It should be here," I insisted, feeling a nasty chill starting to work its way up my spine. "Three rackmount servers, a fiber channel switch, a storage unit with a dozen drives in it, eighteen high-end network scanners, and a 42U cabinet."

Jeffrey squinted and looked up at the ceiling. "Haven't seen any new equipment show up lately," he told me. "But we did have the electricians in here last week to put in a new PDU, so if we find the stuff I'm pretty sure I know where it goes."

I took a quiet, deep breath and willed myself not to panic yet. Jeffrey led me down a lushly-carpeted hallway, past a pair of very expensive work centers to an ornate mahogany door. He knocked once, and a thin voice said, "Come in."

Mortimer Cole, according to Sean's notes, was the managing partner of the firm, the one who had chosen our system and gotten the other partners to sign off on the funding for it. He reminded me immediately of an American Hercule Poirot: a short, round, aging man with a thick mustache and an incredibly obvious hairpiece drawing attention away from his impeccable suit. The items on his desk were perfectly aligned and evenly spaced apart, and there wasn't a stray sticky note or a speck

of dust anywhere. He looked me over carefully, his face providing no hint of the opinion he may be forming, and nodded. "Miss Weatherby, yes?"

I nodded. He frowned slightly and continued. "I'm afraid we are less prepared for you than we should be. Mr. Kendall gave me the impression that you wouldn't be here until after the equipment had arrived."

"The equipment should have arrived Friday," I said. "I'm gathering that it didn't, so at this point I need a place to make some phone calls and find out where it is."

"You can use Mr. Kendall's office for that," Cole offered. "I've been trying to reach him by phone to let him know you're here; until he comes in, Jeffrey should be able to help you locate whatever you need. We can have a more in-depth opening meeting when things are ready to move forward." Turning to my drafted companion, he added, "Jeffrey, show Miss Weatherby how to use the phone, please, and teach her the charge codes for the imaging project."

Jeffrey got me settled in the office belonging to Joe Kendall, the IT manager for the firm and my primary contact. The part about showing me how to use the phone turned out to be no joke: in order to make any outside call, you have to enter a 3-digit employee code and a 5-digit charge code. Jeffrey assigned me a temporary code, along with a login to the network, and gave me his pager number in case I needed him again.

It took the rest of the day, but I solved the equipment mystery: the trucking company had looked at the delivery address and, knowing how things can be in DC, had called Joe Kendall to find out if there was a raised loading dock to accommodate their truck. Since Joe had left early that day, getting a head start on the long Christmas weekend, he never got the message; the trucking company was holding my equipment while they waited for instructions. With some more help from Jeffrey I found out that there was a loading dock, got instructions on how to get to it, and arranged with the trucking company to have the equipment delivered the next morning. Joe Kendall turned up during that process, looking stressed out, and seemed relieved when I told him we had things under control and that I wouldn't really need him until Thursday. Finally, I reported in to Mr. Cole and we scheduled a project kickoff meeting for Thursday morning, the day after the equipment delivery.

The one bright side to all the chaos was that I had a relatively short day that first day: only nine hours. I had a nice dinner at the hotel restaurant,

then went up to my room to turn in. It was only 7:30 Eastern time when I got to my room, but I was already dragging -- I'd gotten up at 7am, which felt like 4am to my body thanks to the time difference. I was already partially undressed when I noticed the flashing message light on the phone. I picked up the handset and dialed the code for voice mail.

"This is Darlene at the front desk," a female voice said. "We have a delivery for you. When you hear this, please call the front desk and we'll have someone bring it up."

I called the desk, and they promised to bring my delivery right up. They were as good as their word -- I barely had time to hang up my business suit and slip on a robe before there was a knock on the door. It was Darlene herself, bearing a crystal vase brimming with my favorite flower, American Beauty roses. Tucked into a plastic holder was a small white card:

*On the second night of Christmas, your true love sends to you ...
Two dozen roses, of your favorite kind, to remind you every day that
I love you.*

-T

I looked up from the card and saw Darlene studying my face. "You've got yourself a prize one," she remarked.

"Yes, I do," I agreed. There was something odd in the smile she returned to me -- some hint of a secret, maybe? Before I could ask, she had wished me good night and was on her way into the elevator.

The roses were wonderful, fresh and fragrant. I pulled the petals off one and slipped them inside my pillow case so I could fall asleep to the scent of fresh roses.

The scent of fresh roses was all over the room when I got up in the morning. It was a wonderful way to start the day; I got to Fowler, Briggs with a fresh, positive attitude. I was going to need it.

I spent the morning meeting department heads and identifying the people I would be training on how to use the scanning stations and the catalog application. A couple of them were none too happy to be there

-- apparently they'd planned to be off for the holidays until Mortimer Cole told them otherwise. I could relate, of course.

The equipment showed up right at lunch time, with another surprise: the bill of lading only listed delivery to the dock, not inside the building. That left it up to me and Jeffrey to move the boxes inside. Neither of us would need to go to the gym for a day or two.

We spent the rest of the day unpacking the boxes, making sure all the pieces were there, and starting to assemble everything. Joe Kendall made an appearance long enough to apologize profusely for the mix-up on the delivery instructions. He took a good look at the array of parts and tools we had out, said, "I'll get out of your way," and vanished for the rest of the day.

Jeffrey and I worked well into the evening. We had Chinese delivered and ate together in the server room, discussing strategy. Mr. Cole had assigned Jeffrey exclusively to me for the remainder of my trip, so we planned out the next few days' work with that in mind.

I trudged through the lobby of my hotel at 10:20pm with no thought other than getting my aching muscles into bed immediately. Darlene waved from the front desk with a knowing smile on her face, but I was too tired to do more than wave back.

There was a small gift bag sitting on the middle of my bed. It was tied up with pink ribbons, and had a little white card taped to the top. I pulled off the card and turned it over.

*On the third night of Christmas, your true love sends to you ...
A few creature comforts to soothe your aches. I wish I could be
there to pamper you personally, but I'll make it up to you when you
get home.*

-T

Inside the bag was a tube of foaming bath salts and a bottle of moisturizing after-bath lotion. The tube had a pleasant aroma to it that mixed nicely with the lingering flower scent in the air. Why not, I decided; a good, hot bath before bed would do wonders for my sore muscles.

The warm water welcomed me like a lover as I eased myself into the tub. The relaxing floral scent of the bath salts filled the room. I slid way down, letting the water come all the way up my neck, and enjoyed the

sensation of floating in the tub. With my eyes closed, I took deep breaths and imagined I had Ted with me, lovingly scrubbing my back with a soft sponge. My body tingled, imagining his hands on my shoulders, smoothing and caressing my muscles. It had only been three days, but already my body was missing Ted's. I drifted off into a daydream in which Ted was there with me, bathing me, running his hands over me while he planted little kisses on my neck and shoulders. My breasts began to tingle at the thought of his fingers on them, and there was an extra warmth coming from down below where his cock would be so welcome. I lay there daydreaming, getting more and more aroused by the thoughts and imagined sensations, helped along by the warm water flowing around me. I pictured Ted standing over me, an amused smile on his face as he saw how worked up I was getting. I pictured him kneeling down next to the tub. "Just close your eyes and relax," he'd say, "and let me take care of you." I closed my eyes and imagined him leaning over, slowly letting his hand wander down my stomach, over my mound, and up my leg to the water line. Then he changed direction, sliding easily along the inside of my thigh and coming to rest in my center. My finger became his finger as I imagined him carefully parting my lips, sliding in between them, finding my button ...

I came, suddenly and intensely. With the water cradling my body, I felt it from head to toe and back again. I gave in to the feeling completely, letting it take me for a ride. When it was over I felt so loose I wasn't sure I'd ever get out of the tub. I tripped the drain lever with a toe and let the water recede around me while I caught my breath.

Finally, the relative chill of the bathroom air motivated me enough to get up from the tub. I toweled off, applied the lotion to my drying skin, and slipped between the sheets to dream of my lover some more.

The kickoff meeting was enlightening, as they often are. Mortimer Cole chaired the meeting himself, and from the way he stressed that full cooperation was expected of all departments I got the feeling that there had been some opposition to the project. That's not unusual; law firms are notoriously resistant to change, and our system was a radical departure from the processes they had been using since time immemorial. Some reluctance is normal. By watching the various department heads, I was able to pick up clues as to which ones would need some extra reassurance that the sky was not going to fall.

After the meeting, Jeffrey and I returned to the server room to finish putting the system together. We had most of the hardware mounted in the cabinet; it was just a question of dressing the cabling. I'm a bit particular about cables, I confess: I like to have them neatly laid in, tied down so they only move when they need to, and with any slack tucked out of sight and secured. Sean and Joel like to kid me about it, but my clients are always impressed at how neat my installations look. It seems to reassure them that, despite being a woman, I really do know what I'm doing.

By four in the afternoon we had the SAN powered up and ready, and it was time to start configuring the servers. Fowler, Briggs had purchased a 3-node cluster. All three servers had shared access to the SAN, so if any one failed the others would be able to cover for it and the users wouldn't notice the difference. Clusters are very reliable, but the configuration is tricky; I diagrammed it out on paper first, partly for my own benefit and partly so Jeffrey would understand it, since he would be supporting it after I was back home. Installing the base operating system on each node, I ran into the usual difficulties with drivers and firmware levels; it was almost nine o'clock before I had all three nodes alive and seeing each other and the SAN. I called it a night.

There was another gift bag on my hotel bed, this one secured with a white ribbon. I read the card first:

*On the fourth night of Christmas, your true love sends to you ...
Music, to feed your soul and give you something to counteract the
all-day hum of machinery. Let me sing you to sleep by proxy with
these.*

-T

The CD's were new, but included some of my favorite artists. There was some classical, some jazz, some romantic ballads, even a CD of novelty Christmas songs. I got out my laptop, put the ballads CD in it, and turned the volume up enough to hear comfortably, then picked up the phone and dialed home.

"How are things going?" Ted asked me after we exchanged greeting.

"Pretty chaotic," I told him. "If it wasn't for your little care packages, I'd be a basket case by now."

"It's a pleasure to service you, m'lady."

"You'll be doing plenty of that when I get home," I replied, my mind already picturing my homecoming.

"Is that a promise?" I could hear the lust in his voice and decided to have some fun with him.

"Oh, yes, lover." I let the words out slowly, in my sexiest voice. "You know, last night I was fantasizing about you during my bath."

"Umm ... really?" The hitch in his voice told me I had him.

"Oh, yes. As I lay there in the tub, all naked, letting the hot water just roll all over me, I imagined you were there with me. You were washing me off, caressing my breast, kissing my neck, and I was just melting for you. I was so wet, and so hot for you, I touched myself just once and had an amazing climax."

"I see."

Time to move in for the kill. "Your voice sounds a little tense, honey. Am I arousing you? Are you sitting there imagining what I looked like, touching myself in the bathtub, thinking of you, and getting so hard you can't stand it? Do you wish I was there with you now, stroking that splendid, hard dick of yours, whispering into your ear how much I want to have it inside me?"

"Yes," he groaned softly. "And yes, and yes."

"Do it for me," I told him. "Stroke yourself, and imagine that it's me doing it. I'm right here, and I want to hear to you come." I whispered the most arousing things I could think of into the phone, teasing him, talking about how good he felt, how much I wanted him inside me, until I heard the telltale grunting sound I knew so well. "That's it, darling, come for me. I love you."

I hung up the phone and realized I was most of the way there myself. I pictured Ted sitting there with the phone in one hand and his erection in the other, thinking of me, coming, and very soon I was doing the same.

Friday morning was cold and wet and dull. The offices of Fowler, Briggs were even more deserted than the previous days, thanks to the fact that Monday would be New Year's Day.

I started the day in Joe Kendall's office with him and Jeffrey, plotting out the rest of the installation work. Jeffrey would install the scanning stations - freestanding, network-attached scanners with sheet feeders and the ability to store the scanned documents on my cluster's SAN -- in strategic places where they'd be convenient to everyone. Joe and I would go over the standard forms, contracts, and other documents that would need to be scanned into the system and turned into templates. While we were going through the folder, Mortimer Cole walked in on us.

Joe almost jumped out his seat. "M-morning, Mr. Cole."

Cole frowned slightly. "Mr. Kendall, Miss Weatherby. How is the project going? Are we on schedule?"

"Just about," I said. "We lost a day at the outset because the equipment wasn't here, but with Jeffrey's help I've been able to make up for that. We're just about where we need to be."

"Good. Will you be working through the weekend, then? There will not be anyone on duty Monday, but I can arrange someone to let you in and stay with you if need be."

Out of the corner of my eye I could see Joe Kendall turning gray, probably at the thought of spending New Year's Day at work. "I don't think that's necessary, Mr. Cole. By Sunday afternoon we should have the system fully operating with the most common templates available for the training sessions on Tuesday. I think we can take Monday off."

For a moment I thought he was going to smile. "Very well," he replied. "Let me know if anything changes."

I spent the rest of the day getting our software installed and tuned on the cluster. It's a tricky process; there are several service processes and associated databases to size and load balance across the cluster's nodes. Using my laptop, I checked the network for congestion that might cause performance problems and found that things were pretty clean. The firm had a good architecture in place, with best-of-breed switches and routers and a solid cable plant. I was impressed.

Mostly for Jeffrey's benefit, we called it a day somewhat early -- six o'clock. I didn't see Darlene in the lobby, but I didn't have to; once again, there was a gift on the bed.

This time it was an envelope with a golden ribbon for decoration. I opened it and read the card inside.

*On the fifth night of Christmas, your true love sends to you ...
The gift of laughter. Since I couldn't predict your schedule, this ticket is good for any show this weekend. The same limo company will take you there and back if you call them an hour before show time.*

-T

In addition to Ted's card was a ticket to Washington Improv Theatre, a local improvisation troupe, and the phone number for the limousine service that had picked me up from the airport. According to the schedule on the ticket, I had my choice of Friday night or Saturday night shows, either one starting at 9:00. Since I was done for the night at a reasonable time, I opted for the first choice.

The limo came for me at 8:15. Tony greeted me with a friendly wave and a Jack and Coke. "I could get spoiled very easily," I told him.

"I think that's the idea," he replied with a wink.

The show was brilliant -- fast-paced, creative, and funny as anything I've ever seen. And then, toward the end of the show, came the final surprise: the group's leader came to stage center. "Is Paula here tonight? Paula Weatherby?"

More surprised than I should have been, I raised my hand. The man on stage saw me and smiled. "Paula, we have a special surprise for you tonight. I understand you've been having an interesting week. Would you mind telling us a few things about it?"

I shrugged. "Okay."

The player, whose name was Tyler, asked me a series of questions about the week: people I'd met, incidents I'd taken part in or witnessed, things I'd seen, what I thought of Washington. Then, to my amazement and delight, the group put on a scene incorporating what I'd told them. I laughed out loud at their reenactment of my week. The audience roared

over their highly embellished version of my first morning at Fowler, Briggs and the confusion with the security guard. Their impressions of Mortimer Cole and Joe Kendall had me doubled over in my seat. Finally, after a good twenty minutes, they ended the scene with me going back to California and meeting up with Ted at the airport. The applause at the end seemed to last forever.

On the way back to the hotel, I took out my cell phone and called home. Ted answered on the third ring. "Hello?"

"Is every Christmas with you going to be like this?" I asked.

"Hopefully not," he answered quickly. "Next year I hope to spend the whole twelve days with you at a clothing-optional tropical resort."

We chuckled together. "This is wonderful," I told him. "I don't know what to say except thank you."

"You're wonderful. And you're welcome."

Saturday was a busy day. Jeffrey and I worked a full day getting the scanning stations hooked up and tested. We did the first few together then, once he was comfortable with the process, we split up to finish the job faster. Still, the job took us well into the evening. We had a quick meal at a nearby diner and parted company.

A tingle of anticipation went through me as I entered my hotel room. My eyes went straight to the bed and located the package on it. This time it was a box, and a heavy one. I picked the card off the top:

*On the sixth night of Christmas, your true love sends to you ...
Something to keep you company over the weekend. How long has
it been since you read something that wasn't a tech manual?
Hopefully this will provide you with a short break from the job.*

-T

Inside the box was a heavy hardcover book: *Sexplorations -- a Collection of Erotic Poetry*. A very impressive collection, I noticed: over 1,000 pages without the index. I flipped to a random page and started reading.

*The excitement rises,
yet you have not touched me;
with eyes closed, i softly smile,
feeling your presence.*

*Your breath stirs my hair,
and my body reacts.
I reach for you, but you tease me
further.*

*Your fingertips feel like
a gentle breeze, and i shiver.
you come into my arms,
and i have never felt more alive.*

*Suddenly, you are kissing me.
The violent swirl of hunger
erupts in my body,
the need for you becomes desperate.*

*Our bodies snake together.
I want to be closer,
but there is no such thing.
And suddenly, I'm home.**

I closed the book and sighed, feeling a tingle in my groin as I related the words to my own experiences. There was power in those words, and passion, and romance. I knew I'd be reading a lot more, and soon.

Sunday, New Year's Eve day, was rainy and cold. Jeffrey had the day off, his work done until the office reopened after the holiday; my agenda for Sunday was with Joe Kendall. We'd agreed to meet in his office at ten, but his name wasn't on the entry log when I signed in at 9:55. I went up to his office and waited there.

Forty minutes later Joe finally showed up, mumbling something about traffic. I ended up waiting another ten minutes while he got himself coffee. The, finally, he plopped down behind his desk and declared himself ready to begin.

"Good," I said, biting back the urge to comment further. "If you'll get out the standard forms you want made into templates, the first step is to scan them."

He looked at me as if I'd sprouted a second head. "You need those now?"

"Yes, Joe. We can't do anything with them until we scan them in." *That's why I asked you to collect them five days ago*, I added silently.

"Oh. You're gonna have to excuse me for a few minutes, then. I still need to collect some of them."

"We can start with one you have handy," I offered, but he was already halfway out the door and didn't respond.

I sighed and let out a quiet growl of frustration. A central feature of our system is a library of standard forms that users can call up and complete quickly. We build the library by scanning in the client's own most-used documents and turning them into templates. I'd asked Kendall to assemble a collection of the documents they wanted treated this way, and he'd assured me that when we got to that stage, he'd be ready.

So much for his assurances. I waited half an hour before he returned with a manilla folder under his arm. I fired up the scanner and fed the first one in, then pulled up the system on my laptop and got ready to take the scanned image and create a functional template from it. Kendall watched from his chair, one eye often straying to the clock, answering my questions with as few words as possible.

My productivity soared at 12:30, mostly because Joe left me alone while he went out for lunch. Fortunately, most of the firm's standard documents were boilerplate legal papers, and it was pretty easy for me to deduce from the context what the data entry requirements should be. I was almost disappointed when Kendall returned at 1:45. As luck would have it, though, he left for good at 3:00 citing a family gathering. I wished him a happy new year and breathed a sigh of relief when he was gone.

I spent the rest of the afternoon plowing through the remaining documents. There would be a few questions to be answered on Tuesday, probably by someone other than Joe, but on the whole they were not hard to figure out. So deep was my concentration that I hardly noticed the passage of time.

"Miss Weatherby."

The unexpected voice from the doorway behind me startled me. I almost didn't recognize Mortimer Cole; for the first time that week, he wasn't in a dark business suit. In khakis and a sweatshirt he seemed like an entirely different man. "Mr. Cole," I blurted, covering myself. "Surprising to see you here."

"Not if you know my reputation," he replied, with just a hint of a smile on his lips. "Some of the associates think I sleep in the office, in double-breasted pinstripe pajamas."

"Do you?"

"No." The smile was full this time. "But some days I might as well. Weren't you supposed to be working with Mr. Kendall today?"

"I have been," I assured him. "The templates are just about ready for Tuesday."

"That's good to hear," he replied, with a stony look at the clock. "Especially since Mr. Kendall signed out some four hours ago."

I was in no mood to defend Joe Kendall, so I said nothing.

"This process that you're doing," he continued, gesturing at the laptop and the documents on the table. "Is that something you can teach Jeffrey to do?"

"Certainly," I responded. "It's a little out of his normal sphere, but Jeffrey has a good understanding of the system. He should have no problem picking it up."

"Good." Our eyes met, and an understanding passed between them.

"I can show Jeffrey all of the normal system management functions, too, if you like. We always find it handy to have a backup administrator."

Cole nodded. "Will you be much longer? You and I are the last two in the building, according to the logs. Security will need us out of here by eight so they can lock up and set the alarms."

Where had the time gone? "I can close up and do the rest with Jeffrey," I offered. "It would make a good training exercise."

Cole agreed, so I packed up the laptop and we left the building together. The rain had let up, so I declined his offer of a ride and walked back to the hotel, stopping in a deli on the way to pick up a sandwich and chips for a light dinner.

It was with a tingle of anticipation that I opened the hotel room door and stepped inside. My eyes had gotten to the habit of checking the bed as soon as I got inside, and once again they spotted the gift. This time it was a silver room service tray. On the tray was a silvery ice bucket with the neck of a bottle sticking out and a crystal bowl of foil-wrapped droplets -- Hershey's Kisses. I read the card first:

*On the seventh night of Christmas, your true love sends to you ...
Champagne and kisses for your New Year's wishes. I'll be thinking
of you at midnight, my love.*

-T

I had my dinner, but drank Moet with my sandwich instead of the Diet Coke I'd bought at the deli. It not only hit the spot, but massaged it sensuously afterwards. After dinner, I ran some more water in the tub and had another nice, luxurious bath.

At midnight Eastern time, I picked up the phone and called Ted.

"Hello?"

"Hi there, lover," I purred into the phone. "Do you want to know what I'm doing right now?"

"Okay."

"I'm sitting in an easy chair in my hotel room, naked, drinking champagne and eating chocolate and thinking about how I'm going to repay you for all this pampering when I get home."

"Sounds as though you're enjoying yourself."

"Not as much as I would be if you were here."

He chuckled. "It's just a few more days, love."

"And I'll be spending those days planning your payback," I promised. "You'd better start taking extra vitamins now."

New Year's Day was cold and clear. I took advantage of my one day off to walk around downtown DC. Most of the monuments and museums were closed because of the holiday, but it was enough for me to walk past them and get a feel of the flavor of the capital. It was fun.

When I got back to my room there was a card on the bed and nothing else.

*On the eighth night of Christmas, your true love sends to you ...
A dinner to remember. The limousine will pick you up at seven and
take you to Ruth's Chris Steakhouse.*

-T

My stomach growled in anticipation. I'd been to a Ruth's Chris once before, with Ted; we'd both agreed that it would be very easy to get addicted to that level of food and service. You pay dearly for the food there, but it's worth every penny.

It was no surprise at all to find Tony waiting for me at the appointed time, a Jack and Coke in hand. "How's my favorite passenger?"

I smiled. "Having a wonderful time. I actually had a chance to be a tourist today."

He grinned and closed the door for me. On the way to the restaurant, he asked me where I'd gone on my day off. We chatted about DC, the tourist traps, the news of the day. It was a short ride to Connecticut Avenue, where the restaurant stood. "Take your time," he told me as I got out. "I'm yours exclusively tonight."

Dinner was to die for. The steak was so tender I didn't need a knife to cut it, the salad was fresh and full of flavor, and the dessert was absolutely decadent. I checked my self-discipline at the door, except for the wine -- with all the alcohol I'd been having lately, I decided that iced tea would be a better choice.

After dinner I poured my full, sleepy body into Tony's limousine. He started to get out the liquor, but I waved him off. "I won't need to eat or drink anything else for a month," I told him.

Tony took the long way back to the hotel, driving past the monuments so I could see them lit up in the night. I thanked him at the doorway and turned in early.

The alarm went off at 5:30 Tuesday morning. My body protested a bit as I rolled out of bed, but I wasn't hearing any excuses: I'd been a very lazy, self-indulgent girl the past few days, and some penance was in order.

I threw on some sweats, then found the health club and spent some quality time on the treadmill and stair climbing machines. I'm not a fitness nut, but I do like the energy lift I get from doing a session or two a week. I hadn't worked out since the day before Christmas, and I could tell; it took my body longer than usual to find its rhythm and settle into it, and when I was done I felt it more than I normally do.

A shower and some fresh coffee got me ready to face Fowler, Briggs. This would be the first day of live users on the new system, which meant I'd be kept busy training users, watching the system for unexpected glitches, and answering every question imaginable.

I got there early to give me a chance to check on the system and make sure the training room was set up according to specs. Jeffrey had done that, so I was pretty confident it would be. I wasn't disappointed.

The morning training session went as well as could be expected. Several of the more senior staffers were in that first class, and I could tell from their body language that I was going to have a tough time. They looked at the computer screen as if it had something foul written on it; any chance they saw to suggest that the new system was too complicated or too slow, they took. Fortunately we have a great product, so there weren't very many of those opportunities. I've had plenty of practice at dealing with people like that, but it's never fun.

After the morning class I caught up with Jeffrey and, over sandwiches from a vending machine in the building, showed him how to turn a paper document into a usable electronic template. He took to it quickly, and was even able to suggest answers to some of the questions I'd had on the forms from Sunday.

The afternoon class had a different tone from the morning group. No hostility this time, but the people were sleepy and dull and clearly didn't want to be there. Afternoon classes are like that sometimes.

Following the second class I did a walk through the building, checking on people from the classes and answering questions. By the time I finished one tour of the building my legs were complaining, my voice was getting husky and it was after six in the evening. I walked back to the hotel to call it a night.

My nightly surprise was waiting for me, as usual.

*On the ninth night of Christmas, your true love sends to you ...
Relief for your overworked throat. If I know your schedule as well as
I should, then you probably need this. Take care of yourself, darling.*

-T

Inside the gift bag was a large ceramic mug and a package of herbal tea: a blend of Echinacea and chamomile, my favorite treatment for an overworked throat. Blessing Ted's foresight, I brewed a big, steaming mug of tea using the in-room coffee maker and settled into the easy chair. I propped my sore feet up on the ottoman, sipped tea, and read erotic poetry until it felt like bedtime.

Wednesday was pretty much a repeat of Tuesday: an early start to check on the system; a morning training class; a working lunch with Jeffrey to teach him some aspects of system management that, in theory, should have been Joe Kendall's job; an afternoon training class; and a post-training walk around the building to answer questions and provide spot tech support.

The pattern changed at the end of the day, as I walked through Mortimer Cole's department. His senior assistant, an older lady named Patience, spotted me, got up from her desk, and came over -- a bad sign all by itself. "Mr. Cole asked me to bring you in to see him when you stopped by," she explained in a tense undertone. "Will you come this way please?"

I shrugged and followed her past Cole's office to a conference room. She opened the door, ushered me in, and closed it behind me. Mortimer Cole was inside, seated at the head of the conference table. He stood up briefly and motioned toward the empty chair at the opposite end. "Miss Weatherby, thank you for coming. I apologize for pulling you in here without notice, but your input in this meeting would be invaluable."

A table full of older men in 3-piece suits watched me as I sat down, giving me a strong feeling of foreboding. Something was up. Cole provided brief introductions. "Miss Weatherby, I'd like to present my partners: Mr. Fowler, Mr. Briggs, Mr. Llewelyn; Mr. Sanderson and Mr. Thomas are also partners in the firm."

A nasty knot formed in my stomach as I exchanged pleasant greetings with the partners. Something was up, and my intuition told me it wouldn't be pretty. Sure enough, Cole's next words bore my suspicions true.

"Miss Weatherby," Cole said, clearing his throat, "the partners and I need to discuss with you the issue of Mr. Kendall's performance. In your role as consultant on the imaging project, have you formed an impression of Mr. Kendall's competence as an IT manager?"

Alarm bells were going off in every corner of my head. I forced myself to take a deep breath and steady myself. "Mr. Cole," I answered carefully, "I really don't feel comfortable with that question. Joe Kendall is someone I only met a week ago, and it wouldn't be fair or appropriate for me to offer any kind of judgment on his competence. I know you have some concerns, but I'd really rather not insert myself into the firm's personnel decisions. I hope you can understand that."

Mortimer Cole's face lit up a little, like someone who's stumbled on a pleasant surprise. "You're right, of course," he said, with the partners nodding in agreement. "I apologize for the approach. If it helps any, let me assure you that the decision on Mr. Kendall has already been made; at issue in this meeting is the status of the imaging project, and the consequences of Mr. Kendall's missteps in that context. It is my impression that the apparent success of the implementation has been more a result of your and Jeffrey's efforts than Mr. Kendall's; would you be amenable to discussing some of the details of the project in that context?"

The knot loosened a little bit. I had no particular reason to defend Joe Kendall, but it's never a good idea to get pulled into the client's internal machinations. "That I can do."

For the next hour, I answered questions about the project. We discussed the problems with the equipment delivery, the work I'd done with Jeffrey, and the situation with the templates. I confined myself strictly to the facts, keeping all judgment about Joe to myself. When it was over, they thanked me politely and let me go.

When I got back to the hotel it was after eight and I felt as if I'd been grilled by a Senate committee -- which, considering the political clout of the lawyers I'd been cloistered with, wasn't too far from the truth.

There was a box on the bed this time instead of a bag. It was tied in a deep red ribbon, with the card on the outside.

*On the tenth night of Christmas, your true love sends to you ...
A little something to wear under your business suit tomorrow. Feel this against your skin, and remember that while you may be brilliant with technology, you're also amazingly sexy. And you're all mine.*

-T

Inside the box was a teddy. The main body of it was a deep, blood-red silk, with soft lace accents and thin straps. I held it up against my body, looked at it in the full-length mirror, and had to approve. It felt sinfully smooth in my hands, and I felt my nipples tighten in anticipation of that luxurious cloth brushing against them. Tempted as I was, I hung my gift up to wear the next day.

Thursday was a big day on the schedule -- acceptance test day. Each implementation ends with an acceptance test, where every function of the system gets demonstrated to the client so they can see that it works as promised. There is a formal checklist that we follow, and each side keeps a copy as proof that the system passed. Not only does a completed acceptance test make the client feel more confident in the system, but it also helps us in getting the bill paid promptly.

It was another early morning for me. I hit the gym as they were unlocking the door and put the machinery to good use, working off some more of my weekend indulgences. After my shower, I put on my present from the night before and gave myself the once-over in the mirror.

Not bad, I decided. The teddy was smooth and comfortable, not too snug and not too revealing; it was sexy all right, but in a classy way. I decided to go braless and enjoy the sensation of the silk against me all day. My dark gray suit covered it nicely, giving no hint of what was beneath. Walking down the street to Fowler, Briggs, I felt strong and alive and irresistibly sexy all at once -- a feeling that would stay with me all day.

Jeffrey was waiting for me in the server room when I popped in there, as I generally did first thing. He looked at me, blinked, seemed about to say something, then shook whatever it was off and started over. "Did you hear about Joe?"

I shook my head.

"He got hauled in before the partners this morning, early, and put on probation. Officially, he's got 90 days to prove his competence and keep his job; unofficially, the rumor is he'll be gone by the end of the month at best."

"That's too bad," I replied.

Jeffrey grinned. "No, it isn't. Joe doesn't belong in that job, and everybody knows it. He needs to go back to the Hill, where he came from. One of the partners hired him here as a favor to a client who'd lost his reelection bid, but nobody was happy with it."

"That explains a few things," I noted.

"Yeah. There's just one thing." Jeffrey looked around, making sure we were alone. "Joe knows that you talked to the partners last night. I wouldn't expect a lot of cooperation from him for the rest of this project if I were you."

"I wasn't," I said grimly, "but I didn't --"

"I know. Cole told me you refused to trash Joe in front of the partners; said he was impressed enough to offer you the job, but he didn't think you'd take it."

"The commute would be hell," I joked, and turned the subject to the upcoming acceptance test. Jeffrey and I spent the rest of the morning doing a dry run through the test procedures, making sure that everything would work as planned. I also took the opportunity to show him some more administration, especially how to audit activity on the system and how to lock out an administrative user if, or when, Joe Kendall got his walking papers.

I didn't see Joe until after lunch, when it was time for the acceptance test. He showed up in company with Mortimer Cole and Cole's assistant, Patience. Jeffrey was there already to complete the committee.

There was an awkward moment at the beginning, when Joe volunteered himself to be the one to execute the tests. Normally I like to have someone from the client company doing the driving -- it proves that the system will work for someone other than me, for one thing -- but I really didn't think Joe was the best choice for this place. I looked quizzically at Cole; he nodded and fixed the problem. "Mr. Kendall," he said in a voice that would brook no argument. "As an IT professional, I think we can assume that you would be able to successfully complete the test exercises. Since Patience is more typical of users in the firm, I think the test would be more valid if she were doing the actual work. Miss Weatherby?"

I nodded, grateful for the help. "That's the way I usually like to do things," I agreed. "With a typical user, rather than an IT type."

Kendall shot me a malevolent look, but yielded the seat to Patience. From there on out the test went smoothly, as I expected it would. Patience had no problem creating documents by any of the ways the system supports, filing them, retrieving them, faxing them, emailing them, printing them, etc. Using storage reports, I was able to demonstrate that the test documents, which were based on the firm's own originals, took up less than 20 percent of the space those same documents used under the old system. While Patience worked with a long, complex document, I simulated a system failure by pulling the power plug on one of the three servers; the other two kept things running and the "failure" had no effect on Patience's work.

At the end of the day I had a signed copy of the test results indicating the firm's acceptance of the system and Cole's personal assurance that the balance due would be paid within 15 days. For me, it was time to celebrate.

I headed back to the hotel, wondering what Ted would have waiting for me this time. He'd already done flowers, candy, champagne, lingerie ... all the normal cliché gifts that men give their women. Plus he'd thrown in a hefty dose of the unexpected, with the music and the bath salts and the erotic poetry. What next?

The answer was on the bed when I entered my room, as usual: a white satin robe and a pair of slippers, neatly folded, with a card in top.

On the eleventh night of Christmas, your true love sends to you ... a reward for what was surely a job well done. Put on the robe and slippers -- and just those -- and go down to the hotel spa, next to the gym, for your massage. They're expecting you.

-T

The robe felt almost as good against my skin as the silk teddy had. I belted it, put on the slippers, and headed for the spa. I brought nothing with me but my room key, which I'd slipped into the robe pocket.

I entered the spa and was greeted immediately by a friendly guy behind the counter. When I told him my name, he nodded right away. "Yes, we've been holding a table and shower for you. If you'll come with me, please?" I followed him into the back, into a large room divided by curtains. It was like a hospital ward, only with a more intimate feel. He motioned me into a corner area with a massage table and a small coat tree. "If you'll wait here," he said, "Veronica will be right with you." He pulled the curtain closed on his way out.

That left me sitting on the massage table, holding the robe closed, wondering what the protocol was. Should I shed the robe and lie down? Sit up and wait?

I didn't have to wonder long. The curtain moved, and a young lady my own age poked a head in. "Paula?"

"That's me."

She gave me a beaming smile and came in, pulling the curtain shut behind her. "Great! I'm Veronica, and I'm your best friend for the next ninety minutes. Anything I should know about before we start -- aches, pains, recent injuries?"

I shook my head. "Nothing. Just tons and tons of job-related stress."

Veronica nodded knowingly. "I'll bet. The guy who made the reservation for you said you've been working 12-hour days since Christmas, and that we should be very, very nice to you. Was that your husband?"

"Boyfriend," I corrected.

"All the better -- boyfriends try harder," she said with a wink. "Ready to start?"

"Sure."

"Okay, then let's have you on your tummy. Did you want to keep the robe on?"

I hesitated. "What's easier for you?"

Veronica shrugged. "I can go either way. It feels better without the robe, and it tends to get in the way when you move around, but I want you to be comfortable."

I took another look at the curtain, shrugged, and let the robe slip off. Veronica took it from me and hung it on the coat tree while I climbed onto the massage table face down. "I'll keep you covered where I don't need to work," she assured me, "so just relax and enjoy."

For the next hour and a half I lay on the table and let Veronica work her magic on me. She worked the muscles in my back, releasing tensions I didn't even realize were there, occasionally making a remark about a knot here or there and telling me to relax. She spread warm oil on my skin as she worked her way up and down my entire body. After a while, she helped me roll onto my back. She draped a towel across my pelvis and another over my eyes to block out the light, then went back to work. I think I cat-napped a little, because the time just flew by. At one point she asked me something about my feet; I was too blissed out to pay attention, so I just grunted a "Yes" and let go a little more.

The grand finale was pure sensual heaven: I lay on my back, propped up slightly, while Veronica worked my neck and shoulders and someone else caressed my feet. It wasn't until the end, when she took the towel off my face, that I looked down and saw that the person doing my feet was a man!

He looked up at me with a broad smile. "I'm Bill," he said, offering a hand.

I shook it, then realized that I was lying there topless in front of this strange guy. He didn't seem as though it was a big deal to him, so I decided it wasn't a problem for me either. "Bill," I told him, "You're an artist."

"My pleasure." He winked, and made a discreet exit. He hadn't even looked at my chest that I'd noticed. Of course, most of the time I'd had

my eyes closed and a towel over my face. I vowed that if Ted asked, I'd tell him I'd had a female masseuse.

Veronica handed me a bath-sized towel. "You're all done," she said. "Wrap up in this, and you'll find there's a shower stall with your name on it behind that door and to the right. There'll be a hook on the outside for your robe. If there's anything else you need, just push the attendant button outside the shower. Okay?"

I sighed, moving my very relaxed muscles around a bit, trying to wake up. "More than okay," I told her. "What comes after 'unbelievably wonderful'?"

She grinned. "I believe 'orgasmic'. Take care now."

The glow was still with me after I'd showered off the massage oil and gone back up to my room. Still in just the robe, I flopped into the armchair and picked up the phone. Ted answered right away. "Hello?"

"I love you," I said, breathlessly.

"I love you too," he replied, and I could imagine the grin on his face from his voice. "How do you feel?"

"Like a pampered kitten. I just want to sit here and purr."

"Then my job is almost done," he declared. "Tomorrow night, when you get home, I'll personally lick your fur."

"Promise?" I asked with a leer he could hear.

"Cross my heart."

There wasn't a lot left to do Friday. Joe Kendall called in sick, so I handed all of the administrator manuals to Jeffrey, with the approval of Mortimer Cole. We had a final meeting, mostly to go over the tech support program and to set up the points of contact. Mr. Cole ended that meeting by inviting me to lunch with him and Jeffrey.

We had a very nice lunch at a four-star restaurant. Away from the office, Mortimer Cole was less formal -- he told stories about his grandchildren that kept us entertained while we waited for the food.

Over coffee, he came out with the offer Jeffrey had mentioned. "Paula," he began, getting my attention right away. "I'm sure Jeffrey's told you that Joe Kendall is on probation. I don't think anyone expects him to stay long enough to improve; he's out of his depth, and all of the partners know it. We could start searching for his eventual replacement today, but before we do, I'd like to offer you the position. Your talents are obvious, and the partners concur with my judgment that you would be a valuable addition to our firm as IT manager."

I did think about it, for a second or two, but the answer was obvious. "I'm sorry, Mr. Cole," I replied. "As much as I would probably enjoy the work, I have family on the West Coast that I'd like stay near. And with Sean's condition, I can't leave the company in the lurch even if I wanted to. I appreciate the compliment, but I can't accept your offer."

Cole nodded, a resigned look on his face. "Much the answer I expected," he remarked. "Which demonstrates why you're exactly the kind of person we need. If you change your mind ..."

"Not likely," I said, "But thank you."

My work day ended with lunch. When I got back to the hotel, I was only mildly surprised to find Tony and his limousine waiting outside. "We really need to stop meeting like this," I kidded.

"I won't tell if you don't." His wink reminded me a little of Ted.

I'd already checked out; all I had to do was get my bag from the front desk, where the manager had stored it for me. Tony got me to Dulles in plenty of time for my flight home.

There was only one surprise involved in the flight, and it was a pleasant one: the ticket clerk at Dulles told me I had been upgraded to first class for the trip home. He didn't have a white card for me, so I decided I probably had Rose to thank for that one. No matter, I thought as I settled into seat 3A for the ride to San Jose. Just getting home would be present enough for the twelfth night.

We landed on schedule, which was a nice bonus. I followed the crowd to the baggage claim area, scouring every face looking for Ted. Then, as I

was straining to see through the crowd at the carousel, there was a tap on my shoulder. I turned around and there was Ted, grinning from ear to ear. "Welcome home, honey."

I squealed with delight and jumped on him, smothering him with passionate kisses. He held me tightly until I became aware of the people staring at us and broke off, reluctantly. "You are going to get so much more when we get home," I vowed.

"I'll be ready."

We carried my things out of the terminal and toward the parking garage. "What," I teased, "no limo?"

He shrugged. "I called every service in town, and none of them would let us make love in the back seat during the ride. So I figured if I had to keep my hands off you the whole way home I'd better just do the driving myself."

"There's always the back seat," I tendered. We both laughed at that one. Ted drives an Altima; it's not a bad size for a passenger car, but to do any serious lovemaking in it you'd have to be either very small or quadruple-jointed. So I contented myself with stroking his thigh suggestively while he drove and cackling in wicked glee every time he shifted in his seat to accommodate the erection I was causing.

We managed to make it home without incident. We carried my things inside and dumped them in the living room, then started necking in earnest. Ted carried me into the bedroom, my legs locked around his waist, and lowered me gently to the bed. We undressed quickly, almost frantically, our need for each other driving out all other thoughts.

The first time was fast and furious. Ted spread my legs apart and just dove in, locking us together at the hips. We came together almost immediately, panting and grunting and staring deeply into each other's eyes.

With the immediate hunger abated, we stretched out together on the bed and luxuriated in the joy of skin-to-skin contact. Our hands explored each other's bodies as if for the first time, caressing and squeezing everywhere we could. Ted's fingers found my steaming center and worked their way inside, pushing my buttons, causing that sense of urgency to start all over again. I lay back, panting, while Ted suckled at a breast and pleased me from within. He brought me to the edge, then

backed off for a few seconds, then started over again. After he'd done that a few times, I lost myself in the sensations and the growing need for release. "Do it," I moaned as his fingers brushed my button again. "Please, just do it."

For answer, he reached a little deeper into my tunnel and pressed on the upper wall, sending fire through my entire nervous system. My bottom clenched, my back arched, and my brain went completely blank as I climaxed. Ted held the spot, keeping me quivering and shaking, until I collapsed onto the bed, spent. Then he gathered me into his arms, kissed me, and whispered, "I missed you. Welcome home, lover."

We lay together in a lazy embrace while I recovered. My hand idly played up and down Ted's torso, stroking aimlessly. After a while, I felt his cock pressing against my leg, and the stroking became much more purposeful. I deliberately let my hand stray a little lower with each repetition, slowing down, letting him anticipate where I'd stop next. When I finally touched his cock, it was at full attention for me. "Looks like somebody's ready for another round," I said, and grabbed his shaft in my hand. Instead of pumping him, though, I just squeezed him once and then opened my hand, rubbing around the whole area in circles. I teased him, touching his thighs, his balls, his groin, and his cock, all in succession. Ted got harder and harder, and his hips began to move with me. "Not so fast," I teased, tickling his balls lightly on the way past. "We've got all night."

I was recovered enough to get up, so I knelt up on the bed and applied both hands to the job. One concentrated totally on his cock, the other on the surrounding area. Both I kept in constant motion. Ted's moans let me know how much he was enjoying it. Watching him writhe beneath me, so close to coming, was more than enough to get my juices flowing again as well. Soon I'd teased him enough; I climbed up and took him inside me, settling down over him until he bottomed out. I squeezed my muscles against him as we rocked up and down together. Soon I could feel that little quiver that told me he was about to come; I reached behind and gave his balls a little fondle for good measure, and Ted exploded. His whole body tensed and bucked beneath me, applying even more delicious pressure to the pleasure points inside me. I rode him, squeezing and rocking, until I came again. Then, satisfied at last, I climbed off and tucked myself back into his arms.

I was just about asleep when Ted stirred and rolled out of the bed. "What are you doing?" I asked him, looking around for the clock, only to be temporarily blinded by the bedroom light.

"Don't go to sleep yet," he told me, as he reached into a drawer in his dresser. "You'll miss your last present."

"I got my last present," I countered, purring with slaked sexual desire. "Three times."

Ted laughed. "That wasn't it," he insisted. "I have something else for you. I was going to give it you before, but we sorta got sidetracked right away."

Sitting on the edge of the bed at my side, he handed me a tiny velvet box and a white card.

*On the twelfth night of Christmas, your true love gives to you ...
One golden ring. And, I hope, a lifetime of Christmases to come.*

-T

It was hard to tell for sure with the tears forming in my eyes, but I thought I could see Ted smiling.

"Yes," I said, before I'd even opened the box. "Absolutely, yes."

-wg
12/25/01

* Thanks to **Donna** for providing this original poem for the story.