



A Winter Solstice Kiss
By Kelley Heckart

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A Winter Solstice Kiss by Kelley Heckart:

Become enchanted by a magical kiss.

Do you like short, sweet, paranormal Christmas romances? This short story will inspire and captivate you just in time for Christmas. Grab your copy now!

When young, widowed Brianna decides to attend the Winter solstice masquerade ball, she never thought she would end up kissing a handsome knight beneath the mistletoe, but they part without exchanging names and phone numbers. How will they find each other again?

Chapter One

Brianna stared at the invitation written in antique script on old-fashioned parchment. *'You are cordially invited to the first annual Winter Solstice Masquerade Ball to celebrate Yule.'*

Tears blurred her vision. She glanced down at her left hand, her bleary gaze resting on the wedding ring she still couldn't bring herself to remove.

The invitation had sat on her kitchen counter since it arrived. The Winter Solstice Ball was tonight, and she still didn't know if she would attend. Since marrying John five years ago, they celebrated every Yule together.

But that was before.

Her coven would be disappointed if she didn't attend.

The phone rang, and Cassie's name appeared on the screen. She answered the phone. "Hi Cassie."

"Hey B, I'm picking you up at eight."

"I'm not sure if I should go."

"You are going. You need to get out."

"I don't know if I can. This was always our favorite time of the year and we always celebrated together."

"I know it's hard for you, but don't you think he would want you to move on? Come on, B. I'm really worried about you."

Brianna peered down at her ring. "How come he hasn't tried to communicate with me, to give me a sign—a cold breeze or something?" She just wanted to know he was okay.

"I don't know. Maybe he's staying away because he wants you to move on."

She looked at the picture of John she kept on the counter, the one of him sitting on his motorcycle, flashing her a smile.

Why won't you contact me? A part of her fumed with anger at him for leaving her.

"B? You still there?"

"I'm here."

"Look, I understand if you don't want to go, but I really want you to and so does everyone else. I won't have fun knowing you're sitting home by yourself. And besides, do you want that beautiful costume to go to waste?"

A part of her wanted to get out of the house, to escape the place that held too many memories. Her friend was right. It was unhealthy for her to mope around for so long. "Okay. Pick me up."

"Awesome. I'll be there at eight."

* * * * *

Brianna took her time putting on her makeup, carefully lining her eyes with kohl and using a shimmering gold-hued shadow on her lids. She brushed on a hint of blush, careful not to use too much. She wanted to look good in case the mask

slipped, but not too made up, and decided to go with a pale pink lip-gloss that provided just a hint of color.

Morgana lay near her feet, head resting on her front paws. The German Shepherd's soft brown eyes glimmered as she watched Brianna's every movement.

"I know that look, girl. I won't be out long, I promise."

Morgana raised her head, pointed ears twitching.

Brianna waited until the last minute to step into the medieval gown. The dark blue dress dipped low in the front, and the thin green belt accentuated her small waist. She stared in the mirror, pleased with the way the dress hid her wide hips. The long sleeves would keep her warm on this cold December night.

Her favorite piece of the gown was the sleeveless vest decorated with embroidered green stems and red roses. This piece hung past her knees, giving a colorful, regal touch to the dress. She gazed at her reflection in the full-length mirror, admiring the way her long brown hair fell down past her shoulders. *I am only thirty-five. I am too young to be widowed.*

Pushing her sorrow away, she finished dressing. She picked up the golden crown she had specially crafted for the costume. The headpiece sparkled on her brow with tiny garnets and carnelian jewels, and she believed she could easily pass for the legendary Gwenhwyfar, queen to King Arthur. *Only I am without my king tonight.*

The doorbell rang, leaving her with no time to dwell on her sorrow. She slipped on the soft leather shoes and hurried to answer.

Cassie stood in the doorway looking fiercely sexy as Xena, Warrior Princess, her large breasts pushed up high on her chest in her strapless leather armor.

"Wow, aren't you going to be cold?"

"Cold? Here?"

"It does get cold here."

"Yeah, but I'm not worried about it. I'll be fine." Cassie shrugged. "Hey, don't forget your mask."

"Oh yeah." Brianna headed into the kitchen to give Morgana some treats. "Be a good girl now." She grabbed her golden mask and small pouch purse containing her cell phone and other essentials off the table in the foyer.

To keep her hands free, she looped the strap of the purse through her belt as she climbed into Cassie's car.

Brianna stared out the window, transfixed by all the beautiful Christmas lights. She contemplated how people living in a place lacking snowfall made up for the lack of winter weather by filling their yards with Christmas decorations.

Cassie spoke, breaking the silence. "This is going to be a great party. It's at the home of some members of the L.A. coven, and there are supposed to be a lot of people attending."

"In Laurel Canyon, right?"

"Yeah. They own Medieval Times and their house is supposed to be really nice."

"Cool."

Cassie glanced over, smiling. "I'm so glad you decided to come."

"Me too." She decided she would use this night to cleanse herself of grief, to look upon this shortest day of the year as a way to leave all the sorrow behind and start new with the growing power of the sun.

Her friend quirked her brow. "You're still wearing your wedding ring. You know, there are going to be so many single men at this party, a lot of pagan men . . ."

"I guess I forgot to take it off." But really, why bother? She doubted she would meet someone who could make her feel the way John had or who shared her beliefs.

"Uh huh," Cassie smiled. "You know I give you so much crap because I love you."

"I know, Xena Warrior Ho Bitch."

They looked at each other and burst into laughter.

Brianna sat back against the seat, smiling.

They exited the freeway and drove up the winding canyon road. Cars lined the street near the house so they had to park farther up. Brianna carefully stepped out of the car, straightening her flowing gown. She followed Cassie, traversing the rutted road, thankful to be wearing comfortable flat shoes.

From the street, the house looked like an average one-story house, but after she entered the side gate into the back of the house, her eyes opened wide. "Wow."

"This is crazy cool," Cassie exclaimed.

Built into the side of the canyon, the back of the house turned into a three-story structure. Balconies ran the length of each story, giving it the appearance of a fancy hotel.

The house wrapped around the large backyard in an L shape. A cemented courtyard covered the yard near the house. Masked revelers danced around a fire to 80's hair-band music that blared out of large speakers. Beyond the courtyard glimmered a swimming pool surrounded by an oasis ringed with palm trees.

The balconies on each of the three levels gleamed with colored lights reflecting off evergreen garlands and red and green Christmas balls. A large banquet table glowed with golden candles highlighting heaps of food.

Kings, queens, lords, ladies, Roman soldiers, princesses, elves, faeries, Viking warriors, and sorcerers mingled near the table and around the fire.

Brianna experienced an odd mixture of excitement and melancholy to be attending such a large Wiccan gathering.

"Hey, someone is waving at us. I think that might be Tammy and David.

They're going to be so happy to see you." Cassie started down the steps.

Brianna recognized a couple of people behind the masks by their familiar hair. She put on her mask and carefully walked down the steps, holding her long dress up a bit so it wouldn't tangle around her feet.

"Oh, honey, I am so glad to see you. Blessed be." Tammy gave her a tight hug, whispering in her ear. "How are you doing?"

"I'm fine." She forced a smile to her lips, determined to get through the night without crying.

Tammy arched her brow. "Really?"

"Really."

"I'm so glad to hear that. If at any time tonight you need someone to lean on, just come find me." Tammy touched her shoulder, her expression sympathetic.

"Thanks," Brianna said, grateful to have such caring friends.

Other members of the coven greeted them.

"I need a drink." Cassie pulled Brianna by the arm toward the bar.

"I'll take a tequila shot," she told a be-masked and be-costumed bartender. "B?"

"How very Yule-like of you. I'll have wassail with a shot of red wine."

They raised their glasses in a toast.

"To a blessed Yule," Brianna said.

"To finding some hot men tonight." Cassie downed her shot and sucked her lime.

AC/DC's "Shot Down in Flames" blared from the speakers.

"Woo hoo!" Cassie shouted. "I love this song. Dance with me."

"You know I don't dance. Especially when I'm sober. Ask me later."

Brianna sipped her hot, spiced punch, watching everyone having a good time. The sense of loneliness set in now that she stood away from her friends. An ache pressed into her heart as she recalled how John would make her laugh at parties by speaking in a fake British accent. She could almost hear his voice call out to her.

"My lady, may I have this dance?"

She became aware of someone standing next to her and realized she hadn't imagined the voice. "Huh?"

"I asked you for a dance."

The music changed to a slow song. A tall man looked down at her.

Mesmerized, she took a step back. Dressed like a medieval knight, he wore a red tunic glittering with chain mail and a large sword sheathed at his side. A black mask covered his face so she couldn't see him clearly, but she didn't recognize his voice, and he stood taller than the other men in her coven.

"I'm sorry, but I don't feel like dancing right now."

"Very well. Perhaps later then." He gave a gallant bow then disappeared in the crowd.

The man had caught her off guard with his invitation to dance, leaving her with wobbling legs. The house beckoned her with its promise of a quiet place to sit. She carried her cup inside and found a comfortable couch. She took a deep breath and another long sip of her drink to calm her nerves, savoring the blend of wine, cinnamon, cloves, and other spices.

She studied her surroundings with interest. The immaculate room contained the latest electronic equipment, fine art, and stylish furniture—much different from her small, cluttered house. Her gaze rested on a lighted tree in the corner of the room. Real pine needles gave off a sweet aroma that made her think of the Christmas tree she always picked out with John. Tears threatened to fall, and her eyes burned.

Filled with the need to get out of that room, she rose from the couch and wandered through the house, awed by its size and the wealth of the owners. For all the fine décor, she thought the place lacked a personal touch, seeming cold like a model home. A long hall took her through a large kitchen and another sitting area. She wandered into a spacious bathroom decorated in shells and beautiful artwork portraying dolphins and other marine life. On her way out, she stopped to admire herself in the mirror.

"You look beautiful, Gwenhwyfar. That is who you are dressed as, is it not?"

She whirled around at the sudden sound of the male voice and recognized the man who'd asked her to dance. "Are you following me?"

Standing in the open doorway, he grinned. "No, not at all." Black hair fell to his broad shoulders, giving him a darkly handsome look.

"Are you in character or do you always speak like that?"

"How do I speak?" He leaned close to her, a playful smile on his lips.

"Like a medieval knight."

"Well, I suppose you would have to spend some time with me to know the answer."

His nearness and flirting made her hot and had her trembling. She stepped into the hall and moved around him. *What is wrong with me?*

"Wait, where are you going?"

"Outside to join the party."

"You never answered my question."

"What question?" She stopped at the end of the hallway.

"Are you Gwenhwyfar?" His bold gaze swept over her.

"Yes."

He stepped closer, and she could smell the faint hint of his sandalwood cologne. His alluring scent quickened her heartbeat and deepened her flush. It caught her by surprise.

"Do you know where you are standing, Gwenhwyfar?" He glanced up.

She followed his gaze to mistletoe hanging from the low ceiling, glimmering with a tempting glow. Her breath caught in her throat. Captivated by his nearness, she imagined those masculine lips touching her. "I . . ." Her feet froze to the floor. He had the most amazing blue eyes.

"It's tradition," he said, dipping his head and pressing a kiss to her trembling lips.

She couldn't move her mouth at first, allowing his lips to capture her mouth in a thrilling crush. His forceful yet tender kiss awakened something inside her. She forgot who she was or that she was allowing a stranger's lips to caress her. Her head spinning, she surrendered to him.

He cradled the back of her head with his hand, and she was aware of the slight scratch of stubble tickling her face. The kiss grew more passionate, and she almost dropped her cup, the only thing keeping their bodies from touching.

The heat from his skin sent a flush to every part of her body. Her breasts heaved and tingled. Excitement spread through the rest of her body, quickening her pulse. She wanted to stay there in his embrace, feeling a man's lips giving her so much pleasure again.

"Okay guys, get a room already." A reveler laughed and ducked into the bathroom.

She stepped away from the stranger, the magical moment broken.

Blushing, she avoided eye contact with him.

Someone stuck their head into the house and announced it was time for the covens to gather for the burning of the Yule logs.

She swallowed hard. "I have to go."

"Wait, will I see you after?"

She nodded.

He took hold of her left hand and bent to kiss it. Remembering the wedding ring, she stiffened.

He delivered the kiss then started to straighten but hesitated, his gaze pinned on her ring finger.

"I will meet you here after the ritual." She withdrew her hand from his grasp, turned and hurried outside.

She set her cup down, slipped into place with her coven and the others gathering around the fire. Leaders of each coven stepped forward to lead the Yule Sabbat. The High Priestess of the L.A. coven's words resonated with her. "Every ending is a beginning." Each High Priest or Priestess spoke a part of the ritual.

They extinguished the fire then relit it with enormous Yule logs to create a brilliant bonfire. Coven members approached the blaze in a single file to place their offerings. This year Brianna brought a sprig of mistletoe to cleanse her grief and help with the healing of her heart. The coincidence of kissing under the mistletoe and now using it for her offering wasn't lost on her, and she wondered if it was a sign. She silently called on Brigit, the goddess of healing and inspiration, to help aid her in the coming year.

Everyone joined together to dance around the fire in five rows of masked revelers. Brianna stood between Cassie and another member of her coven named Pam. Loreena McKennitt's song "The Mumpers' Dance" played through the speakers; the lively haunting music brought light into a heart filled with darkness. The lyrics spoke of blue-veiled spring nights under a breathless moon and reminded her of a forest pulsing with life. Brianna found herself smiling and laughing along with the others.

She didn't see her mystery man among the dancers pressed around the fire. The song ended, and she made her escape, flushed from exertion and eager to see if he awaited her under the mistletoe. Disappointment washed over her when she found he wasn't there.

She waited until the next song ended, but he didn't show. Feeling foolish and desperate, she joined the party outside, realizing he wasn't coming to meet her. She looked down at her wedding ring. No doubt he'd changed his mind, thought her married and therefore unavailable. She shook her head. She hadn't even had sense enough to get his name.

"There you are." Cassie approached her with a sly smile. "Where did you disappear to earlier? Someone said they saw you with a tall man."

"Yeah, he was very tall and a good kisser, too." Brianna smiled, recalling the kiss.

The party began to break up, costumed people shuffling toward the gate.

Cassie's eyes widened. "You kissed someone? You go, girl."

Brianna touched her ring, sliding it back and forth. "I think I screwed up though. I think he saw my wedding band and decided to bail on me."

"Well, did you get his number or his name? Someone must know him."

"No and no." Brianna frowned.

"I'm still proud of you." Her friend touched her shoulder, smiling.

"I'm ready to go home," Brianna said. Awash in disappointment, she had no desire to stay at the party. "Can you drive okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. Let's go."

They bid farewell to their friends, wishing everyone a blessed Yule, and left the party.

Brianna looked for the mysterious knight, hoping to find him standing outside the party, but he had disappeared. She would have thought he existed only in her imagination if her lips didn't still feel so pleasantly bruised from his passionate kisses.

Chapter Two

Shane lay on the weight bench in his garage workout room, his thoughts turning to last night's events. He wanted to kick himself for leaving the celebration right after the Yule ritual, but the friend who drove him to the party had to leave. The last image he had of the woman he knew only as Gwenthwyfar remained in his thoughts. She looked so happy dancing around the fire with her friends. He should have approached her, but he decided not to disturb her.

Not to mention the wedding ring she wore caught him off guard. Yet another reason he'd decided not to approach her again.

But she haunted his thoughts.

There had to be an explanation for the wedding ring. If she were married, she'd attended the party without her husband. But she didn't strike him as the type of woman who would accept another man's advances if she were already in a committed relationship. Maybe she was separated? *I should have asked her.*

He kept thinking of the kiss they'd shared under the mistletoe. The mindless exercise of bench-pressing always made his mind wander. With a grunt, he did a few extra reps with heavy weights, pushed through the last one, then set the bar back in its resting spot with a loud clang.

He lay on the bench daydreaming about how beautiful she looked when he first saw her standing by herself next to the banquet table. She'd looked like Gwenthwyfar—who just so happened to be the woman of his dreams. Her long brown hair spilled down her shoulders in an enticing splash, framing a delicate face and the creamy tops of her breasts—those full, heaving breasts. The thought made him shudder with arousal.

His first thought had been that she was too beautiful to be by herself. She appeared somewhat sad, watching the others dance. Her pensiveness made her more intriguing to him and he had to know the lady behind the mask. She'd spurned his invitation to dance, but he refused to give up. Even the gentle sound of her voice pleased him, and he remained determined to learn more about her.

She tried to elude him again inside the house. Her elusive behavior only made him more determined. Women always flocked around him. This was the first time a woman had turned down his advances and it intrigued him further.

He'd almost run out of ideas when the mistletoe caught his eye, drawing his gaze with its strange, almost magical light.

She'd stood right beneath it, giving him the perfect opportunity to make his move.

He would never forget that kiss, the sweet taste of her lips. At first, she'd held herself stiffly, but she'd finally relented, surrendering to him. Her soft lips had caressed his mouth with yearning. He'd never experienced such passion in a kiss.

Of course, some wanker had to interrupt them and ruin the moment.

Then, like an idiot, he had allowed her to slip away.

But what about the wedding ring?

He groaned in exasperation. What difference did it make? He had no way of finding her now.

He glanced at his watch. Damn. If he didn't get moving, he'd be late for rehearsing battle scenes before tonight's show. After rising from the weight bench, he grabbed his gym bag and headed out the door.

* * * * *

Shane pulled up to the back entrance of the castle-like building. He stepped inside, making his way through the backstage maze to the dressing room to drop off his bag. With hurried steps, he strode out onto the huge arena.

It always felt strange to him to see the stadium seating area empty. In the bright, harsh lights, the area lacked the beauty it possessed at show time. As soon as Medieval Times opened its doors wide to welcome its guests, the place would be transformed into a magical setting of darkness and colored lights. The arena would be packed with eager patrons clapping and cheering their knight.

His fellow performers warmed up with stretches on the sandy floor, and he plopped down into place, stretching his leg muscles.

"A late night, was it?" His friend, Chris, smiled with a knowing glimmer in his eyes. "Were you tasting the flesh of that blonde wench with the gigantic tits?" he added, using his best British accent.

"No."

"I know you did something, and I want to hear all about it later, my friend." Chris finished his stretches and turned his attention to the other knights. "We will be going through the final fight scene. Grab your weapons." He clapped his hands. "Come on, girls, you can move faster than that."

Shane grabbed the two-handed sword from the rack. He gripped the smooth, worn hilt of his favorite weapon with confidence, the strength of the blade rippling through his shoulders when he raised it for battle. The sensation thrilled him.

He pushed through the choreographed fight on instinct, his concentration focused on his opponent. Two steps forward with overhead swings followed by a lunge to the left with a left side cut . . . clash, clash, clang . . . right foot back with a right slash.

Out of the corner of his eye, he thought he saw a woman wearing a golden mask. The mirage broke his concentration for a split second and his last strike fell too low. His opponent would have cut into his right shoulder if they had really been fighting using full, forceful swings.

He managed to deflect the sword with his hilt, but the careless blow put him off balance and he stumbled backward.

"Green Knight, a word please." Chris bellowed. "The rest of you go through it again."

Shane obeyed the command and stood before the training coordinator. "What was that?"

"Nothing. I just stumbled."

"Uh-huh. My head knights don't 'just stumble.' So, what's really going on? I know you and you never break concentration. Is it a girl?"

"Sort of."

"Do tell." Chris kept one eye on him and one eye on the battling knights. "I met someone last night and she seems different from the other girls I usually date."

"You mean she isn't blonde with watermelon tits?"

He thought of the passionate kiss. "Yeah, she was beautiful though. I just can't get her out of my head."

"I thought you were dating someone."

"I was, but she broke up with me. She said I spend too much time doing this." Shane looked away for a moment, his gaze following the battle.

Chris rubbed his chin, his gaze darting back to the battling knights. "It's funny how they always love what we do at first and then they complain we spend too much time practicing and performing."

"Yeah, but *you* found someone who puts up with it."

"I was lucky. You just need to find the right girl."

"There is something about this girl. I can't get her out of my head," Shane said, "but I forgot to get her name or phone number."

"So, *that's* what's screwing with your concentration."

"Pretty much, yeah," Shane said, frowning.

"So find her. There must be a way. But until then, you need to concentrate or you're going to get hurt." Chris turned away, clapping his hands. "Okay, one more time, guys."

Chris's encouraging words made him feel better. A sense of determination filled him. He would find her somehow. But for now, he put her out of his mind and concentrated on his opponent. He didn't want to be the knight who messed up his performance and had to stay late and help with the dishes.

Chapter Three

The memories of the traditions she'd shared with John for five years brought hot, stinging tears to Brianna's eyes. Each year at Yule they bought a real Christmas tree to decorate and burned a Yule log in their fireplace. They always toasted the Yule with a glass of wine and made love before the warm fire.

Swiping at her tears, she pushed herself up from the couch, determined to make it through the holiday.

She searched the garage and managed to find the small, fake Christmas tree they usually put in their bedroom. That proved to be the easy part and she did it without shedding a tear. But when she opened the box containing the Christmas ornaments, she lost her tenuous hold on her emotions. Each one held a precious memory. The sight of the Harley motorcycle ornament with a smiling Santa made her sob. John had loved his Harley. A part of her wanted to throw it on the ground and smash it into pieces, the bitterness of his accident still gnawing at her. Instead, she carefully hung it on a prominent branch of the tree.

She found another ornament she forgot about, carefully unwrapping it from the tissue paper. John had bought it for her last year, knowing how much she loved anything medieval and mystical. She recalled the pleased grin on his face when she opened it. When she looked at it now, her heart leapt with a mixture of joy and sorrow at the faery queen holding a crystal ball.

The ornament had been finely crafted, each detail of the faery's body and hair etched to perfection. But it was the crystal ball that caught her attention this time. It sparkled, emitting a rainbow of colors in a magical light. An electric spark tingled through her hand as she held it in her palm. Startled, she almost dropped it.

The crystal ball glowed with a magical, otherworldly light. She didn't recall such a phenomenon occurring last year. She blinked hard, and the light faded. I'm over-tired, she thought, and shrugged. Her mind had to be playing tricks on her. Careful not to drop it, she hung it in a special place on the tree.

She opened more boxes of ornaments, feeling like an impatient child on Christmas morning. The precious memories attached to each decoration whirled around her in a wondrous aura.

With the tree decorated, she poured herself a glass of wine and reclined on the couch. Morgana sprawled on the floor next to her.

She stared at the fiber optic tree, the dazzling lights reflecting off the adornments in a glittering array of beauty. A smile tugged at her lips. The tree lacked the perfection that only John could give to it; some of the branches twisted in awkward angles. If he were here now, he would roll his eyes and make a joke about her lack of skill at putting the tree together. But he would always compliment her on her decorating skills.

Blinking back tears, she tried her best to embrace the good memories, instead of wallowing in her sorrow like she'd done over the last year without him.

Rooted in her pagan beliefs, she believed in reincarnation and knew she should celebrate his new journey, but the emptiness in her heart overruled her head. They had always talked about what would happen if one of them died before the other. They promised each other they would make contact from the other side.

She emptied her wine glass, feeling a little buzzed. Her gaze rested on the fireplace where John's urn sat. "You broke your promise to me."

From the corner of her eye, she thought she saw the faery queen ornament send out a bolt of light, but when she turned to look, she noticed nothing out of the ordinary. Warmed by the wine, she allowed her eyes to drift shut.

* * * * *

Brianna awoke with a start. *What the—?* A loud buzzing noise filled the room. She fumbled into a sitting position, her mind trying to identify the source of the sound.

Morgana sat up, her head tilted toward the kitchen.

Brianna followed her dog's gaze and realized the noise came from her cell phone.

What the hell? She jumped off the couch and grabbed the phone off the island counter that divided the kitchen from the living room. She frantically pushed the *END* button in a desperate attempt to silence the annoying sound, but her phone appeared to be broken, the screen blinking and not responding to the keypad strokes.

"Hello?" A deep, male voice came from her phone.

Hello?

She stared at the phone, confused. The horrible noise coming from her phone wasn't her ring tone. "Hello? Who is this?"

"You called me."

"I didn't call anyone."

"Well, this is weird because I know I didn't call anyone."

She liked the sound of this stranger's voice and it sounded oddly familiar to her.

"What's your name?"

"Uh, Shane, what's yours?"

"Brianna."

"That's a beautiful name."

His rich, deep voice fascinated her, and she became bold. "There must be a reason we ended up talking to each other. Do you believe in fate?"

"I might."

"Where are you right now?"

"I am leaving my job at Medieval Times."

"Where is that?"

"Buena Park, California."

"Seriously? That's not too far from me. I love that place. You really work there?"

A shiver touched her spine. She remembered the conversation she and Cassie had about Medieval Times on the way to the masquerade ball.

"Yes."

The strange caller intrigued her, and her heart fluttered in excitement. "Are you one of the six knights?"

"I am."

"Which one?"

"The Green Knight."

She smiled, adjusting the phone to her ear. "This is so strange because the Green Knight is my favorite."

"Would you like to meet the Green Knight?"

She liked this game, and her pulse raced with excitement and naughtiness.

Why not meet him? I am single, after all. The time had come to start living again. She took a deep breath, closed her eyes and said, "Yes."

"I was hoping you would say that, Brianna. How about we meet here tomorrow night? How will I recognize you?"

She thought a moment about how she could stand out from the hundreds of people in the large arena. "I will be dressed like a medieval queen."

"I like that. I will see you tomorrow night."

She ended the call, her heart thumping with anticipation.

A blinding flash shot out from the screen on her cell phone. She dropped the phone on the counter and stepped back, her heart now hammering. The phone spun around in circles and sparks filled the air. She sensed a presence in the room.

Morgana stood, wagging her tail, and the hairs on Brianna's arms stood at attention. *John.*

She spun around, scanning the room for signs of his presence. "John, is that you?"

A soft glow appeared next to her, and a warm breeze touched her cheek like a lover's caress.

Tears stung her eyelids. Her hand shook as she reached up to touch her face. "Why did you wait so long? I have tried so many times to contact you."

I have always been here, my love.

The warm breeze wrapped around her in a tender embrace. She closed her eyes and imagined John standing there, holding and kissing her like he used to do.

A strange sensation surged through her body. He was there to say goodbye to her. She heard his voice in her head telling her he loved her, but she needed to move on, to be happy.

The breeze faded, and the light dimmed into a tiny spark, disappearing near the tree.

"I love you, John. I will never forget you."

She wiped away her tears and gazed down at her left hand. The white-gold wedding ring with the modest diamond glittered on her finger. Letting out a sigh, she removed the ring. She'd put it away now. John had given his blessing and that was all she needed to take that step, and the others to come as she moved forward with her life.

Chapter Four

Shane took a deep breath, listening to the raucous crowd from his place backstage. His stomach fluttered with nervousness, something he hadn't felt since his first performance fifteen years ago. He had a feeling the woman waiting to meet him was special by the strange way they'd connected on the phone. Her voice had sounded familiar and his pulse quickened with anticipation.

Magic seemed to be in the air, the thrilling sensation crackling around him.

He sat astride his horse and waited for his name to be announced.

Lancelot, a well-trained white and gray Andalusia, waited patiently for him to give the signal.

The announcer's voice droned on in a mesmerizing rich tone suited for a medieval palace. ". . . the Green Knight."

With a gentle prod of his heels, Shane set Lancelot in motion. They headed out into the arena, accompanied by the cheers and jeers of the crowd. Lancelot pranced around the arena with kingly grace. Shane unsheathed his sword, taunting the crowd before retreating to his place in front of the green seating area. The approving roar from the crowd in his section gave him a jolt of energy and he fell into character, becoming the invincible Green Knight.

He knew she sat in the front where he instructed them to seat the woman dressed as a medieval queen, but he avoided looking for her. He couldn't risk a break in his concentration.

The performance moved by in a blur for him. He blocked out all other distractions and performed his jousts and battle scenes to perfection. Finally, the moment he had been waiting for arrived. He held the single red rose and guided Lancelot over to the wall of the green area. A spotlight broke the darkness, resting on a woman dressed as a medieval queen. She stood and faced him, the spotlight creating a glittering aura around her.

His breath caught in his throat. That dress . . . that long brown hair. But this time, she wore no mask, and his heart hammered when she smiled. A most beautiful smile, one she directed at him. He leaned over the top of his horse, reaching to give her the rose.

He saw her face more clearly, amazed at her beauty. Her discerning brown eyes sparkled with warmth, and he found himself lost in her gaze. He made a spontaneous decision. "My lady Gwenhwyfar, would you care for a ride?" His wireless microphone captured his words.

The crowd roared.

"Yes, my lord."

Her sense of daring pleased him. She hiked her skirt up to her thighs and he caught a flash of pale, flawless skin. He helped her over the wall and onto the back of his horse.

She wrapped her arms around him. The warmth and softness of her womanly curves raised his desire.

With his beautiful queen pressed against him, he urged Lancelot to do one more turn around the arena. The enthusiastic crowd applauded and cheered with a deafening roar, adding excitement to the magical moment.

Embraced in the spotlight, he reined Lancelot backstage and dismounted, then reached to help Brianna down. Her nearness drove him mad with yearning. He smelled the sweet strawberry scent of her hair and felt the warmth of her breath on his cheek.

Ignoring the curious stares and impish grins from his co-workers, he took her hand and led her back to his dressing area.

Even as they reached the door to his dressing room, he refused to relinquish her hand. Now that he'd found her, he never wanted to let go. But there remained one problem. His gaze fell to her left hand, and his eyes grew wide. Her third finger was naked. A boyish sense of eagerness filled him, a sensation he hadn't felt since high school, when love was new and exciting. He realized then how she differed from his other dates. She possessed the confidence of a woman, so unlike the insecure girls he usually dated. The thought filled him with excitement. He wanted to know this woman.

* * * * *

Her heart hammered, and her stomach fluttered. She couldn't believe she was standing with the man from the masquerade ball. He was so handsome dressed in his medieval armor, and she remembered how gallant he looked jousting and battling the other knights. He possessed the face of a warrior, a strong jaw shadowed with stubble, a slightly crooked nose and full lips. She blushed, recalling the kiss they'd shared.

"I just need to get out of these clothes and then we can do whatever you want." He ducked behind a curtain.

She heard him tugging off his clothes, and she couldn't help imagining how sexy his tall, strapping body would look naked.

He stepped out, dressed in snug jeans, pulling a T-shirt over his chest. She caught a glimpse of his hard chest and experienced another blush warming her cheeks.

"What do you want to do?"

She glanced down at her dress. "Well, if we go anywhere else, I should change my clothes."

He gazed at her. "You look beautiful."

"Thank you, but I would feel out of place." She blushed in response to his admiring gaze.

"We don't have to go anywhere. Would you like something to drink?"

"Yes, a glass of wine."

He pulled a chair out for her. "Here, have a seat. I will be right back."

She sat in the cluttered dressing room, her gaze drawn to some pictures taped to his mirror. The girls in the pictures with him looked like models or strippers and they all looked very young.

He came back and caught the direction of her gaze. He handed her a glass of wine and pulled up another chair. "Pay no mind to those pictures. Those girls are fans, nothing more."

"They are so pretty and so . . . big-chested."

He laughed, showing even, white teeth. "Yeah, but that's about all they have to offer."

She took a sip of wine and cradled the glass in her lap. "Can I ask you something personal?"

"Sure."

"If that is the kind of girl you are attracted to, then why did you approach me at the masquerade ball?"

"You looked so beautiful and you were dressed like Gwenthwyfar or at least what I imagined she would look like. I'll admit I did date some of those girls on my mirror, but it didn't work out."

"But you didn't meet me after the ritual."

"It wasn't because I didn't want to see you again. My friend had to leave." He looked down at her left hand. "And you were wearing a wedding ring. I wasn't sure what to think of that."

"I thought that might've thrown you off."

"Why?"

"Why the ring?" She paused, glancing at her left hand. "My husband died last January. Until now I didn't feel right about taking it off."

"I'm so sorry." He slipped his hand into hers.

She stared down at her bare fingers entwined with his big, strong hand. She liked the way his touch comforted her. "This is going to sound weird, but I think he was the one who brought us together on the phone. I saw this bright light and I swear I felt his presence. It was really strange. Anyway, I had this sense that he was telling me to move on." She looked up, hoping he didn't think she was nuts.

"Then I must thank him." He gazed at her, his expression genuine.

"And I must thank those girls on the mirror for driving you away."

"You're very funny. I like that. Truthfully, they broke up with me because they complained I spent too much time training and performing, but working here isn't just a job for me; it's my passion."

"Oh, that's good."

"Good?" He drew his brows together.

"I don't mean it's good that they broke up with you; I mean it's good you have a passion. I spend a lot of time in my herb garden and mixing my lotions and creams. I am trying to start an online business and that's *my* passion. We'd probably get along well, since we'd understand each other's need for time apart."

He watched her, his expression one of wonder.

She gave him a sheepish grin. "I'm sorry. I'm really jumping the gun here, aren't I? Talking as if we're already a couple."

"Not at all. I was just thinking how amazing it is that you have come into my life." He leaned forward and kissed her.

The kiss electrified her. The spark of passion still existed between them.

Tingles raced from her lips to the rest of her body. She surrendered to his skillful ministrations, this time without any regrets.

* * * * *

Winter Solstice, two years later:

Nervous flutters rippled through Brianna's stomach.

"I am so happy for you." Cassie gave her a hug. "You look so beautiful." Brianna gazed in the mirror, thinking she must be dreaming. The off-white wedding gown looked like something a medieval bride would wear. Patterned after her masquerade dress, the ivory gown sparkled with rows of tiny Swarovski crystals. It gathered at the waist and dipped low in the front while the long, delicate vest displayed beautiful embroidered green stems entwined with red roses. A smooth circlet of gold rested on her brow, the cool metal refreshing against her warm skin.

"It's time," Cassie said.

Brianna barely registered walking down the aisle to the music of a flute and harp. The outside park setting and her costumed pagan friends faded into the background. All she saw was her handsome soon-to-be husband standing at the altar wearing his medieval knight costume. Her heart fluttered with happiness.

His blue eyes brightened when he saw her.

She spoke her vows gazing into his eyes, her voice trembling.

He spoke his vows, his voice edged with huskiness, the soft light and sparkle in his gaze conveying his love for her.

The High Priest spoke. "You are now joined as husband and wife. You may kiss the bride."

"Wait." Shane reached into his pocket and held up mistletoe.

"You remembered," Brianna said.

"How could I forget?"

At that moment the sunset merged deep shadows and twilight colors of orange and purple together in a wondrous display she would never forget. The kiss they shared sealed their love and started a new set of traditions.

~The End~

About the Author

Multi-published author Kelley Heckart lives in Arizona with her musician husband and Chihuahua. Inspired by the ancient Celts, her stories are steeped in myth and magic, filled with fierce warriors and alpha heroes, bold women, otherworldly creatures, and romance. When not writing, she works as a freelance editor, practices target archery, and writes and records music with her husband. She can be found online at <http://www.kelleyheckart.com/>

Other books by Kelley:

Of Water and Dragons

Ravenwolf

Daughter of Night

White Rose of Avalon

Cat's Curse

Beltaine's Song

Winter's Requiem

The Bear Goddess

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