
To Have and to Hold

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FOOTSTEPS ECHOED overhead, muted by the deep carpets of the old mansion. Edward looked up, and glimpsed the dark brown curve of Rachel's calves, disappearing into a cranberry dress molded to her figure. Watching the warm breadth of her smile, he caught himself wishing that he could hold her, really hold her.

?Edward, I've got you a present.? She stopped on the bottom step, her face level with his own, so close that he saw the moisture glinting on her lower lip.

She stood quite still as he leaned forward, his mouth edging toward hers. The duskiness of her cheeks,

the broad grace of her lips engulfed him. He kissed . . . nothing. He saw her face beneath him, but it was only an holographic image created by some electronic conjuring trick. Devoid of substance.

'I'm sorry.' He shut his eyes, aching through and through.

'Why do you always do that?' Her voice was flat, dulled with hurt resignation. Perfectly reproduced.
'The tactile range is limited to?'

'To my hands and feet. I know that.'

'Then why did you try to kiss me?'

Answers jammed in his throat: why? Why? Because it *mattered* to him, because he was fed up of tiptoeing through simulations, working so hard not to break the illusion that the whole thing was ruined anyway. And because there was an instant when he stared at her, at the light and shadow mixing on her skin, when he fell into the dream, into her. Before his lips fastened on emptiness.

'Because I want you,' he said finally. 'Because I goddamn want you. And you won't?'

'Won't fuck you? That's what you really mean, isn't it?'

'Yes, it is!' The shock on her face silenced him. Shit. He'd gone too far. 'Rachel, I'm sorry. That isn't all I want. You know that.'

But she wasn't even looking at him. 'Computer,' she whispered, 'Abort this?'

'Wait!' His hands were trembling; he would have given a month's pay to make things all right again. 'I want to be with you, Rachel. Not just for an hour or two in a lousy simulation. I want to meet you outside.'

She shook her head. 'We've been through this before. When we first met, I told you I didn't want any complications.'

He caught the undercurrent of pain in what she said, and shrugged helplessly. 'Okay. No complications.'

'Your present.'

He blinked, confused.

'I said I'd got you a present. This way.'

He followed her down a corridor. Gilt-framed portraits of self-assured aristocrats lined the walls. Doubtless they'd have handled the situation better than he had, told Rachel that whatever she was worried about didn't matter. That she could have gray hair and grandchildren and he'd still like to meet her. He opened his mouth to tell her so, but he wasn't sure it was true. Tight-lipped, hating himself, he walked after Rachel into a small, sun-filled room.

Curled on a rug, bathing in the light, was a rag-eared, motley-coated, rumbling heap of a cat. A very, very large cat, clearly a veteran of numerous feline battles. Edward backed toward the door, froze as the creature fixed one baleful yellow eye on him.

?You're scared of him.? Rachel grinned. ?I don't believe it, you're scared of my sappy old pussycat??

?I'm not scared! And that . . . thing . . . isn't a pussycat. It must be as big as a tiger.?

?Bigger. I never wanted a little pet, one of those toy-sized animals that hides under sofas.? She sat cross-legged beside the cat, scratching it softly behind the ears. Delicately, the cat lifted two heavy paws, rested them in her lap, laid its head on her thigh, purring.

Edward cautiously advanced into the room. The creature glared at him, the tip of its tail twitching.

?Easy, Genghis. Edward's a friend.?

The tail-twitching slowed, and the cat arched under Rachel's steady stroking. Edward forced himself to relax. He hadn't been this nervous since the first time he'd played the piano in front of Rachel. Usually, he refused to play for his friends, but the wistfulness in her voice had undone his resolve. In the end he had stayed up all night, running through everything from Satie to Beethoven to Bartok.

Maybe today would turn out equally well. At least the cat seemed peaceful at the moment, just like an overgrown pussycat. *Just* like an overgrown pussycat. How had she managed that? He pictured the animal writhing as she forced its legs into a full bodysuit, as she clamped a miniature helmet to its skull. ?What did you do to it? How can it feel what you're doing??

?That's the way I wrote the program,? Rachel said mildly. ?The computer notices where my hand is??

?The cat's a computer program??

?Yes.?

He peered at the animal. ?I'm impressed. It's so lifelike.?

?Touch him. He won't bite.? Gingerly, Edward brushed his fingers across the cat's back. The thin fur slid under him, sun-warmed, vibrating in time with the purring. He yanked his hand away. Impossible. To mimic tactile contact accurately needed a surface that altered five hundred times per second. Endless high school science lessons had insisted that no control software could achieve that.

And yet, he reached for the cat again, felt the ridge of its spine, the deep softness of a paw. He looked at Rachel, the cranberry dress clinging to her dark skin. His hand hovered at the nape of her neck, a millimeter above her flesh.

?No, Edward.?

Ignoring her, he pushed his hand forward. The computer compensated immediately, providing a smooth barrier with the inflexibility of steel.

?Are you satisfied now??

?Rachel, I, I'm sorry.? He sounded like an idiot. He *was* an idiot. ?I thought . . . ?

?Don't expect more than one miracle. Genghis was the first simulation I created. Over the years, I've kept extending his program.?

There was something odd about Rachel's expression, something that jarred with her easy explanation. Faint lines gathered at her eyes. Worry lines, grief lines. He wasn't ready for any of this. He'd come here for a few hours companionship, nothing awkward, nothing unpleasant. He took a deep breath, "What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

Fine. He could tell she was lying, but he had tried. He looked away from her, gestured at the cat. "So, how did you do this?"

"The texture? The hardware was developed decades ago, it's incorporated in the standard simulator gloves and boots. I wrote some software to use it." The brittleness of her tone sliced at his nerves. "What do you think? Do you like Genghis?"

"Well, it's certainly quite an achievement. I'm sure you could sell that program for?"

"He's not for sale. I've never duplicated his program and I never will." She closed her eyes, her fingers digging into the animal's fur. "I'm giving him to you."

"To me?!" He searched for a polite way to say that he didn't need a gigantic, battle-scarred, computer cat. "It belongs to you?"

"There's a new project starting up. I won't have time for Genghis. But he's very easy to look after. No litter box, no food. Of course, if you don't want to?" she broke off, her voice snapping like a broken violin string.

And, staring at the unnatural brightness of her eyes, at her fingers clamped round the cat's fur, Edward found himself kneeling down beside her. He didn't know why this mattered so much to her, didn't know why his throat suddenly hurt. But he crouched on the floor, nose to nose with the cat.

"Hello, Genghis." He turned to Rachel. "I'll take care of him. No problem."

* * * *

Genghis wasn't the problem, Rachel was. She slipped from meeting him daily to meeting him once every three days, and then once a week. Tonight, she hadn't even managed that. Edward had hurried back from the last in the winter season of concerts, skipping the party with the rest of the orchestra to keep his appointment with Rachel.

And she hadn't come.

He ran his hands through his hair, his fingertips still bruised from playing the piano, and looked around. The setting matched his mood. Electric-blue flames ran across the pitted black walls of a cavern. Phosphorescent bats circled above, gray slime dripping from their wings.

"Computer, add a sound effect. Library program: wolves howling."

Noise rushed through the cave, wild shrieks rising and dying in discordant chorus.

Genghis shot out of the corner where he'd been sulking, hair bristled out, slit-eyed. He gave one disdainful glance around the cave before turning on Edward, lips curled back, hissing.

?Computer: cancel sound effect. Sorry, Genghis.?

The cat's head dipped fractionally. It sank down, ignoring the fire that licked at its coat.

Edward stared at the animal for a full minute. Sometimes he forgot it was nothing more than clever software, sometimes he thought it understood him. Rachel must have spent longer programming that cat than she'd ever spent with him. Than she ever *would* spend with him, if things continued as they were.

Five minutes to midnight. He stared at a flame crawling over his arm. What was he doing here, playing stupid Halloween games? He'd originally selected a lighthouse on Mizen Head for the meeting?wind-white waves from the Atlantic coast of Ireland, exotic, romantic. His best guess at something Rachel would like. So what was he hoping for now? That she'd scream in horror at his amateur theatrics, realize in that instant how cruel she'd been, and beg to spend the next week alone with him?

He was being childish and ridiculous. Time to quit. ?Computer??

Rachel stepped out of the flames, blue light coruscating over the dark canvas of her body, reflecting from the infinite brown of her eyes. A triangle of white silk stretched taut over her breasts, vanished between her thighs.

?Rachel??

?Hush.? She placed a finger over his mouth, undid the buckle of his belt with her free hand, pulled him down into a bed of blue fire.

Groaning, he reached for the heavy sweetness of her, the throb and pulse of her a hot echo of his own rhythm. Hands and feet and tongues entwined, caressing and caressed, as he thrust into her, grasping for that tumbling moment. Where he hung, stationary, wrapped in her.

And, descending, kissed her lips, the taut smoothness of her stomach. Her eyes were brushed with firelight. He whispered, throat raw, ?I love you.?

She rolled sideways, muscles tense. ?We scared away Genghis. How did the concert go??

?I love you??

?How was the concert??

He straightened up, gazed at the stiff tilt of her chin, her fisted hands. ?Rachel, what's going on? You can't just walk in here, and . . .? He swallowed, his cheeks flushed. ?And somehow hook up the computer so that we can have sex, and then pretend nothing happened.?

?Please,? her voice was hoarse, strained. ?Don't ask. Don't ask for more than this. No questions, no complications.?

?But that's not?? Not what? Not fair? The word died in his mouth as Rachel shuddered violently. He moved to hug her, but she flinched away, leaving him stranded, hollow. ?Rachel? Rachel, whatever's wrong, I want to help.?

?I know that.? She forced a smile. Standing up, she prodded the iron spike with her fingernail. ?Very atmospheric. How did your concert go??

Edward hesitated, his arms aching with the need to hold her, to touch her. But he stayed where he was, empty handed. He said, watching her shoulders relax as he did so, ?The concert went well. They had a twentieth century Steinway that would have sounded good even if Genghis had played it.?

Rachel laughed, her voice creamy-rich, like a cello easing into a lazy solo. Quietly, she folded her arms around him. ?I'm sorry I missed it. I'm sorry I was late.?

?That's okay,? Edward said roughly. He fastened his lips over hers, teasing her mouth open, all words lost in the taste of her.

* * * *

World War III was taking place inside his skull, missiles detonating in a syncopated beat, accompanied by an urgent siren. Blearily, Edward opened his eyes, wincing at the glare of the overhead lights. He was flat on his back in the simulator, most of his clothes strewn over the padded floor. The ringing of his alarm clock drilled through his temples.

?All right, all right, I'm awake.?

Silence, blissful silence. He lay there, trying to work out how his goggles had draped themselves over the console. What the hell had happened last night?

He'd been waiting for Rachel?*Rachel*?her arms pulling him down, the taste and touch of her moving against him. Christ, that was impossible. But he remembered the tickle of her hair, fragrant with coconut shampoo, the blue fire dancing across her skin. And he remembered, painfully, how Rachel had still refused to discuss anything that really mattered.

Edward hauled himself upright and sat at the computer console. Last night couldn't have been a mere simulation. Rachel must have been here, in his apartment. Peeling his gloves off, he switched to the security diagnostics. According to the system, no one else had entered his apartment last night.

Frowning, he keyed in Rachel's electronic mail address from memory. He would get some answers from her if he had to?the computer flashed back: Account Does Not Exist.

He slammed his fist into the table, stared at his hand with distant incredulity. That hurt.

Slowly, he checked through his files. All mention of Rachel had been deleted, each record of their meetings, each message she'd sent, each message he'd written to her. Genghis's program had vanished with the rest.

He leaned his forehead against the monitor, shivering. Rachel must have done this. *No*, he willed that thought away. Yet nobody else knew about their meetings. He shut his eyes, his shoulders shaking. Maybe he should call a psychiatrist, maybe he had been hallucinating.

?No,? he mumbled. ?She was real. I want to remember her.?

A faint scratching intruded.

Edward raised his head. The noise continued: there was something outside the hall door. He slouched

over to it, fumbled with the lock.

A rag-eared, five foot tall cat blinked up at him. Its eyes were wrong: oval not round, brown not yellow. Human eyes, Rachel's eyes.

"Rachel?" he breathed.

The animal shook its head, an unmistakable gesture. It sniffed his legs, brushed against him insistently. He rested one hand in its fur, felt the vibration as the beast started to purr.

There was a yellow note tied round its neck: "Edward, I'm sorry I had to go. Please don't waste your life looking for me. Rachel. P.S. This one does need feeding."

Edward clung to the animal, his cheek half-buried in cat, tears leaking damply into its coat.

* * * *

The day after Genghis's arrival Edward hired a private detective to scan his apartment for fingerprints, hairs, skin cells, all the identifiable detritus of humans. There were plenty of samples, of course, but none of them were Rachel's.

He thought it over during the week that followed, the ways in which a woman might break in, join him in the simulator as though she were part of the program, then remove all evidence of her presence. The more he thought about it, the less likely it seemed. And there remained the matter of Genghis, not this Genghis that now slept by his bed, but the computer cat that he had looked after for two months.

According to the experts he consulted, the computer cat was technologically impossible. The hardware to mimic tactile surfaces wasn't advanced enough, despite Rachel's claim, and the control software would require decades to develop.

At the end of the week, he took Genghis to the flower gardens. He sat on a park bench, fingering a delicately shaded rose-petal. A thousand separate fragrances mixed in the spring air. There was no one else in sight.

"Genghis?" He paused, wondering if he was about to make a fool of himself, voicing wild conjectures to an animal. But he had to know. "Suppose I told you that I thought this was all a program. The ginkgo trees, the flowers, this bench. That would be crazy, wouldn't it?"

The cat's head shifted minutely from side to side.

"No, Genghis. You're not listening to me properly. I'm talking about the whole world here?about people spending their entire lives in some computer-generated fantasy. That *is* crazy?that *must* be crazy.?"

The cat shook its head.

"But there's no reason to do that?"

A brown hand slid over his own. He spun around, but there was no one there. The hand had vanished. "Wait?"

A woman whispered, her breath tickling his ear: "Edward, suppose that radioactive fallout had contaminated the seas, the soil, the air. Or that a meteor impacted in Mexico, obliterating one quarter of

a continent. Or that a plague decimated the world's population, destroying people's neuro-muscular systems, passed on to generation after generation. There might be many reasons to hide reality.?

?Rachel?!? He clutched at thin air, frantic.

?I'm sorry,? the whisper said. ?I'm not allowed in your world.?

?Rachel??

?I love you.? A shadow brushed against him, a shimmer against the sunlight, a woman's face. And then there was nothing but the cat, its tail curled possessively around his ankle.

* * * *

Within a year, the critics hailed Edward as the greatest pianist of the century. A few of the more acid-penned wondered why his reputation had blossomed so unexpectedly, how technical proficiency had transmuted into lyricism. They speculated about drug problems, about lovers, and, repeatedly, about the freakish animal he kept as a so-called pet.

Edward didn't give interviews to the reporters. But he noticed when a hurricane ripped through the city, leveling dozens of buildings without causing a single death. And he browsed through government statistics, curious about rising grain production, about the steady decrease in the murder rate, the virtual disappearance of child abuse.

Privately, he congratulated the programmers, whoever they were.

And he played his music with a longing that didn't belong in this world of carefully calculated parameters and tidy solutions. He played with a passion and a grief that transcended it, calling to a woman named Rachel who might be listening, somewhere beyond his reach.

The End

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