

## Lucinda's reflection

A short story by AmandaK

Gradually Lucinda drifted up from a deep sleep. Through the carelessly drawn curtains, she saw the orange glow of light fading on the horizon and she realized with a start that she had slept all through the day.

She smiled when she remembered the previous night. Lazily, she stretched, like a cat that had just woken. Taking a deep breath, she noticed the faint waft of a musky eau de cologne in the air. It was his scent. The man she met last night, a most intriguing man. Abruptly, it occurred to Lucinda that she never learned his name.

A barely perceptible but insistent throb on the side of her neck reminded her of the kisses he placed there. She blushed at the thought and unconsciously brought a hand up to touch the spot. It was tender beneath her fingers. Lucinda knew she'd probably have a bruise to show for his passion. She blushed and giggled. A good thing she did have several scarves that she could chose from to wear.

Stretching again, she enjoyed the feel of the soft, silk sheets against her skin. Should she get up? Not yet, she decided. She really was too lazy and would rather muse a little more on the events of last night.

The party, in celebration of the opening of her uncle Jerrold's art gallery, had been incredibly boring. She didn't like what passed for the art crowd in this small town. Most of them were hypocrites, not able to tell a Rembrandt from a Picasso. So, Lucinda sat on a stool at the bar, nursing a cocktail, and tried to decide if she could decently take her leave and go home. And that's when she saw him.

Moving through the crowd, in her direction, was the most handsome man she had ever seen. He was tall, easily six foot and then some, with broad shoulders and narrow hips. His eyes were dark, his features strong and handsome, and he was dressed in an immaculate tuxedo. To Lucinda, he appeared to have stepped straight from the pages of one of her aunt Bessie's women's romance novels.

She suppressed a chuckle and nearly choked on her drink when he caught her looking. He winked knowingly; he was fully aware of the effect he was having on women. And on men too, judging by the sideways glances in his direction as he made his way toward the bar. Lucinda blushed.

"Hello," he said, his voice deep and melodious. Not quite trusting her vocal cords, Lucinda smiled shyly, suddenly feeling like a smitten teenager. "Is this seat taken?"

Corny opening, a small voice deep inside her whispered. \*Of course\* the stool wasn't taken; the gallery visitors were wandering around, in an attempt to be \*seen\* while carrying their drinks and discussing the various glaringly bright paintings her uncle had put up for display. But the man's appearance and white-teethed half smile made her forgive him instantly.

"Uhm, no... no," she stammered. "It's free."

He took the stool without another word and rested his elbows on the bar. He motioned the bartender to bring him a double Scotch, but Lucinda noticed he barely touched it. He twirled the drink around in the glass, sniffed it, then glanced over at her. "You look sad," he remarked.

"Sad?" Lucinda's eyes widened. "Not sad. Bored, maybe. The gallery's my uncle's, so I'm more or less obliged to be here. I'd much rather be somewhere else. Anywhere else, for that matter." She stopped abruptly, groaning inwardly. That sounded far too much like an invitation. And no doubt a man as good looking as this one got plenty of invitations.

But he merely smiled mysteriously. "I know what you mean," he said.

Lucinda relaxed and soon found herself explaining to him how much she desired to get out of this small town 'in the middle of nowhere', as she called it. She longed to see something of the world. "All those faraway places, strange cultures," she sighed wistfully. "Italy, France... China. Instead, I'm stuck here, in this town, in a dead end job. Don't get me wrong," she hastened to add, "I love my aunt and uncle dearly. They took me in when my parents died and have cared for me ever since. But I can't help thinking there has to be more..."

"Oh, there is," he said. "Lots more. More than you could ever see in a single lifetime... How old are you? If it's not too forward to ask."

Lucinda blinked. "Twenty-three," she replied. "That's too young to be buried alive, isn't it?"

"Twenty-three," he repeated slowly, the word rolling on his tongue as if he were tasting the sound. "That's a beautiful age, twenty-three." He paused, then hopped off his stool. "Come," he said, offering her his hand. "I want to show you something."

Lucinda noticed her fingers trembled slightly when she accepted his outstretched hand. She followed him through the crowd, which seemed to part ahead of him. She chuckled inwardly. Like Moses parting the sea, she thought.

As they came outside, she realized she'd forgotten to get her coat. And the night was a little chilly, despite the warmth of the summer's day earlier. He noticed her shiver and draped his tuxedo around her shoulders. She pulled it around her gratefully.

He began to lead her away from the buildings, toward Oak Tree Park. She felt a moment's apprehension. What on earth was she doing, going to the park in the middle of the night with a strange man she met only an hour ago? Lucinda shrugged off her fears. The mysterious stranger made her feel safe. He wouldn't harm her.

They walked in companionable silence, him holding her left hand lightly while she kept his jacket close around her with her right. Finally he stopped and Lucinda realized they were standing at the edge of the lake in the park. The lake was situated almost in the middle of the vast grounds. The oak trees that gave the park its name were a distance away, shutting out the glare and noises of the city. Only a few cars with late night travelers could be heard far off in the distance.

"Look," he said quietly in her ear and pointed up. His breath on her skin made it tingle pleasantly, distracting her. She raised her head obediently, looking where he pointed. And gasped. Overhead, millions of stars sparkled. Without the city's glare to take away from their beauty, they were bright in the dark expanse. "There's a world out there for you to explore."

"It's beautiful," Lucinda whispered and turned to face him. His dark eyes simmered with something indiscernible. Was it desire? She shivered, but it wasn't the cool night air that made goose-bumps spring up on her arms.

"So are you," he whispered huskily. "So are you." Mesmerized, she stared in his eyes as he lowered his head slowly. She closed her eyes, waiting for his lips to meet hers. With mild surprise, she discovered he didn't kiss her mouth but was instead making his way along her neckline. Placing small kisses, starting at the sensitive spot just below her ear, his lips traveled down, ever down. She could feel the blood rush to her face in anticipation.

"Oh," she gasped, startled as he lightly bit the soft flesh of her neck and began to suck gently. Her knees went weak and his strong arms were all that were holding her up as she allowed herself to ride on the wave of pleasure his touch gave her.

Her memory became a little unclear at this point. She seemed to remember flying, flying endlessly. And the cold... Lucinda shifted on the bed, pulling the sheets a little closer.

By the time she came back down to earth, she was in his arms, and he was offering her something to drink. "Here," he said. "Drink this. It'll make you feel better." Lucinda swallowed the liquid. It was warm and thick.

When the liquid was gone, he scooped her up and carried her back through the oak trees, out of the park.

"That was... that was..." she stammered.

"Divine," he finished.

"Yes. Divine."

He had dropped her off near her car, Lucinda recalled. She had no idea how she'd gotten home; the drive went by in a daze. Once she reached the house she shared with her uncle and aunt, she'd stumbled up the stairs and crawled into bed, immediately falling asleep. Until now, the following evening.

With a sigh, she sat up in the bed. She really should get up, take a shower, get something to eat. Although she didn't feel hungry. First, she decided, she'd better see how bad his love bite had marked her, before she ran into aunt Bessie. How strange that her aunt hadn't woken her, she thought absently.

She padded barefoot through the room toward the tall mirror. As she stepped in front of it, her breath stuck in her throat. She blinked, rubbing her eyes before opening them again.

As mirrors are wont to do, it reflected the room behind her. The messy bed, the sheets rumped. The window with the small patch of darkly orange light. But the mirror didn't reflect her.

Almost instinctively, Lucinda looked down. She was real. She could see herself, still dressed in last night's evening gown, slightly the worse for wear. Her hands, shaking badly, touched her face, arms, stomach. Yes, she was here. Then why didn't she see herself in the mirror? A horrible answer came up and her hands flew to the spot where the stranger had kissed her. Barely discernible, she could feel two punctures where he'd bitten her.

"Are you ready to explore the world?" a low voice asked behind her. Lucinda whirled around. There, outside of her window, seven feet off the ground, he hovered. He smiled warmly, a wide smile that revealed the pointed eyeteeth.

"What did you do to me?" she gasped.

A look of startled pain washed across his handsome features. "I..." He hesitated. "I made you mine. Forever."

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