

## **THE CRUSH**

By Joey W. Hill ©2003

Being in his arms was like being home, after having been away for a very long time. Though she had never actually felt his embrace, she knew it. He had strong arms and he smelled wonderful, a soap with a trace of lemon, and a male scent of aftershave. His jewel blue eyes were steady, serious, and yet there was so much more there. Laughter, thoughtfulness, desire.

He pressed his lips to hers, covered her mouth with gentle pressure. One hand came up to cup her face, to stroke her throat and jawline, which made her feel fluttery, feminine. The kiss deepened and her knees weakened, so she had to hold onto him for balance. He smiled against her lips, murmuring to her, and an aching need spread through her chest and stomach.

It took her by surprise, because she didn't expect it to be so potent. The touch of his lips gave her a sensation like the first kiss of a true love, where everything tingled, from lips to toes, the body tightening, the heart squeezed in a relentless, gentle fist. Only she knew now what she hadn't known as an adolescent, or even as a young woman. *Don't pull back too soon. Let it spin out until the whole soul is laughing from the joyous feel of that mouth, and those hands holding you close.*

There had to be a heaven, if there were such moments as this, and if there weren't, this was a heck of a consolation prize.

*Never let it end. Please.*

Resa Davenport opened her eyes and her damp palms a moment before the fifth period bell rang, her internal clock set to rouse her from her short meditation before her last class of the day.

Her thoughts certainly were not meditative. She wasn't napping either, unless daydreaming was a subcategory of napping.

"You're losing your mind, Resa," she muttered. She rose, opened her supply closet to check her appearance in the full-length mirror there.

She'd shed her blazer in the quiet privacy of her classroom, though there was nothing inappropriate for a high school teacher in the white silk blouse and A-line pale pink skirt that stopped just above the knee and had a modest slit in the back.

She was expected to dress up a bit this week, because it was teacher evaluation week for her hall. The principal would be visiting each teacher's class for a period, to give his personal evaluation of his or her performance.

However, as an honest woman, she knew the combination of fragile feminine colors, the faint outline of bra and lace beneath the blouse's soft folds and the smooth snug line of the skirt were sexy to a man, and that's why she had worn them.

Today, because the dream had clung to her when her morning alarm had gone off, she had made another impulsive decision. Beneath the clothes, she wore a white fantasy. A white lace demi-cup bra, silken thigh highs with lace tops and garters, and a pair of bikini underwear that were swatches of sheer gauze connected with a trio of satin straps over each hip bone. She didn't expect anyone to see them, but they allowed her mind to drift back to the fantasy of that dream each time she moved and felt the slide of the garments against her skin.

She had taken special care with her fine gold hair, putting it up in a twist on her head and holding it in place with a pearl-edged comb that bared her neck. She shrugged into the matching pink blazer, made sure she didn't catch her silver hoops, and rearranged the dainty silver cross on its chain around her neck.

She moved to open her classroom door when she saw waiting silhouettes, and had to suppress disappointment when all she saw were the faces of her students. He wasn't going to come today. He'd probably come on a day she wore one of her denim jumpers and comfortable clogs that fairly screamed "dowdy".

She covered her reaction with a smile and a greeting for her early arrivals and went to the board, lifting the screen hook from the chalk tray.

"Good morning, Mrs. Davenport."

Her fingers fumbled the handle and the hook slid from the tray and clattered to the floor.

Principal Tom Brent stooped, picked up the hook and placed it back in her hand, his fingers warm against her palm.

He smiled and reached over her head, using his six-foot height instead of a hook to catch the eyelet of the screen and lower it for her. "Surely you, Southwest High School's two-time Teacher of the Year, aren't nervous about me sitting in on your class. I'm expecting to learn as much as your students today."

She had worn the clothes she wore today to acknowledge that she still had needs and desires, and wanted to feel desired. The dream had reminded her of that, and here he was, the object of her desires, the unknowing center of her dream, and she felt as giddy as one of her students.

Smiling back was easy to do. She had known Tom Brent since fifth grade. She had run with a close knit group of a half-dozen girls, and the young Tom Brent had fallen in with their group. A creative boy fascinated by film and writing, inspired by Spielberg and Lucas, he scribbled Douglas Adam-esque stories between class periods in junior high school for the girls to devour under their desks during class.

It had been inevitable that at least one of the group would fall for him, because he had been gorgeous. A full head of dark, silky hair, and eyes of a warm sapphire. Not just a shadow of what was hinted at in romance novels, but the real, vibrant hue. He had a comfortable, sensual ease with girls that most boys lacked and many men never acquired. A girl savored his casual touches, just like she had the brush of his fingers as he put a screen hook back in her palm.

Shaking her head at herself, Resa moved behind the desk to open her roll book. Tom took a seat in the guest chair at the back of the room, laid his tooled binder on the work table next to him, and opened up his coat to withdraw his pen from the pocket of his white dress shirt. He straightened his tie, a dark blue silk with a print of Luke Skywalker fighting Darth Vader. A gift from one of the students, she was sure, for they were all aware of his passion for the original Star Wars trilogy.

He crossed his ankle over his knee and stretched his arm out over the ledge of the back bulletin board, giving her a wink.

Oh, Good Lord, he looked so appealing back there. She could still smell the lingering scent of his aftershave. His lustrous dark hair had receded, so at thirty-five he kept it cropped short, instead of falling into that ridiculous habit balding men had of growing a pony tail. This style emphasized the strong structure of his face and those amazing blue eyes, only now he gazed out of them through wire-rimmed glasses.

He looked as good, no, better, than he had as a boy. Life had tested him and stamped character on his face. He had the confidence and contentment with himself he had lacked as a student.

It had been a hard road for him. She knew, because she had been there for most of it.

Tom's looks and unique interests had attracted him his share of the school's prettiest girls, but it was Resa's group of friends that drew him. In eighth grade, he had dated Kencha Bryant, now an equestrian rider who trained Olympic champions. That had lasted two months, a long time for junior high students. He had flirted off and on with Kim Wellesley and Sarah Hollingsworth, now an accomplished doctor and professional model-turned-nurse, respectively, through four grades. They shared the secret of being deeply in love with him during most of those four years. Kim and Sarah managed to stay friends through that, likely because he had never chosen either of them.

Then, in tenth grade, Julie Regan had caught his eye. The most dynamic and determined of the group, Julie was now a chemical engineer and patent attorney. They had dated through high school and college. When Julie's mother contracted terminal cancer, they'd come to one of those weak moments where two people made a mistake for all the right reasons. They'd married, and it had been a five-year disaster.

Despite his looks and diverse interests, which implied a dynamic personality, Tom Brent was the son of a lifetime FBI man and a quietly religious mother. At heart, he was their son, a conservative, service-oriented man who enjoyed simple pleasures. A day watching Mystery Science Theater while doing paperwork, reading the latest Harry Potter book, or mowing his yard and drinking a beer on his porch. If he had become a minister, the Sunday school teacher would have been a good match for him. As a principal...Resa's finger tightened convulsively on her pen, and her check mark next to Debbie Winslow's name acquired a wild tail.

Julie was an adrenaline junky and high-powered career woman. She went cave diving and jumped out of airplanes to relax. When she made a decision, she made it decisively and did not look back. The divorce, when it happened, had been quick and

brutal, and left Tom reeling on his heels, cut out of her life as decisively as a dissection exercise.

Resa had been there for him, listening, caught helplessly between two friends she cared about, but Julie had not seemed to need her the way he had. When Tom recovered, he picked up his teaching degree and got his feet back under him. Four years later, it was his shoulder Resa leaned against when her husband died. An overfondness for southern food, an aversion to exercise, and a family history of heart problems had taken his life before he reached forty. He had been her best friend since they married at twenty-one, right out of college.

When she met her husband, she thought she wanted to be an exotic and unattached person. With him, she discovered her desire to be adventurous and uncommitted was simply a fear of being rejected. What she wanted was quiet happiness, an anchor, someone with whom to share her life, who provided love as a guaranteed promise, along with support and friendship. He was the man who had made her feel beautiful for the first time in her life.

When he was gone, Tom had stepped into that void of support and friendship. Now that she was ready to love again, it made sense that it was to him her compass was pointing, but it terrified her.

While all of the other six girls had mooned over Tom or dated him, she had only entertained feelings for him once, in ninth grade. The last of their six, Veronica Strawson, who had never before shown interest in him, had asked him to the Sadie Hawkins dance. Tom had come running down the hall, grabbed Resa around the waist and whirled her around in that joyous melodrama to which teenagers were so amusingly oblivious.

"She asked me, she asked me," he exclaimed, those amazing blue eyes delighted, the handsome mouth spread in a smile, and Resa had been overwhelmed by the touch of his hands at her waist, by that potent charm to which he had always been so unaware.

Of course, the one date was it, for Veronica found out immediately what Julie took eight years to find out, that she had nothing in common with the boy who had all the visible qualities of a heroic and dashing prince, but the heart of a quiet warrior-scholar.

It had not been a long-lived infatuation for Resa, either. She knew he was not for her, so she pushed up her glasses, shrugged, and went on being his friend.

She had gotten married, loved and lost a good man. Three years of friendship had gone by since then, and then, one night, the dream had come.

She knew who Tom Brent was, a man who loved bad sci-fi movies and hanging out on his back deck at sunset, discussing student problems with her as they tossed a salad. A man who went running by her house every morning and threw her paper from her driveway to her porch with unerring accuracy.

She had not dated since her husband's passing. Their love had been deep and sure, a slow moving river. What she wanted was something she knew had a chance of providing her the same spiritual and emotional nourishment. The dating scene with its experimental nature and games had no appeal for her. Tom did, but the risks were far greater. So she had stayed silent, and would likely always stay silent, letting the dreams fulfill her needs.

"Good morning, class," she said. Tom's expression settled into the serious mien expected of a principal. She wanted to devour him in several tasty bites. Instead, she turned her attention to her slide show on European art.

"I hope you're ready for your test today. I'm going to show a series of thirty slides. Number your paper from one to thirty. For each slide, I want you to write down the style of art being displayed.

"When we've done the visual portion, there are ten essay questions on the board. Complete five of those and then we'll go over the answers and review about ten minutes of the material for tomorrow's lesson. Marie, please get the lights."

She started the slide, and the class settled down. As a professional she knew there was no better class for Tom to be evaluating. Her gaze coursed over them, watching them examine the picture. She saw expressions of immediate recognition, thoughtful study, and some uncertainty. A little panic as she switched to a slide she had not reviewed with them.

"Remember, if it's not a print you recognize from the lesson, study it. Think about the elements of the different periods we discussed." She slid off her stool and went to the screen, interjecting her hand into the play of light and color. She pointed at some of the sculpture's elements in the picture, saying nothing else. However, she saw faces clear as the deductive reasoning skills kicked in, something that always gave her a charge because it told her they were thinking, not just remembering.

She flipped to the next slide using the hand control and went back to the stool, sliding back onto it, shifting her hips to settle herself.

"Mr. Brent looked at her ass," Sheila Griggs whispered to Martha Nordwick in the front row of the seats just behind Resa.

"He did not," Mark McLaurin muttered. He sat behind Sheila.

"He did, too. You looked, too," Martha pointed out.

"She's got a better ass than you, lardbutt," Mark hissed.

Resa turned around, put a finger to her lips, noted Martha's stricken look. She tried to assume a nonchalant look that said she hadn't heard the conversation, but she was glad for the dim light that hid the color on her cheeks. *Had* Tom looked at her?

Oh, don't be so juvenile, she chided herself. She would not look at him. She couldn't. Of course, she *could* glance at him as part of her sweep of that corner of the room.

She met his gaze and found it warm and amused. Was it because he had heard what they said, or because he had done what they said, or because he had seen her reaction? He was, after all, a good enough friend to know her body signals for embarrassment. That was the problem. He knew her too well, and that was what she craved. A man's familiarity with her. No, not just any man. Her obsession with that dream had decisively moved it from the realm of loneliness and into desire for a specific target. She wanted him.

She finished the slides and walked the well-worn path to the front of the room to lift the slide screen and show the essay questions. In the quiet stillness of her classroom, it was easy to imagine him, slipping quietly into her class at the end of her day. He might come up behind her while she was at the chalkboard, her arms raised, and slide his arms intimately about her waist. He would pull her back against him, against his starched white shirt, the charcoal-colored summer wool trousers tickling her skin through her sheer hose, and ask how her day was. His lips would touch her neck, that subtle gesture of tenderness and possession at once. The sexy timbre of his voice would vibrate in the curve of her ear, and he would say something to make her laugh, as he always did.

She went to her desk, her mind still lost in the fantasy. What if, after her students left for the day, she stepped out of her shoes, as she did sometimes when her feet were hurting? For the two-inch pumps she wore today she would have to lift one foot at a time, to slide off each shoe. In this outfit, it would be an elegant gesture that parted the back slit and showed just a bit more leg. She would bend to take the shoe in her hand, and the forward drape of the blouse would give him a glimpse of a curve nestled in a lace cup. Would his eyes linger, would the fingers on that clever hand stretched so casually along the back bulletin board close in a tighter fist, reflecting heightened awareness, the first licks of desire?

There was a rustle of paper, an indrawn breath, the tell tales of a guilty act in the classroom. She glanced to her right and saw Todd Carlyle trying to recover a folded piece of paper from the aisle.

"Mr. Carlyle," Resa said sharply. "Don't touch it."

He froze. Todd was her class clown, but also exceptionally bright and self-assured, and the terror on his face made her heart sink. Surely he hadn't been stupid enough to cheat. He had no reason to cheat.

She unfolded the paper as he looked down at his test, his ears so pink that she could see their flushed color. Tom's attention was on them both, his face stern and unsmiling as appropriate.

*Baby, I can't believe the rush,  
the power of this crush.  
I want you like nothing else matters.  
When I see you, my thoughts, they just scatter.  
I'll pick up every grain of sand on a beach,  
if for my hand you'll reach.*

It was not great poetry, but it was so earnest, so close to her own raw feelings, Resa took a moment to compose her expression before she looked up.

She normally made her students read their notes out loud, a cruel but effective method of ensuring there would be no repeat infractions. Todd's fingers were trembling on his pencil. Debbie Winslow in the seat across the aisle was looking on with curious interest, but no trepidation. Resa realized the girl was unaware of his feelings. This had been his strategic move, and apparently gravity and wind currents had been against his toss.

"Finish your test, Todd," she said gently. "And don't let this happen again."

Tom raised an eyebrow at her expression. She knew it would be appropriate to show him the note, but she waited until Todd's heart rate had gone down to safe levels and he had settled back into his test. She strolled casually down the middle of the classroom, checking on her other students. She dropped the note in Tom's hand as she passed him, meeting his eyes briefly.

She laid a hand on Martha's stiff shoulder, squeezing. "That's a very good answer," she murmured, glancing down at essay question number three, knowing she would draw the class's attention to her, and not to Tom, who was scanning the note. His face revealed nothing, the blue eyes thoughtful, and he slid it into his binder silently.

"All right. I think everyone is done," Resa said, after a few moments. "Let's go over the lesson."

She was pleased with the high level of volunteered responses to the questions, and knew most of them had done very well. They went through the test quickly and she collected the papers, taking them up front.

"All right, we have ten minutes to go. Let's start on the major political influences that led to the Renaissance period. Please - "

"Mrs. Davenport."

She turned. "Yes, Mr. Brent?"

"I would like to ask one of your students a question that is not related to history. Is that all right with you?"

"Of course," Resa responded, wondering what he was about.

Tom shifted, so he made direct eye contact with Todd. "Todd, I'd like you to tell me how *you* would define a crush."

Todd paled. The class tittered at his reaction, though they of course were ignorant of the note's contents.

"Well," he cleared his throat, sounding much younger and less cocky than he normally did. "It's, well, it's supposed to be this short term obsession with something, someone, I guess. A lot of time... It's kind of an adult term. I guess."

Tom nodded. "Now, I repeat, tell me *your* definition."

Resa leaned against her desk, intrigued.

Todd blinked, laced his hands, unlaced them.

"It's all right, son," Tom said. "Just tell me what you think. You're not being punished for anything."

Todd gazed at him warily, but at Tom's even and encouraging look, he seemed to relax a fraction. "Well," the boy ventured, "I think adults mean it that way, but it's not that way, really. I mean, there's a reason they call it crush. You feel like your heart and lungs are being squeezed every time you look at that person, but in a good way, like breathing's not really important."

The class laughed, but Todd was okay with it now.

"It might just last a day, but it can last a month, a year, maybe even forever. It doesn't make it feel any less powerful when you're feeling it. And I mean, if you think you don't have a chance with her, and don't do anything with it, it might go away, but if you act on it, it could turn into love, kids, you know. Everything."

Debbie Winslow had propped her chin on her hand and was studying him out of interested green eyes, and Todd seemed to lose even more of his self-consciousness as he looked over and got captured in that gaze a moment. Resa thought the boy might have made his strategic move after all.

"Even if you don't act on it," Todd said, tearing his attention away, back to Tom, "it sometimes won't go away. You keep it in you someplace, and every time you think of it, you'll feel that feeling, that squeeze again, and it'll feel good, and hurt at the same time. Like a path you didn't travel that you get to imagine turned out lots of different ways, a good book that always has a different ending."

There was a moment of silence and then one of the boys in the back made a snorting noise that didn't quite mask the murmured comment. "He's so gay."

The class laughed and Todd made an obscene gesture at the boy.

"Todd, John," Resa reprimanded. "Mr. Brent?"

Tom nodded. "That's all. Thank you, Todd. I apologize for interrupting your lesson, Mrs. Daven--"

The bell cut off the remainder of her name, but she saw his lips move over it. She also saw the rueful twinkle in his eyes, telling her he knew she'd likely take him to task for taking up the rest of her class time.

She dismissed the students, and as they filed past her desk, she drew Martha to her with a light touch on her arm.

"A moment, please, Martha." Resa waited until the bulk of the students had converged on the door away from her desk, so their conversation was just for them. "I'm going to let you in on a little secret that all women know, all right?"

The girl looked puzzled, but nodded. Resa smiled, pressed her shoulder. "Remember that boys tend to mature more slowly than girls, and they get defensive when they've been caught doing something that embarrasses them. They say cruel things, things they don't mean. You are a beautiful girl, and I've seen Mark looking at you more than once."

Martha's cheeks pinkened, but the wounded look receded somewhat, replaced by a tentative smile. She nodded and Resa let her go.

Tom came to her desk as Martha filed out behind the last of the other students. "That was nice."

Resa shrugged, smiled up at him as she circled around and sat down at her desk. "I remember what it was like, being the chunky one. You can tell a teenage girl she's been convicted of murder, and it wouldn't upset her as much as being told she's fat."

He put his hip on her desk, picked up the apple she always brought herself. "But you were so smart, you never acted like it bothered you. You were always focusing on saving the world. Animals, environment, battered women." He grinned. "I was terrified of how smart and focused you were. You had discipline that scared all of us. It was intimidating."

Resa stared at him. "You mean that."

"You bet I do. What happened, Resa? How did I go from wanting to be the next Steven Spielberg to being a principal, and you from wanting to be an international traveler, involved in all these causes, to a small town teacher, both of us content?"

"Maybe we learned there are dreams you have as kids, and then there's the calling of your heart, the place where you were meant to serve." She laced her fingers on the desk, studied him. "I think it came home to me when my father and mother's marriage fell apart. I learned it may be more important to be there for that one person who needs you, at the right moment, than it is to seek the glory of saving the world. Tom." She reached out, covered his hand holding the apple. "You were brilliant. You still are, but I mean, I need to tell you, I found *your* enthusiasm and boundless creativity intimidating. There was nothing you couldn't think of on the spur of the moment. You'd come up with a story, or an idea for a skit you'd film. You had a magnetism that gravitated us toward your ideas, made us want to carry them out."

His gaze flicked up from her hand to her face, and she saw his surprise, but he had surprised her, and she wanted him to know.

"You still have that magnetism, but it's settled into something sure and steady, like a ship going on the right course. You use it very well to inspire us on the faculty. The students love you, no matter how strict you are with them, because they sense you're carrying us in the right direction. I can't tell you how much we all value that, and I hope you never lose sight of it."

He turned his hand, gripped hers in the warm touch of a friend. "Oh sure, suck up to the evaluator," he teased, but she could tell from his expression that she'd moved him, significantly enough that he felt the joke necessary to duck the embarrassment.

She pulled his hand from his, pinched his arm. "Pest. Go on. I've got lesson plans to do."

"If you've got another minute, I'd like to talk to you in my office, about the evaluation," he said, still smiling, but now there was a more professional set to his expression.

It puzzled her, that he wouldn't speak to her in her own room, but she nodded, put aside her paperwork and followed him out, locking up. The kids were filing into their last period classes, a minute before the bell rang, and Resa watched Tom give and receive greetings. He stopped and asked one of the boys to remove his cap in school, checked with a young girl as to how her mother's surgery had gone. He caught another lanky boy by the sleeve and made sure he was going to do homework tonight before hitting the skateboard park.

He noticed things, she knew. They all mattered to him, every one, students and teachers, and she realized again he would have been as equally effective as a minister.

"So who gave you the tie?" she asked. He unlocked the door to his office from the main hall, rather than going through the admin offices where he'd likely get besieged by a hundred messages and requests.

"This? Oh." He laughed. "Mrs. Blanchette, health ed teacher. Her son goes to the conventions and she asked him to bring back something an 'old timer' would like, one of us alive when the first Star Wars came out."

She rolled her eyes. "When did we thirty-somethings become old-timers?"

"In their eyes, ever since we stopped being teenagers."

His office was designed equally for comfort or punishment. A deep couch to comfort tears, a horseshoe-shaped desk for work, a couple of arm chairs to discuss matters with staff and faculty, and a hard-backed straight chair for stern lectures.

Knowing this, she was surprised when he pulled that uncomfortable chair over, set it down and gestured to her. "Mrs. Davenport, if you'll have a seat here."

He typically called her Mrs. Davenport in front of the children, but in private, it would have been Resa. Unless he was talking to her in an official capacity. Most of the staff knew they had been childhood friends.

She took a seat in the hard chair, straightening her back and folding her hands, taking a formal posture to match his tone, though she kept hers light. "Have I done something wrong, Mr. Brent? Am I in trouble?"

"Well, that depends on how you look at it, Mrs. Davenport." Tom took a position, not behind his desk as she anticipated, but in front of her. He propped his hips on the desk and stretched his long legs out in front of himself. It effectively caged her in between them, because the chair was so close to the desk.

"I'm concerned about your reaction to Mr. Carlyle's note. I'm not sure you quite understand the seriousness of the situation. I'd like your thoughts on it."

Resa blinked at him a couple times, not certain if she had heard him right, and if she had, if he was serious. His expression told her he was, his arms folded over his chest so the suit coat pulled over his wide shoulders.

"Well, I know this is a very difficult age for the students," she ventured. "Not as bad as junior high, when the hormones are everywhere, but I think emotions tend to be more sincerely involved in their attractions now. Rejection can be more painful. I try to be sensitive to that. It's one of the reasons I chose not to make Todd read his note out loud."

"I see. What did you think of his idea that a crush could become more, if the person feeling it has the bravery to declare himself?"

"It's a romantic idea, a lovely one. He has so many layers to him. He reminds me a lot of you at that age," she smiled. "Particularly how he gets along better with the girls than the boys. Of course, you got much quieter in high school after you and..." For some reason Julie's name, her friend for twenty years, stuck in her throat. "Got involved."

Tom raked his hand through his hair, startling Resa. It was an impatient gesture she had not seen him make for years. He had a balding man's tendency not to touch his head, while she perversely had begun to have a constant desire to stroke her fingertips over the short neat layers and that handsome skull.

"Mrs. Davenport, I seem to be having some problems getting through to you."

Her spine snapped straight at the tone. "Well, Mr. Brent, perhaps you should get to the point you're trying to make, rather than playing twenty questions with me," she retorted.

At his raised brow, it was her turn to flush. "I'm sorry, Tom. That was disrespectful."

"Mrs. Davenport, I have a crush on you."

She had her mouth open to say more, but at his forcefully delivered statement, delivered over her apology, she snapped it shut. "What?" she managed.

"Mrs. Davenport. Resa," he repeated, slowly, giving her an even look, "I have a crush on you. I've had one for nearly eighteen months now, and like Todd, I have found that such a sustained crush becomes something more. I find myself thinking about you in many different ways, and not just the ways that would make you blush." He studied her flustered expression. "Sometimes you come into my thoughts as a comforting, very brief image. Your laugh, your touch, just a brush on my sleeve, your good-night hug when you leave my house. Sometimes you come in like a breath of spring air and gardenias through my open office window, teasing me, making me smile, making me want. The more I've thought about it, the more I realize the seeds have been in the soil for years. I think the right combination of sun,

water and fertilizer have brought this forth in abundance. My feelings for you are virtually an overgrown garden at this point."

"I..." She couldn't think of a thing to say. Her mind had gone as clear as crystal and into as fragile a state.

"I would have spoken sooner," he said, watching her face with eyes gone so intently blue she couldn't tear her fascinated gaze away. "But I had to think some things through."

He shifted, giving her the impression his next words would not be comfortable ones, for either of them. Her fingers, together in her lap, tightened on her legs.

"It was always obvious that there was something special about all of you. Kim, Sarah, Veronica, Kencha...Julie. A sense of strong connection that went beyond common interests or neighborhood proximity. Like you were destined to be a part of each other's lives from the womb. You were all so different, and yet, each of you had at least one spectacular element to you. I think that's why you came together. You were different facets, different colors, but you were all gemstones.

"You took me in, let me be surrounded by that, reflect my own light off of yours, and there was a synergy that made me feel more special. I kept trying to find the one of you that would lock me into the essence of all of you, rather than seeking the person who would be a fit for my life."

Now she honestly could not have found words if she'd wanted to speak. She stared at him in shock.

"It took me a long time to realize that," he said. "You all accepted me, stimulated and challenged me. I was a straight male obsessed with film making, creative writing and science fiction, and I had the looks of the class president. Thank God that passed, so now I can be treated like the geek I always was."

She would have disagreed, would have told him he was more handsome now to her even than he had been then, but she still couldn't will her tongue to move.

He cleared his throat and glanced momentarily at his feet. "I had six, accomplished, intelligent and beautiful young women who enjoyed my company, and accepted me on different levels. When I chose Julie, I was really choosing all of you, and when I realized my mistake, that I had simply cut one branch off of the whole tree I wanted, it was too late."

The shadow of that pain crossed his face, but he waved away the concern that creased her brow.

"Time passes, and I grew up. I changed, or maybe I returned to the road I was always meant to travel. But you never forget the mistakes you make, and you hope to God you learn from it, so the pain you cause or dish out isn't wasted. So, the long and short of it is, I took a lot of time to think about you, Resa. You've become my dearest friend, and if I lost that because of poor judgment, I think it might hurt me

even worse than my divorce. I don't think I can handle pain like that again. Especially if I didn't have you to get me through it."

His gaze lifted, and she was seared by the raw honesty in those eyes. "It's you I want. Not who we were, not as a part of the girls, you. I can't hold back any longer, no matter how afraid I am. I want you too much, for me, Resa." He slanted a strained smile at her. "That squeezing that Todd talked about has gotten so bad I think I sometimes need oxygen around you. Say something, for heaven's sake. Before I make a total ass of myself."

She lifted her hand to say something, perhaps a feeble, vague question.

"No, I've changed my mind. Don't say anything. Just come here."

He caught her hand in his to tug her to her feet. His intent was clear. Though her breath clogged in her chest, she balked a moment, staying him with a hand on his chest, her palm sliding beneath his coat and coming in contact with the warmth through his soft white dress shirt.

"What?" he asked, sliding his grip to her shoulders.

"I was just..." She shook her head, her body going pliant, more sensible of what she should be doing at this moment than her befuddled mind. "I was just remembering a dream."

"Let me show what I've been dreaming about," he said, gathering her close, so she settled against his body, firm male against soft female curves, and brought his mouth down to hers.

She kept her eyes open to the last moment, to see those blue eyes up close, the curve of his lips before they came against hers. She watched her fingers slide over the fabric of his suit at the shoulder and touch the soft hairs at the nape of his neck. She drew in a breath. Aftershave, lemon scent. Toothpaste. Him.

Oh. My. God. It was the same reaction she had in her dream. It was as if a tightly budded flower began to open in her chest as he kissed her, the tips unfurling and brushing and bringing to life sensitive nerve endings in her breasts and thighs. It was the way a man who knew a woman's heart would kiss, who was willing to open his own to her.

The sensation of falling that she'd had in the dream was there. The shivers from the lightest caress. However, it wasn't all the same as the dream. In the dream, it had been all her, and so she hadn't been able to experience the hard, hungry male heat that she felt now, straining beneath his gentle touch upon her. When she sighed into his mouth, opening to him, it snapped his control. His hands left her shoulders and came around her, banding her to him so her arms were locked against him in a delicious sort of way, only her hands mobile, able to grip the fabric of his coat as he explored her mouth with his own.

Though she felt his passion, he did not rush it, did not make the mistake of suddenly trying to devour her in three bites. He treated her like a dessert, nibbling at her lips,

learning the contours of hers like the first clasp of hands, testing the way they fit together. That absence of hurrying was also like her dream. Just as she had in her sleep, a sound of need came from the back of her throat. A desire for more. He drew her closer, so she felt the inside of his thighs brushing against the outside of her hips in the snug, silk lined skirt. His hands moved down her back, his palms settling against her blouse below the clasp of her bra, his fingers softly stroking the line of flesh just below the lace binding. It was an intimate caress without vulgarity, unspeakably erotic, a knowledgeable, mature man's touch acknowledging what was beneath her clothes.

A quick knock. "Mr. Brent, I need to get--- Oh. *Oh.*"

Resa jerked back at the sound of Linda Benton, the office secretary and Tom's assistant. Panic leaped into her chest and color flooded her cheeks. There was no way Linda could mistake what they were doing, and Resa couldn't imagine how they would handle it, how she would handle it so it wouldn't reflect badly on Tom.

Tom brought her jumbled soup of thoughts to an immediate halt by not letting her go. He held her fast, his hands at her waist and back so she could not turn. So she did not have to turn and face Linda's expression, could press her cheek to his shoulder and not do anything.

He was protecting her. With her face averted and in the unusual outfit, perhaps he thought Linda would not recognize her. She had missed that so much, the instinctive desire to protect a woman that all honorable men had.

"Can you give me a minute, Linda?" he said mildly, in a voice so calm Resa was awestruck by his composure, and she wished she could see his face.

"Certainly sir. However, before I go, I'd like to say something."

Now she felt him stiffen, and Resa got her wits about her. She would not allow him to face this alone. She turned her head, held so close to Tom her nose had to brush his jaw. She completed the rotation in time to see Linda considering them both, a gleam in her eye.

"It's about time the two of you wised up and figured out what the rest of us already knew." She grinned from ear to ear and stepped back out, shutting the door quietly behind her.

"Well," Tom let out a breath. "That was unexpected."

"Yes," Resa said, at a loss. "Yes, it was."

She made to step back, but found Tom was not yet ready to release her, keeping his hands comfortably anchored on her waist. "So, I had another question for you, Mrs. Davenport."

"Yes, Mr. Brent?" she lifted a brow, a smile on her lips, a smile that faded into something more serious as he lifted one hand and used a fingertip to follow the neckline of her blouse. He dipped just under the edge of the fabric, so his finger

skimmed the lacy low edge of the cup beneath, brushing the top of her breast with the action. Her breath stopped, and she felt the muscle of his thigh shift against her hip as he wrapped his arm further around her waist and settled back on the desk so he could continue his arousing caress more comfortably. "Did you wear this deliberately to tease me?"

Resa swallowed. Lord, she had never realized how potent, how sexy a man comfortable with women could be. He knew how to touch her, knew how to keep communicating, keep drawing her out, rather than getting absorbed in his own desires.

"Well, somewhat. Yes."

He stilled his touch, glanced up at her and she saw the surprise become something else. Something heated and strong, that made her tremble in his arms. "Tell me," he ordered in a rough whisper. "How long?"

"I...I started dreaming about you," she admitted. "The first time..." She took a breath, not wanting to mar the moment with sadness, but knowing she would tell this man, her friend, anything. "It was about eighteen months after he died. It was the first time I had felt desire of any kind, and I cried for two hours."

"You missed a day of work," he remembered, astounding her.

"Yes, it was that day. I cried, but I cried because I knew that it was natural, that what was supposed to happen was happening. The healing, the going on with life and loving. The next time it happened, it wasn't so painful. Then it started happening often." She chuckled shyly, averting her gaze. "I started doing a lot of daydreaming about you."

"Daydreaming during class? Mrs. Davenport, that's about as bad as passing notes. We'll have to assign some disciplinary action to you."

She had a second's warning and a chance to let out a short squeak, and he had turned them, so she was lying on his desk, and he was over her, his arm still beneath her waist.

"Tom," she hissed, wriggling to get free. "We can't---"

"I know," he murmured, nuzzling her neck. "I've no intention of making love to you anywhere but where I've dreamed about you being every night for the last few months, in my bed. But this is one of my little side fantasies." He nipped at her ear, the sensitive area of her neck beneath it. Her worry dissolved like butter in a saucepan. "I want to take it slow, take you slow. Savor you. It's interesting how those kinds of words all start with that same letter...sensual, slip, satin, skin, silken, seduce, certain..."

"That's a 'c' word," she managed, arching as he placed a kiss at the hollow of her throat.

His broad palm slid just a few inches up the side of the skirt, just to hold her thigh anchored to him. He stilled as he found the lace top of the thigh high, the clasp of the garter. An expression of male pain crossed his face. "You're going to kill me," he muttered. "What all have you got on under this?"

It made her body liquid, the look in his eyes, the need she felt in his body, matched with her own, but she cupped his face, her eyes sobering. "Tom--"

"No." He kissed her palm, reassuring her doubts before she voiced them. "We're going to take it slow, Resa. It seems like I've always wanted to have this feeling for someone. Now that the possibility is here, maybe for the first time in my life, I'm not going to rush it. I just want you in my home for the weekend. I want to drink coffee with you in the morning, find out what you like for breakfast, think about how we want to spend our day. You can stay in the guestroom..." He quirked an amused brow at her. "If you want to." Then his expression became more intent again, and he brushed another kiss to her temple, the shell of her ear. He tightened his hand on her leg a moment before moving it back outside the skirt to her hip so he could lift her to her feet, to stand in his embrace. "I want to be with you as my friend, and as more than my friend. If you're willing to give it a try, knowing we might be risking our friendship."

"Well, considering what Todd said, I think we'd be crazy not to see where our crush will take us."

*"...I want you like nothing else matters,"* he said softly, looking down at her. *"When I see you, my thoughts, they just scatter."*

Rather than being amused, the words were tender, passionate, and made her draw him to her, hold him close in a tight hug, so she heard his heart pound against her cheek. She repeated the last line of the poem to him like a promise.

*"I'll pick up every grain of sand on a beach, if for my hand you'll reach."*

He took her hands in a firm hold. "Whatever you need," he promised.

THE END

Joey W. Hill writes epic fantasy, mainstream fiction and women's erotica. For more information about her published and upcoming works, log onto her website at [www.storywitch.com](http://www.storywitch.com).