

*Excerpt for A Late-Blooming Rose by Jennifer DeCuir*

*Leaving the coffee service behind to clean up later, Beau swept an arm under Eva's knees and waited for her to grab his neck for balance before lifting her from her chair. The sliding glass door that led out to the flagstone patio was still open. He frowned down at the track. There had to be a way to cover it, even temporarily, so that Eva could have access to her little entertaining area out here. It had the best view of her rose garden this close to the house.*

*"My chair was back there. Where are you taking me? Beau!"*

*Her tiny fists thumped at his chest as he carried her through the living room and out into the hall. With a purposeful stride, he entered the library. Intending to set her down in one of the wingback chairs in the center of the room, Beau changed his mind at the last second and dropped into the seat himself, Eva draped across his lap.*

*"I demand that you take me back to my chair this instant!" She struggled in his arms, as much as her upper body would allow.*

*Beau winced when he took a sharp elbow to the gut. "Relax. I'm not going to hurt you. Look where you are. Take a deep breath. Smell that? Leather and old paper, ink."*

*"This is ridiculous. Why did you bring me in here?"*

*"You need a sanctuary. You need a place where it's safe to be yourself, to let it all out and grieve for those you have lost. You can't get to your roses, and I feel terrible about that. But you can get to your books."*

*Don't tell me what I need! I need to be left alone. I need you to go back to Syracuse and leave me with my grandfather's books and my mother's ruined rose bushes. Stop making me—"*

*"What? Feel? You cover up the hurt by pushing people away. You replace the grief with anger. You spend so much time feeling sorry for yourself when you could be reliving the happy memories."*

*"I can't. I'm not strong enough. I see their faces in my head, and it hurts." She was clutching his shirt now.*

*"Then just breathe. Close your eyes and breathe. It's okay, I've got you."*

*"I can't remember the sound of their voices. Every day it's like a little more of them fades. But I'm still here. I'm always here."*

*She cried then. Great, heaving sobs that broke his heart and made his entire body ache to hear. He held her tight, not uttering a word as she finally released tears five years in the making. He rubbed her back, comforting her as he would a small child. He cradled her as the shudders became less pronounced, the sobs turning to sniffles and finally to rhythmic breathing that indicated she'd fallen asleep. Standing up once more, he brought her to her room and tucked her in for the night.*

*Excerpt for Music to Her Ears by Stephanie Cage*

*“So, tell me about yourself ... Goldie, is it?”*

*Hannah pulled a face at that most hated of interview questions.*

*Kayleigh kicked her under the table, and she hastily rearranged her features back into a mask of blandness.*

*“Actually, it’s Hannah. Hannah Loxley. I’m twenty-four; I live in Surrey. I worked as a PA for three years, in London, and recently moved into marketing, but I’d like to get back to being a PA.” She wasn’t lying—just being a little selective with the truth.*

*“Hannah. Not Goldie?”*

*“That’s my nickname,” she explained. “As Kayleigh said, we’ve known each other since school. Nobody else gets to call me that, though.”*

*Hannah gulped as she realized she’d just laid down the law to a major celebrity. And a major hunk at that. Even on this small screen, his charisma was obvious. Though he presumably hadn’t been expecting Kayleigh’s call, and it was late in the day, his dark hair was perfectly slick, and his dark navy suit jacket sat smoothly over a perfectly ironed striped shirt. Altogether too perfect for Hannah’s liking, but she wasn’t looking to date the man, just get a job and a roof over her head.*

*“Noted.” Jamie’s face softened as he laughed at her, but in an instant, the cool mask was back, as he carried on speaking. “Bear with me a moment, if you don’t mind. I’d like my brothers to speak with you, too. Mike! Bill!”*

*A ruffled head of equally dark hair joined Jamie on the screen.*

*“This is my youngest brother, Bill,” Jamie explained, as if she hadn’t seen them on screen a dozen times and even giggled drunkenly over their gorgeousness when they appeared on the big New Year’s countdown show on television. She remembered Kayleigh and Sharon practically coming to blows over whether suave Jamie or casual Bill was the more attractive. Hannah had diplomatically refused to join the fray, though if she had, her vote would have been for the middle brother, Mike, in any case.*

*“This is Hannah,” he went on, “not, under any circumstances, to be referred to as Goldie.” From the way Bill’s eyebrow twitched, she had the feeling he was looking forward to finding out what happened if he uttered the forbidden nickname.*

*“Hi, Bill,” she said, then winced inside. She couldn’t have sounded lamer if she tried. “Is there anything you want to ask me?” she added.*

*“Has big bro given you the third degree yet?”*

*“Not at all,” she replied politely. She could imagine him doing so, though.*

*“Oh well, I’m sure Mike will when he gets here, so I’ll hold off for now.” Bill gave her a grin clearly intended to charm.*

*“Will what?” came a voice from off camera.*

*Bill put his fingers to his lips, gesturing to Hannah that she shouldn’t tell him what had been said.*

*“Will give the lovely Hannah the third degree,” Jamie spilled the beans.*

*“There’s a difference between asking a few simple questions and giving someone the third degree. If one of you had thought to ask ‘the lovely Kiki’ a few simple questions last week, we might not be searching for a new personal assistant this week.” The speaker, presumably Mike, got louder over the course of this speech, as if he was coming closer to their webcam, but he still remained out of view.*

*“Oh, sure,” Jamie said, his lips curling. “Because she was so going to tell me she was on the run for conning little old ladies out of their life savings, if I’d only asked her a few simple questions.”*

*Without warning, Jamie’s face shot out of view as he ducked a mock punch. The figures on screen shuffled around, and this time there were three. And what a third.*

*Yes, Hannah thought, he was definitely the most attractive of the three.*

*Excerpt from Fairy Trouble by Andrea R. Cooper:*

*After paying for their coffee with the help of her magic wand, she settled in the seat across from him outside and took a tentative sip of the caramel macchiato drink she'd picked. One of her favorite things about being disguised as a human was that she could actually savor real food and drink. The bittersweet taste mingled on her tongue, and she closed her eyes in pure bliss.*

*"Wow, maybe I should've ordered what you did rather than black coffee."*

*Her eyes snapped open. "What? Oh, no, I-I've just really been craving one of these." For a very long time. "So what happened at the bank?"*

*"I applied for a loan. The bakery's going to fold if I don't do something." He ran his fingers through his blond-streaked brown hair. "I just ... I can't fail. And the bank refused me, because my dad owns most of the shares. I need to get him to back off or buy him out."*

*"What about a fundraiser? Something fun that would bring in families. A carnival!" She'd love to try cotton candy and ride on a roller coaster. "Have it outside of town and draw in people from nearby towns and Pittsburgh. Maybe do catering gigs as well?"*

*"Those are excellent ideas, thank you." He reached across the table and took her hand in his, gently squeezing it.*

*Her insides tingled, and she felt like even her toes were buzzing. What was going on?*

*"Enough about me. What about you?"*

*"Me?" she squeaked.*

*"Sure. What do you do for a living? What's your passion?"*

*"Uh ... Well, I'm sort of a teacher or counselor, I guess." Those were the closest human occupations she could come up with that sort of tied in with fairy godmothering. She needed to get his focus off her. "Helping people is my passion. Have you always wanted to be a baker?"*

*A sadness filled his eyes, and he eased back in the chair. The loss of his hand on hers made her wish she hadn't asked.*

*"Yes. It was something my late moth—adoptive mother, Janice, and me did together."*

*He took a sip of coffee. "We'd think up ways to change a recipe and make it better. Every Sunday we'd have a dessert somewhere, and she and I would try to figure out the ingredients. My brother and Dad never cared much; they just wanted to eat the food. But it was like a secret*

*language me and Mom shared. I think Dad gave me a year to make the bakery work only out of respect for her. He's never even stepped through the door."*

*"You should talk with him. Convince him to give you more time."*

*He shook his head. "I feel like this whole year, he's been waiting for me to fail. I have to prove him wrong."*

*"And you will." She wished she could wave her magic wand and help Ryan. But she doubted he'd accept the charity of her magic, even though he gave away so much to others. A church bell pealed twice.*

*"Thank you for listening," Ryan said with a genuine grin that hinted at a dimple in his left cheek, and Esmeralda's heart thumped against her chest. "I can't believe we've talked for hours. I'd love to take you to lunch at a place near here. It's the least I can do for sharing my problems with you."*

*Her stomach growled at the sound of food. "Sure, I've not eaten since this morning."*

*A couple with a young child strolled past them, and Esmeralda's heart lurched. She loved the clean, sweet smell of newborn babies.*

*"Great." He leaned back in the coffee shop's metal chair. "Italian or Thai?"*

*She closed her eyes, remembering the scents of each. It was like asking which kind of flower she liked better. They were all unique. "Thai. I've always wanted to try it." Her hand flew to her mouth. Fairy sprinkles, he must think her strange.*

*"Oh?" He raised an eyebrow, but his smile was still there and his green eyes twinkled.*

*"Allow me to be your guide then."*

*Excerpt of His One Wish by Nancy C. Weeks*

*Aiden Cooper and Jazlin Morgan's first introduction. Enjoy.*

*Jazlin moved around him and headed down the sidewalk. The woman briefly knelt next to a man asleep under an awning and slipped several bills into his coffee can. Every instinct in Aiden wanted to grab her away from the homeless man. "That's not smart."*

*"I was following you."*

*"What?"*

*"You asked what I was doing here. I was following you."*

*"You asked what I was doing here. I was following you."*

*"And that's not smart either. Why?"*

*A look crossed her face that said, how dense can you be?*

*"To find out where you were going."*

*Damn, she was sassy. Something close to laughter boiled up inside him. He'd forgotten the last time he laughed. "Is living dangerously something you just felt like doing tonight, princess?"*

*"Stop calling me that."*

*Aiden couldn't help raking his eyes over her from head to foot—beautiful, exotic, every inch of her perfect. Smooth, dark chestnut hair flowed gently down her back almost to her waist. She nervously pulled a tassel of hair around to the front, twisted it around her finger, and then let it loose. It took everything in him to keep from brushing it behind her shoulder, taking his time to caress the back of his finger over the swell of her breast.*

*"You're staring."*

*"Yeah. That's what happens when you follow someone, princess."*

*"Seriously, don't call me that. I'm not—"*

*"What should I call you?"*

*"Jazlin."*

*"That fits." He leaned on the wall with his hands on his hips. "Again, why in hell are you following me?"*

*This time, a faint hint of rose appeared on her cheeks. Her gaze roamed passed his left shoulder. “Do you work for Malcolm Morgan?”*

*Aiden stepped into her personal space, eyes narrowing. Anyone in their right mind would’ve had the sense to run right about now. She lifted her bewitching eyes and matched his glare with one of her own.*

*“Is that your business?”*

*She had the decency to swallow. “No. Well, kind of. He’s not a nice man, and—”*

*“How do you know him, princess?”*

*Her expression turned hard, and her hands fisted at her sides. “Don’t call me that again.”*

*“Answer the damn question.”*

*“I’m trying to figure out what he is up to.”*

*“So you’re out spying on your sugar daddy. Did he find himself a little plaything on the side? Maybe it’s time you readjust your standards.”*

*“You think I’m his ... that I would ... ”*

*Aiden spun her around and gave her shoulder a light push. “Go home.”*

*“Whatever he paid you, I’ll double it.”*

*He’d sure as hell read that situation wrong. Still, the woman was crazy to go against someone like Malcolm Morgan. “No.” He placed a hand on her elbow and began walking back the way they had come.*

*She jerked her arm free and stopped in the middle of the sidewalk. “Okay, I’ll triple it.”*

*His pulse quickened. “Where’s your vehicle?”*

*“Why?”*

*“I’m putting you in it, and you’re getting out of this neighborhood.”*

*“God, you’re such a macho, pigheaded jerk.” She maneuvered around him and strutted to the corner, Karo at her heels. The dog paused and appeared to be waiting for Aiden to catch up, like he was slowing down the party.*

*“Shit,” Aidan muttered. “I’ve fallen down a fucking rabbit hole.”*

*When he finally caught up to Jazlin, she was standing in the middle of the block with her fists at her waist. “It’s not this block, is it?”*



*Without waiting for him to answer, she rushed further down the sidewalk, pausing only long enough to check traffic before she crossed the street. The building she stopped in front of was the address from Morgan, but Aiden wasn't going to share that tidbit.*

*Jazlin was the first woman in a long time who made him wish he'd shaved his Unabomber beard and worn something he hadn't slept in the last two days. But, damn, was she high-strung and unreasonable.*

*"So, now what, princess?"*

*Her stare bore into him, nearly causing him to take a step back. "Call me that again and you'll be eating pavement."*

*Aiden moved in close enough that her spicy scent made his mouth water. "Sweetheart, you don't want to threaten me."*

*She sucked in a breath and whispered, "What's your name?"*

*"Aiden Cooper."*

*"I'm not afraid of you, Mr. Cooper."*

*"You should be."*