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Little Black Dress

By Kareenna Colcroft

A month after a hysterectomy, Sophie's body is healing, but she isn't sure about her mind. She no longer feels like a complete woman, and she's wracked with guilt that she and her new husband Garrett won't be able to have children together. Will Garrett's Christmas gift to her help her see herself as a real woman again?

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Christmas would be tight this year. Sophie blamed herself; after all, if she'd held onto her job, she and Garrett would have had more than enough to make Christmas spectacular for her kids. Holding onto the job hadn't been possible when some days she hadn't made it out of bed because of the pain.

Sitting at her computer, she slid down in the chair and grimaced at the slight pain in her incision. A month after the hysterectomy, she'd expected to be closer to completely healed than this. The doctor had told her she wouldn't be able to return to work until after the new year at the earliest, and then only if she could find a job that wouldn't involve too much time on her feet.

Her body would heal, though. Her mind... Even though she thought she'd come to terms with losing her uterus and ovaries, sometimes she couldn't help crying over the loss. She had nothing inside her anymore proving her female; some days, she barely considered herself a woman at all. A shell, maybe. Hollowed out inside. And the children she'd dreamed of giving Garrett would never exist. Thank goodness he considered her children his own; that took some of the sting away. Not all of it, though. She'd dreamed of a little boy or girl with Gavin's deep brown eyes, and since he had no children of his own, she thought he'd probably wanted a child with her as well.

No chance now.

She took a deep breath and looked at the notecard she'd taped to her wall, on

which she'd written a "pep talk" instant message a friend had sent her while she'd awaited the surgery. "You need to learn not to worry about things beyond your control, but you are allowing yourself to wallow in it. You are a very intelligent woman. Act like it; the 'victim' does not become you." As always, the words reminded her to be strong.

The front door opened and closed, and after a moment Garrett entered the den. Sophie stood and melted against him as he embraced her. "How are you feeling?" he asked as he did every night.

"Pretty good." She chose not to mention the dull ache in her abdomen. "How did work go?"

He shrugged. "Like work." He pressed his lips against hers. "I'm just glad to be home with you now. Did you have any problems taking the kids to their dad?"

"No, it went fine." It had only been a week since the doctor had cleared her to drive, and she doubted he'd realized she would drive an hour north to drop off her children with their father. It hadn't been uncomfortable, though. "I stopped on the way up and the way back to rest and stretch my legs," she added, hating that the words made her sound like an invalid.

"Good." Garrett smiled down at her. "I thought maybe we could go Christmas shopping this weekend."

"Don't buy me anything," she said immediately. "I don't have anything for you." She hadn't had the money for anything; with her out of work, Garrett supported the household, and she couldn't bring herself to use his money to buy him presents.

"You've given me something already," he said firmly. "You went to the doctor

when you needed to, you had the surgery that you needed to make yourself healthy, and you're taking care of yourself now so you can heal and be completely well. You've given me a healthy wife, and that's all that matters."

"That isn't something you can unwrap on Christmas morning, though," she muttered.

His eyes twinkled. "Maybe not then. On Christmas night after the kids go to bed..."

She laughed. "Depending on what the doctor says on Monday, that's a possibility."

Another brief kiss, and he let go of her. "I'll pick the kids up on Sunday so you can rest," he offered. "And let me know if you want me to drive you to the doctor on Monday."

"I can drive, honey," she protested. "I'm doing much better."

"I know you can. Let me take care of you anyway." He said that so often she heard it in her sleep. They'd been together nearly two years; she should be able to let him do things for her by now. She had yet to master that skill, though. She'd grown too accustomed to having to do everything herself.

"We'll see," she said lightly. "Do you want me to make you something for supper?"

"We had pizza down at the shop," he replied, looking sheepish. "I'm sorry, I should have called to tell you."

"No problem." On kid-free nights, she rarely made supper for anyone other than

herself.

“I’m going to check my emails,” he announced. “Maybe play a game or two. Let me know when it’s eight o’clock; I haven’t forgotten our date.”

“I won’t let you forget,” she vowed. “I’m going to have something to eat.”

“Order out if you want,” he said, sitting down at his computer.

Of course she didn’t. She didn’t like spending his money on herself any more than she liked the idea of using it to buy his Christmas gifts. Instead she microwaved a veggie burger, which she ate with sides of chips and carrot sticks.

At eight o’clock, Garrett joined her on the couch for their date night. When they’d started the tradition, a year earlier when she and the kids had first moved in with him, they’d gone out once a week. A movie, dinner, dancing; it hadn’t mattered. The point had been to spend time together.

They hadn’t actually gone out in months; the tumor that had necessitated the surgery had left Sophie so exhausted that when they had left the house, they’d usually had to cut it short. So Garrett had subscribed to a movie delivery service, and now once a week they sent the kids to their rooms if the kids hadn’t gone to their father’s and snuggled on the couch to watch whatever movie the service had provided.

This time, the movie had a Christmas theme, one of the sappy happy ending films that proliferated at that time of year. At the end of the movie, when the heroine announced to the hero that she’d become pregnant with his baby, Sophie burst into tears. “Hey,” Garrett said gently, pulling her into his arms. “It’s okay.”

“No, it isn’t.” She sniffled and looked up at him. “Does it bother you that we’re

never going to have children together?”

“We already do,” he said firmly. “Two beautiful girls.”

Through her tears, she managed a small smile. “You know what I mean, though.”

“Honey, I don’t think I could deal with a baby anyway,” he said. “All that crying, and messy diapers and stuff? I like our kids the way they are now. Old enough to talk and have fun with. It doesn’t matter if I contributed DNA to them. They’re still ours.”

Fresh tears came to her eyes. “I’m so lucky to have you,” she murmured.

“Not as lucky as I am to have you.” He tenderly kissed her lips. “Don’t worry about it, honey. I love you more every day, and nothing’s going to change that. You’re still the woman I fell in love with.” She’d told him her fears so many times, he knew exactly what to say to comfort her. “I have you, and we have the kids, and everything’s going to be fine,” he continued. “Especially now. The doctor said once you recover from the surgery, you’ll be healthier than you’ve been in years, didn’t he?”

“Yeah. I just wish it didn’t take so damn long to go back to normal.”

“You had a major operation,” he reminded her. “It will take time. Soon you’ll be back on your feet, and back at work if you want to be.”

“I have to be,” she argued.

“No, honey, you don’t,” he told her. “I make more than enough to support you and the kids, and I’ve told you before that’s what I want to do. If you work, it’s because you want to, not because we’re going to starve without your income. It’s nice to have that extra, and we can start saving for a house if you do work full time again. You don’t have to.”

They'd had this discussion before, along with ones about her refusal to spend his money on herself, and she decided she didn't want a replay of the debate tonight.

"Maybe in a few more weeks, we'll be able to go out again on date nights," she said instead. "Once in a while, at least."

"Definitely," he agreed.

She started to ask whether they'd be able to afford it, then stifled the question. She took care of paying the household bills and usually managed to have a little left over; he kept a hundred dollars or so for himself from his paycheck. If they went out, they'd be able to pay for it.

"Someone told me there's a party coming up for New Year's Eve," Garrett added. "You know, all those people who you've been chatting with online and haven't seen lately?"

"Some of them came to see me in the hospital," she corrected. "And a couple have visited me here since I came home."

"I know, and every time I sign into chat I'm bombarded by people asking about you," he replied. "So I think, if you're up to it, we should plan on going to that party. It's New Year's Eve, and I want to be somewhere special with you for our midnight kiss."

She'd heard about the party as well. A get-together in the ballroom of a fancy hotel. Women in the chat room had talked about the dresses they planned to buy; everyone seemed to plan on formal attire, and more than one person had mentioned finding the perfect "little black dress." Something Sophie had never owned. Her party

clothes tended to be more casual, and some no longer fit her because of the weight she'd lost thanks to the tumor and the surgery. "I don't think I have anything to wear," she protested.

"So you'll buy something." Garrett settled back and put his arm around her. "Take a shopping trip with Maria or Jana or one of your other friends. Let them help you pick out a dress."

"We can't afford it," she mumbled. "It doesn't matter, I'll find something around here." The thought of dressing up depressed her. All feminine and crap, exactly the way she didn't see herself anymore.

"Buy a dress," he repeated adamantly.

"I'm not going to spend money on something I'd probably only wear that one time," she argued. "Especially if we don't even know if I'll be able to go." The doctor would okay it; she'd recovered enough to go out with friends, though she might have to sit more than usual. Sometimes, though, pain and tiredness still hit when she least expected it, and sometimes she just didn't want to be around other people. Not even Garrett.

"I'm not going to argue with you," he said mildly. "If you'd like to go to that party, I think it's a good idea, and if you want a dress, I'll be glad to give you the money for one. Take it out of the household account; if we don't have enough in there, I'll put some in. You don't need my permission to buy something for yourself, you know."

"I know. I need our bank account's permission." Her usual connection with him

had been ruined now. She stood. "I'm going to go read."

"Fine." He looked at her. "You know I love you."

"I love you too," she said automatically.

"I know all this has been hard on you, and I know it bothers you that you can't do everything you think you should be able to do," he went on. "Honey, you have to stop dwelling on all of it. You have to stop thinking that you aren't holding up your end of things because you aren't working, and you have to stop thinking that I'm going to think you're less of a woman because you had a hysterectomy." He frowned. "And you really need to stop thinking less of yourself."

Although she knew he meant well, his words stung, and she turned away to hide the new flow of tears. She didn't want his comfort; she wanted him to go to hell. "I'm going to read," she repeated, and left the room.

* * *

By the next day, Sophie had moved past her bad mood. When Garrett woke up, she made a cup of coffee for him and handed it to him when he emerged from the shower. "I'm sorry," she said.

"Why? Did you burn the coffee?" he teased.

"About last night," she replied. "I'm sorry I acted like such a bitch."

He swatted her backside. "You acted like what?"

She laughed. "I'm sorry I whined and lost my temper."

"That's better." He took a sip of his coffee and went into the den. Sophie followed. Garrett sat at his computer and said, "Honey, you were upset, and that's

okay. It just bothers me that you're still this upset about it all. You should know by now that I love you no matter what, and that it doesn't bother me that you had the surgery. I want you healthy."

"Sometimes I feel..." She swallowed and glanced at her notecard again. "I'm wallowing, aren't I."

"Yeah, you are," he said in a kind tone. "So stop, okay? You're having a hard time because Christmas is almost here and you think you're a bad mother because you didn't buy the kids every toy on the market; you think you're a bad wife because you didn't buy me anything." He set his coffee down and gripped her shoulders. "Knock it off," he ordered with a grin, gently shaking her.

Again she laughed, knowing he wanted to tease her out of her mood. "Maybe I can go shopping with you later for some stuff for the kids," she suggested.

"That's a good idea, if you don't think it'll tire you out too much."

"I can always find a bench if it does." She sat at her own computer. "It's our first married Christmas. I feel like I should give you something special."

He took her hand and kissed it. "You are something special. Maybe you'll find some little thing for me while we're out. Don't worry about it. I meant what I said last night. I have a gorgeous wife who is now healthy, and if the doctor okays it, I will unwrap you Christmas night. So a present for me is optional." He turned to his computer. "Give me a little while to drink my coffee and wake up, and then we'll go."

She checked her emails while she waited, and found two from friends asking if she planned to go to the New Year's Eve party. She ignored them for the moment; she

didn't even know if she wanted to go, and she certainly wouldn't commit to something if she couldn't be certain of going.

Finally Garrett stood and pushed in his chair. "Ready," he announced.

They drove to a nearby mall and spent a little time wandering around, trying to decide what to buy for the kids. As they walked, Sophie didn't even think about her surgery; her legs didn't wobble, she felt no pain, and while she'd grown a little tired, she could deal with it. After they finished shopping for Emily, Garrett suggested, "Let's go sit down in the food court. I'll buy you lunch."

Sophie nodded, and they held hands as they walked toward the food court. The happiness that swelled within her just at his touch surprised her. Happiness had become unfamiliar to her over the past few months. She'd grown used to being sick and miserable, and even the message on the notecard, while it reminded her of her own strength and ability to move past things, couldn't always pull her out of her funk. Now, though, with her body cooperating with her desire to shop with Garrett, and bags full of gifts for her children, she truly was happy.

As they walked, they came to a dress shop with a window display of party dresses and gowns. Garrett stopped in front of it. "That black dress right there would look beautiful on you, honey," he said.

Sophie studied it. The perfect little black dress, sleeveless with a sequined band around the waist. A simple cut, one which would flatter what little figure she had left; she'd lost so much weight she looked like skin and bones in some things. The dress would be great for the New Year's Eve party, if she could bring herself to wear it.

She could only imagine what the price would be, though, and she didn't think she wanted to find out for sure. The store sold expensive clothing. She'd been in it a few times with friends, and had always cringed at the prices on the tags. "It's nice," she said noncommittally.

"Go in and see if they have one in your size," Garrett urged.

"I'd rather not." She turned away and smiled at him. "I think you mentioned lunch, and my stomach's growling."

"Good. I want to see you eating." He took her hand again. "And after we eat, we can come back and see about that dress."

"Honey, let's not," she pleaded. She wouldn't fight with him. However, she couldn't let him even think about buying her something that expensive. She wouldn't be likely to wear it anyway. Something like that belonged on a beautiful woman, not a hollowed-out skeleton.

She closed her eyes hard for a second, refusing to let any tears fall, and then pasted a new smile on her face and thought about how much Sasha and Emily would love their presents.

They ate lunch in the Chinese buffet that occupied one corner of the food court, then headed back to their car. Of course, they had to pass the dress shop again, and of course, Garrett stopped. "Are you sure you don't at least want to try it on?" he asked.

"There isn't any point," she said.

"Of course there is," he countered. "How else will we know what size you take?"

"I don't need a dress," she said firmly. "If we go to that party, I have stuff at

home that will work. I don't need anything new."

"You need something to make you feel beautiful, because right now, I don't think you do," he said quietly. "You are beautiful, and you need to see yourself that way again."

"I don't want to talk about this right now." She walked away, glancing over her shoulder to see him still standing there. "Are you coming?" she called.

"Yeah." He caught up with her and put his arm around her. "I love you."

"I love you too."

"Good." He bent to kiss her cheek without breaking stride.

* * *

Monday morning, after giving the kids the usual lectures about phone and computer usage and reminding them to call Garrett at work if they needed anything, Sophie drove herself half an hour to the office of the doctor who'd done her surgery. One month had passed since the operation. She waited anxiously in the waiting room and even more anxiously in the examining room until he finally came in to look at her. "Any tenderness in the incision site?" he asked as he poked and prodded her abdomen.

"Not much." She gasped as he pressed directly on the scar. "Except when you do that."

He chuckled. "Sorry. Just making sure it's healing all right." He raised her johnny. "It looks much better than last time. How's everything else?"

"I'm still a little tired sometimes. Not as much before, though," she replied. "Other than a little achiness in my belly, I'm fine."

“Good.” He called the nurse in and did an internal exam. “Everything seems fine,” he pronounced after a couple minutes of torture. “I’d say you and your husband can go back to your normal, um, routine.”

“I hoped you’d say that,” Sophie replied, though inside she cringed. She missed making love with Garrett, missed the closeness with him during and after, and she needed that closeness again. All the same, she couldn’t help wondering if it would be the same now. She didn’t see how it could be. She didn’t feel the same at all.

“Just in time for Christmas, too,” the nurse teased.

“I’d still give it another two or three weeks before you return to work full time. Other than that, I don’t see much need for restrictions at this point,” the doctor said. “Take it easy, of course; not a lot of time on your feet, no walking long distances, and so on. You’ve improved a lot since the last examination, and I think you’re on track for a complete recovery within the next few weeks.”

“Thank you.” Sophie sat up. “My husband’s thinking about taking me out for New Year’s Eve.” She held her breath, hoping the doctor would forbid it.

He didn’t save her. “That should be fine, as long as you do what I just said,” he assured her. “Sit down and rest if you go dancing, take it easy. There’s no reason you and he can’t go out and enjoy yourselves.” He shook her hand. “Make an appointment for a month from today, and you’re all set.”

“Thank you,” she said quietly.

He and the nurse left the room, and she slid off the table and put her clothes back on. She had almost recovered. Time to stop letting the surgery rule her and start

actually living her life again.

If only it could be that easy.

* * *

For the next couple days, though, she did manage to live her life. Caught up in last-minute Christmas preparations, she didn't have much choice. She wanted the holiday to be perfect for the kids, and that meant doing everything as they always had.

The house had been partly decorated since Thanksgiving. Sasha had taken care of that, with a little help from Emily when Emily had dragged herself away from her computer long enough. Some of the decorations, like the miniature village Sophie's parents had given them the year she'd left her ex-husband, hadn't been put up yet because the girls hadn't known where to find them.

And they hadn't had a tree. Sophie had grown used to an artificial tree; even the year before, the first Christmas after she and the girls had moved in, they'd had an artificial tree. This year, Garrett had announced that he wanted a real tree, and he and the girls had gone to pick one out on the way home after he'd picked them up from their visit with their father.

The tree looked spectacular in the corner of the living room, next to the largest window. They'd left it to dry out for a day, and when Sophie arrived home from the doctor on Monday, the girls had greeted her with requests to start decorating. It took the four of them two days to put all the ornaments on the tree. Sophie's frequent bouts of crying when she encountered things that reminded her of the girls' babyhoods and toddler years hadn't helped.

Wednesday night, Christmas Eve, they gathered around a fully decorated tree. “We always open one present each on Christmas Eve,” Sasha reminded everyone.

“We know,” Emily said impatiently. “And don’t say you were telling Garrett; we lived here last year, so he knows too.”

“I say it every Christmas Eve,” Sasha pointed out. “It’s a tradition, just like opening the presents.”

“Opening the presents isn’t as annoying,” Emily grumbled.

“Girls, stop.” Garrett put his arm around Sophie, who sat on the couch beside him. “Christmas Eve and Christmas Day are a time to enjoy being a family, and to love each other. Not to bicker like you do the other three hundred sixty-three days of the year.”

“We each choose one present,” Sasha said again. Emily rolled her eyes, though she kept her mouth shut. “Mom, is it youngest to oldest this year, or oldest to youngest?” Sasha asked.

“I can’t remember, honey,” Sophie replied wearily. She’d been up late the night before wrapping gifts so everything would be ready for tonight, and now she wanted nothing more than to crawl into bed and close her eyes.

Garrett saved her. “You went first last year, Sasha,” he said. “So it must be oldest to youngest this year.”

“Then Mom goes first,” Sasha announced, rooting through the presents under the tree.

“I have a special present for your mom,” Garrett said. “I’d rather give it to her in

private.”

“Eww!” Emily exclaimed.

Garrett laughed. “It isn’t what you’re thinking, oh child who knows too much. It’s just something special.”

“So is Mom opening that tonight?” Sasha wanted to know.

“Yes, after we’re done here,” Garrett replied.

Sasha pouted. “Then we won’t see it.”

“Sasha, don’t,” Emily said. “Come on. Make it a good night for Mom, would you?”

That made Sophie feel even more guilty. Her kids tried to take care of her. If they heard that Mom needed or Mom didn’t feel well, they’d do almost anything. It wasn’t fair. They shouldn’t have had to take care of her. She should have been taking care of them. At least in a couple more weeks, they wouldn’t hear those things anymore. “It’s okay, honey,” she said to Emily, trying to make peace. “Sasha, I can open something else. Garrett can give me that present some other time.”

Sasha brightened. “I’ll give you what I made at school Friday. Then it isn’t like you’re opening two presents, because I meant to give you this before anyway.”

She hurried to her room and came back with a piece of paper rolled into a scroll, which she handed to Sophie. Sophie slipped the ribbon off and unrolled the paper to see a picture of the four of them, drawn by Sasha’s inexpert hand. The four of them embracing, with the words, “A Real Family” written in cursive above it.

Sophie blinked back tears. “It’s beautiful, honey.” She held her arm out, and

Sasha came over for a hug. "Thank you," Sophie said softly.

"You're welcome." Sasha kissed her cheek.

Garrett went next. Emily handed him a package containing the wallet she'd bought him over the weekend, when the girls' new stepmother had taken them shopping. Then Emily opened one of her gift cards, which met with a suitable amount of squealing and hugs, and finally Sasha opened a box of oil pastels.

The girls took their gifts to their rooms to put away, and Sophie snuggled against Garrett. "It looks so bare," she said quietly.

"Please don't start, honey." He tightened his arm around her. "It's a good Christmas because you're here and healthy. The girls know that. They're old enough to understand."

"They shouldn't have to understand." She yawned. "Damn it. I am not going to wallow. Not tonight."

"Good," Garrett said firmly.

"Yeah." She cupped his cheek. "I have doctor's permission to give you a very nice Christmas present tonight, as long as we're gentle about it."

"Mmm." He raised an eyebrow. "I think I like that idea. So is that my Christmas Eve present from you?"

Emily came back into the room wearing pajamas. "Eww," she said again. "Why do you guys always have to do that kind of stuff when I'm in the room?"

"Why do you always have to be in the room when we do that kind of stuff?"

Garrett countered. He stood and held his arms out for a hug. "Going to bed?"

“Yeah, so Santa will come,” she quipped.

“Santa will come anyway,” said Sasha, coming in from the hall. She went to Sophie and kissed her cheek. “I love you, Mom,” she said.

“I love you too.”

Emily hugged her as well. “Love you.”

“I love you too,” Sophie repeated, smiling. “Good night, girls.”

“Good night,” the girls chorused, and left the room.

“Are you ready for your Christmas present now?” Garrett took Sophie’s hands and pulled her to her feet. “It’s in the bedroom.”

“Are you sure it isn’t what Emily assumed?” she teased.

“Quite sure.” He winked. “That’s what you’re giving me.”

She laughed and allowed him to pull her down the hall to their bedroom. On the bed sat a wrapped rectangle. Garrett motioned for Sophie to sit beside it. “That’s for you,” he said. “I’m not sure what that surgery did to you. You haven’t been happy since you came home from the hospital. You act like you’ve let us down, and you haven’t.”

“I feel like I’m not me anymore,” she said softly. “I thought it would be better... I know it is better; the tumor’s gone, I don’t need chemo or any of that because it turned out not to be cancerous, and I won’t be so tired and in pain all the time. All of that’s wonderful. Still, it’s like I’m only partly a woman now.”

“You’re completely a woman.” He sat beside her and wrapped his arms around her. “You’re the most beautiful woman in the world, as far as I’m concerned. Nothing’s changed about you except that you’re so sad all the time. I want to see your beautiful

smile more often.”

Her heart warmed at his words. She couldn't quite believe them; she had changed, whether he wanted to admit it or not.

She caught herself wallowing again. The time had come to stop letting herself be so sucked down. She gave him the best smile she could manage. “I'll try.”

“I love you,” he said sincerely. “I love you with all my heart, and all my life. Nothing is ever going to change that. It hurts me when I see you hurting. Please let yourself move past this, honey. For me and the girls, and most of all for you.”

She took a deep breath. She hadn't even thought about how her attitude affected her children and Garrett. Her guilt showed as depression; the sadness filled everything she did. She loved them, and she didn't want them to hurt either.

And they loved her, which meant she needed to love herself enough to let this go. So she'd had a hysterectomy. Big deal. Women had them every day. She and Garrett would never have a biological child. They did have the girls, and she knew the girls and Garrett couldn't have loved each other more if they shared a biological bond.

Her Christmas present to herself, she decided, would be to stop the damned wallowing once and for all. End the pity party, and be who she'd always been. “I'm sorry,” she said softly.

“For what?” Garrett asked.

“I didn't know how much it bothered you to see me like this.” Her smile this time was more genuine. “No more, I promise. Or at least I promise to try. I'm done feeling sorry for myself. If my body is healing, the rest of me can too.”

He kissed her lips. "I'm so glad to hear you say that."

"I'm glad to be able to say it." She would have to try hard to make it happen. The effort would be worth not feeling this way anymore.

"Good. Now." He stood again. "In that box is something that will hopefully help you see yourself differently. Something that will give you permission to start having fun again, beginning with that New Year's Eve party."

She knew immediately what he meant. "You didn't."

"Just open it," he said firmly.

"Garrett..."

"Open it," he repeated, picking up the box. He set it in her lap and folded his arms, waiting.

She slowly unwrapped the package, revealing a plain white box. Inside it... She caught her breath. The dress looked even more perfect than it had in the window. "I can't believe you did this," she breathed, looking up at Garrett.

"You deserve it," he replied. "And it's a gift, so you can't argue about it. Try it on. I think I picked out the right size. If not, I can go exchange it tomorrow." He smiled. "Besides, I want both of us to see how beautiful you look in it."

Without hesitating, she stood and stripped out of her clothes. He shouldn't have spent so much on a dress for her, especially when she'd told him not to give her anything. She gritted her teeth to keep from saying something angry to him. However, her desire to see how she looked in the dress outweighed the anger. She carefully lifted it out of the box and put it on. It fit perfectly. The material caressed her skin, and the

low neckline and knee-length skirt accentuated her best features. “How did you know my size?” she asked.

“I guessed.” Garrett grinned. “I have a good eye for that kind of thing. And I definitely have an eye for you.” He looked her over from head to toe. “You look absolutely gorgeous in that dress, honey. Take a look in the mirror. A good, long look.”

He steered her in front of the full-length mirror on the closet door. Sophie stared at herself, stunned. She did look gorgeous. A little thinner than she’d been; not as bad as she’d thought. Her hair, which she’d had cut very short to allow for easier care immediately after the surgery and in preparation for the possibility of chemo, had grown back to nearly its previous length. She’d had a pixie cut anyway, and now the new growth curled slightly in a way her hair hadn’t done before.

She turned to Garrett and flung her arms around him. “Thank you,” she murmured. “Thank you for the dress, and for seeing me the way you’ve always seen me.”

“How could I see you any differently?” he pointed out. “You’re my beautiful Sophie, and always will be. And that’s what this dress is for. To remind you of how beautiful you really are. You’ll wear it New Year’s Eve, won’t you?”

“Yes,” she promised.

“Good, because I can’t wait to show you off.”

He lowered his mouth to hers for a kiss, which quickly went from tender to passionate. For the first time in weeks, desire coursed through her. Maybe less had changed than she’d thought.

She broke the kiss and stepped back. “Wait.” Slowly, she removed the dress and hung it carefully in the closet. Hands on her hips, she looked at Garrett. “Care to match me?”

He grinned. “Absolutely.”

He undressed much more quickly than she had. Sophie lay on her side on the bed, watching. With a grin, he tossed his clothes to the floor and knelt on the bed beside her. “I want you,” he growled.

“I want you too.” A pang of fear struck her, and she added, “Slowly and gently, though, okay? Even though it shouldn’t hurt, I’m kind of scared.”

“I understand.” He lay on his back and held out his arms. She moved into them, and he tenderly kissed her forehead. “I love you,” he murmured. “And I want you so bad it hurts. If you aren’t sure about this, though, we can wait.”

She rested her hand against the side of his face. “I’m sure,” she said softly. “I’ve missed having you inside me. Just be easy with me.”

“I will,” he promised.

They kissed again, tongues meeting between their open lips. Garrett caressed Sophie’s breasts, and she gasped into his mouth. They’d barely touched since her surgery. She hadn’t allowed it. Now she remembered what she’d been missing. His gentle fingers brought her arousal from a simmer to a boil.

Garrett moved his lips from her mouth along her neck and chest to one hardened nipple. At the touch of his tongue, Sophie moaned. He slid his hand over her belly, careful to avoid the incision, and rubbed his finger against her clit. She cried out. “Is

that pleasure?” he asked huskily.

“Very much so,” she murmured.

“Oh, good.”

Still fingering her clit, he sucked her nipple. The sensations sent sparks through her. She'd worried that she might not be as interested in sex after the surgery. Now she knew she had no reason for concern. She wanted him as much as she always had, and his touch felt as good as ever. She gasped and moaned. Her pussy grew wet and clenched as it always had before an orgasm.

She'd wondered whether she would even be able to orgasm anymore, even though her pre-surgery reading had told her it probably wouldn't change. Now she found out, as the ecstasy from Garrett's finger and lips took over, pushing her past the edge. Her body shook, and tingles ran through her. She quickly turned her head to muffle her cries in her pillow.

As the orgasm faded, she drew quick, shallow breaths and relaxed limply against the mattress. “Guess that still works,” she murmured.

Garrett laughed. “I'm glad it does.” He nuzzled her neck. “Do you think you want to try riding me? I think that'll be the best position; my favorite, and you'll be able to control how fast and hard we go.”

“Not very, to both.” She turned onto her side. “You expect me to move after I came that hard?”

He grinned smugly and put his arms around her. “I'll help you.”

Carefully, she rolled toward him, and he pulled her onto him. Propping herself

on her hands, she smiled down at him. His cock rested against her pussy, sending shivers through her. It had been far too long since she'd had him inside her, and even her misgivings about whether it might still be too soon wouldn't stop her from making love to him now. She needed him. She needed the closeness and to know that despite the surgery, she was still able to make love. She needed to feel like a woman again.

She maneuvered herself onto his cock, slowly taking it into her. "Does it feel all right?" he asked softly.

She nodded. "Better than all right." Her pussy, tightened from the weeks of recovery, easily stretched to accept him. She sighed in satisfaction as his cock filled her.

"You feel so good," he murmured. "It's been too long."

Slowly he moved beneath her, and she picked up his rhythm. Despite her fears, she experienced no pain, not even a slight discomfort. Only pleasure as they languidly moved together.

Garrett's breathing grew ragged, and he lightly grasped Sophie's waist. "I'm going to come," he panted.

"Good," she whispered. "Come for me."

He thrust harder, though she could tell he held back. After several thrusts, he bucked beneath her, staccato grunts escaping him. He spasmed a few times, breathing heavily, then pulled her down to lie against him. "Thank you," he said softly.

"Thank *you*." She couldn't express to him how much it meant to be with him like this again, or how much it meant to feel the way she always had when they made love.

He nudged her with his hands and she slipped off him. They cuddled, Sophie's

head on Garrett's chest and his hand making lazy circles on her back. "Better than I remembered," he murmured. "What a nice gift."

She smiled proudly. "I liked my share of the gift too."

He chuckled. "I should buy you dresses more often."

"That isn't what I meant." She propped herself up on her elbow so she could look into his eyes. "All this time, I worried about how you'd see me now, and you see me the way you always have."

"I told you that," he pointed out.

"I know, and I should have listened," she admitted. "Now I know. Tonight, you didn't treat me any differently. We made love the way we always do."

"Because I love you the way I always have, silly," he said, flicking her nose with a finger. She giggled, and he smiled tenderly at her. "I do love you," he said. "And I'm glad to see that smile and hear you laugh. I've missed that lately."

"I'll try to give you more of it," she assured him.

"Good." He gently pushed her head back to his chest. "We'd better sleep now so Santa will come."

"Yeah, right."

He kissed the top of her head and switched off the lamp on his nightstand.

"Yeah, right," he said softly. "Merry Christmas, honey."

"Merry Christmas." She pulled the comforter over them, snuggled closer to him, and fell asleep.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Karenna Colcroft has been writing since age five, and began writing romance and erotic romance in 2006. She has worked as a teacher, a bakery delivery driver, and a car dealership paperworker, among other things. Under her real name, Karenna has written a phonics program, published in 2002, and a YA novel which is due out in January 2010. Karenna also has written several romance and erotic romance stories. She lives in Massachusetts with her fiancé, two daughters, two cats, and a fish.

Visit Karenna's website at <http://www.karennacolcroft.com>

Karenna invites you to check out her other stories:

From Excessica Publishing www.excessica.com

Ask and You Shall Receive

All her life, Beth has had trouble asking for what she wanted. Even something as simple as asking for a can of soda is beyond her. Asking for something sexual? Forget it. But now Beth's friend Chase has made a proposition. As her closest friend, Chase has heard all Beth's sexual fantasies, and he's willing to help her fulfill them. All she has to do is ask.

Who Can See the Wind

A chance encounter on the sidewalk introduces Nyssa to Boreas, a strange man who seems familiar. Why does Nyssa feel so drawn to him? Why does he remind her of the wind? After harassment from her supervisor forces her to quit her job, Boreas comforts her and gains her trust. But when she learns who he truly is, will she allow him to sweep her away?

From Pink Petal Books www.pinkpetalbooks.com

Beginner's Luck

Kyla has an issue with trust. Until she meets Alec. Alec is funny, charming, loving, and the first man to win her trust. To show him exactly how much she loves and trusts him, Kyla decides to give him something she's given to no man. Purchasing the Anal Beginner's Kit is easy, but giving up her "final frontier" is hard. With Alec's love, patience, and a lot of lube, Kyla learns to give her all to the man she loves.

And coming soon:

From Siren-Bookstrand

Deep Down

Courtney Southard is a country girl far from home in the big city. Tanner Wohl is a subway musician who's given up on love. When an attempted mugging brings the two of them together, will they find what they're looking for in each other?

From Noble Romance Publishing

A Little Tied Up

Nolie and Joseph are married and in love. Even in the best marriage, though, sometimes things become stale. When Joseph suggests roleplaying, Nolie is resistant at first, then confesses her deepest fantasy. She never expects that Joseph will fulfill it, or how hot it will be when he does.