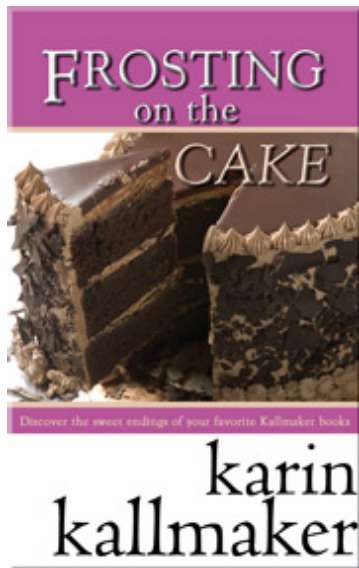


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## Excerpt from *Frosting on the Cake*



*FROSTING ON THE CAKE* IS A COLLECTION OF ROMANTIC LESBIAN SHORT STORIES BY KARIN KALLMAKER.

EACH STORY IS BASED ON CHARACTERS FROM PREVIOUSLY RELEASED NOVELS.

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## **Paperback Romance**

PUBLISHED: 1991

CHARACTERS:

*CAROLYN VINCENSE*, ROMANCE NOVELIST

*ALISON MCNAMARA*, CAROLYN'S AGENT

*NICOLA "NICK" FROST*, SYMPHONY CONDUCTOR

SETTING: HOT SPOTS OF EUROPE AND SACRAMENTO, CALIFORNIA

THE THIRD IS FOR TURNING ON

### **KEY OF SEA (9 YEARS LATER)**

The unfamiliar territory of a swimsuit, sun block and a beach towel almost kept Nick in her cabin. The undulation of the cruise ship wasn't unpleasant, and was not the reason for the fluttering in her stomach.

Nerves, she thought. I don't have nerves.

She glared at herself in the mirror, trying to find the steely calm that braved audiences and critics, cowed violinists and stopped venom-spewing sopranos in mid-syllable.

It was hard to do in a swimsuit.

"Take a vacation, you'll feel like a million quid," she muttered. Patricia, her ex and still a close friend, had thought

an all-lesbian cruise would do her good. Even now, Nick could not believe she had agreed.

A Caribbean cruise was just the sort of thing that Carolyn would have done. Nick watched her mouth soften as she thought of Carolyn. It always did, always would. The one who got away, bella Carolyn.

Carolyn would not recognize her in a swimsuit. The only clothes Nick had worn when she'd known Carolyn had been men's. It had been nearly a decade since the charade as "Nick" had ended, but she still preferred more masculine attire. It had authority, for one thing. Of course she hid behind it—shut up, Patricia, thank you, I know that—and probably always would. It had been the clothes and the privilege that came with being perceived male that had given her the confidence to take up the baton. Tall, slender, ascetic "Nick" had provided too-tall, too-humorless, gawky Nicola an entrance into what was still an almost exclusively male club. For years, long past habit and probably need, she worked tirelessly to always be thought of as Maestro Frost, a conductor, musician and arranger. Woman, lesbian, just plain Nick...they were down the list, near English, Scorpio and allergic to bee stings.

A swimsuit. God, a swimsuit. At least it was a utilitarian Speedo one-piece. She was pale and drawn, having spent the last four years indoors. Patricia was right about one thing, sun would do her good. She angrily slung the towel around her neck, picked up her swim bag with book and suntan lotion and went out on deck.

She settled into a deck chair and hurriedly put on dark glasses. She did not want to overhear any barely whispered conversations that began, "Hey, isn't that Nicola Frost...you

know, the conductor who pretended she was a man to get a job...” She really only wanted to be left alone.

For the next hour the only person who spoke to her was the deck waiter. Upon seeing her cabin key, he danced attendance on her to an extent that was annoying. Drenched with perspiration and dizzy from the pina colada, she gave up the sun for the day and gathered her things.

When she reached the cool hatchway, she glanced back at the deck she was leaving. There were a few women in brilliantly hued caftans, but the majority had skin on display: thongs, Band-Aid-sized bikini tops or no tops at all. Now that’s what I call a landscape, she thought. Hot flamenco tapped in her ears and wild Bartok skirled in her nerves.

“Relax, have some fun,” Patricia had told her. Right. How did a mostly celibate, often disagreeable and thoroughly self-absorbed symphony conductor have fun?

She was not even granted the anonymity of a table for eight where she could introduce herself as just “Nick” and hope she wasn’t recognized. Instead, her first dinner was the Captain’s Table and formal dress. The formal attire didn’t bother her—she’d tied her own cravat enough times. She did miss Oscar, though, whose scathing wit had buoyed her through many ponderous occasions. There had been no warning sign of the stroke that had taken him from her. One moment her lifelong mentor had been deriding a critic and the next he had been gone. His memorial service, attended by hundreds, had been her first taste of life without his sheltering arm.

Life had not gotten any easier. Since Oscar’s death four years ago she’d avoided the public occasions he would have

insisted on. It had been four years of life indoors and in bad humor for the most part. Patricia had thrown in the towel on their relationship a year ago. She was a well-known novelist in her own right and had no need to put up with Nick's moods just for a little companionship.

She cinched her cummerbund and took heart from the fact that she would not be the only woman in a tuxedo this evening. Sure enough, tuxedos outnumbered dresses by at least three to one. There were women everywhere in purple, silver and black tuxedos, most in couples. Rainbow ties and cummerbunds abounded and the line for formal photographs was lengthy. She overheard one happy but tearful woman tell the ship's photographer that they couldn't risk a professional picture together taken at home. Carolyn would love this, Nick thought. That's who should be on this trip, Carolyn and Alison, not me.

She was deliberately late to the cocktail party. Between the captain's English and her Italian they conversed enough for him to assure her of his pleasure in her music. She scolded herself for being stuck up and made an effort to participate in the conversation with the senior crew instead of quenching their enthusiasm with a chilly "How interesting" from behind her maestro's mask.

It occurred to her that she hadn't liked herself very much for a while. Was it any wonder Patricia had decided she'd rather be alone than put up with emotional silence? What was Patricia doing right now?

She turned her mind from that line of thought, having already accepted that she should not have let Patricia go so easily. "I feel as if I'm just a handy escort," Patricia had said

the night she moved out. “I like going out with you, Nick. It’s never dull. Call whenever you want me. I just don’t need to pretend it’s more than that anymore.”

Dinner was sumptuous and the table service impeccable. It had been a long time since she’d cared about what she ate. From bad moods and artistic fever that left her exhausted, she’d descended into a general depression after Patricia left. Not even word of an American Grammy award for *Variations on an Adagio: A Tribute to Samuel Barber* had cheered her much. She’d loved doing the recording. The vocal arrangements of the well-known adagio had been some of her finest work. Oscar would have loved it. Patricia had called to congratulate her on the award, but there had been nothing else, certainly not the Champagne and sex they’d shared to commemorate each other’s successes in the past.

She abruptly realized she was listening to the Barber adagio now, very faint in the background of the chatter-filled dining room. It was indeed her recording, and she thanked the captain for the compliment. She listened to it for the rest of the meal, the pleasure of her work loosening her tongue as she found she had a little small talk in her after all.

The next morning she elected to stay aboard ship instead of hauling about in hot caravans to look at the sights of Nassau. She had no desire to see marching flamingos. On her way down from the sundeck she purchased some postal cards in the gift shop and picked up some lunch at the ever-present buffet. Her stateroom was comfortable and cool, with a small veranda.

*Patricia—*

She had to stop there, not wanting to write “wish you

were here.” It sounded so insincere, and the ironic part was that she meant it. She became so irritated with herself that she set the card aside and started a new one.

*Carolyn—*

*You and Alison would love an all-lesbian cruise. Women everywhere, lots of them celebrating anniversaries with all the romantic trappings that you so adore. I am enjoying myself, except for the sunburn. Picture me in a swimsuit. Now stop laughing. Love to both of you.*

She stared at the card for Patricia. This cruise had been Patricia’s idea. How could Patricia, for even a moment, have thought Nick would fit in? Being single was handicap enough, but being a celebrity made it impossible to buddy around with strangers.

A demon of ill humor wrote the rest of Patricia’s card.

*Patricia—*

*You were right, darling! Just what the doctor ordered. I haven’t slept a wink but can attest that the beds in several of the cabins are quite comfortable. Wish you were here?*

It was what Oscar would have described as a singular lapse in judgment to carry the two cards directly to the purser’s desk to be mailed while they were in port. She waited a moment for the assistant to be free, then handed the cards over.

“We’ll charge the airmail stamps to your cabin, Ms. Frost,” the woman said. She had a charming voice, edged with a Nordic lilt—Swedish, perhaps. Certainly the short, nearly white hair indicated Scandinavian roots of some kind. She

efficiently dabbed two postal stamps on a damp sponge and applied them so as not to cover Nick's bold, block lettering. The words seemed to leap off the cards and Nick flushed, wondering if the woman had read the message to Patricia. She was suddenly aware of her swimsuit-clad body and then abruptly even more aware of the other woman's white uniform that molded a body far more statuesque than Nick's own. Having completed her task, the woman straightened up for the first time, and Nick realized they were eye-to-eye. She did not often meet women her own height. When she did, they were usually not in attractive uniforms while she stood awkwardly in nothing but a swimsuit.

Thoroughly flustered, Nick sought out the woman's nametag—not an assistant, but the Purser herself, Ilea Hamm.

“Was there anything else you required, Maestro?” Ilea Hamm's eyes were focused somewhere lower than Nick's face for a moment, then she glanced up to capture Nick in a clear, blue gaze.

“No, thank you,” Nick stuttered and she escaped to her stateroom. Romance writer Carolyn would be having hysterics at Nick playing the part of the stammering ingenue. Nick didn't find it at all amusing.

\* \* \*

Conversation stopped when she took her seat at her assigned dinner table that evening. Everyone seemed tongue-tied. There was a moment when Nick could have subsided into the humorless, monosyllabic auteur, but instead she made an effort. “I'm sorry I missed meeting everyone last night. I'm

Nick.”

There was another awkward silence, then Nick held out her hand to the woman next to her, who said her name was Tammy, shook hands, and around the table they went.

Yet another silence followed. Bloody hell, Nick thought. Do I have to do all the work? “How did everyone spend their day?”

Thankfully, the American tendency to chatter won out, and she was relieved of having to push the conversation along. Still, the others would just start to get excited about something and then curtail their enthusiasm with a glance at Nick, as if they were afraid she would judge them for liking snorkeling or sunbathing. Contrary to popular belief, she did not live in an ivory tower, breathing only the rarified air of the great masters. At least not all the time.

“I’ve never tried snorkeling,” she volunteered. “Is it fun?”

Apparently, it was. Just like that she agreed to go on a snorkeling expedition when they reached their next port the following day. All the equipment was provided and two of the women at the table, Joan and Paula, worked for the lesbian travel agent who had arranged the cruise. They were sure they could find Nick a spot, even at the last minute.

She had skipped the entertainment the previous night, but Joan and Paula’s enthusiasm was infectious. She’d never had much time for light entertainment. Even films were a rarity. So she’d never heard of the lesbian comic, but it was apparent almost everyone else, particularly the Americans, had. Nick surprised herself by laughing more than she had in the last decade, then she stayed for the karaoke show that followed. Off-key singing usually made her feel as if she were

chewing foil, but the Brandy Alexander recommended by Paula helped her send Maestro Frost to bed while Nick stayed to enjoy herself.

She was surprised to spot Purser Hamm watching the show on the other side of the room, alongside several other female crewmembers. Paula noticed that she kept looking over at them and answered Nick's unasked question. "The lesbians on the crew are always thrilled when we take over the ship—they get hit on all the time. This is the one week where they enjoy it."

So the purser was a lesbian. How...interesting. Properly attired in slacks and a silk shirt, Nick allowed that she might be willing to make Ilea Hamm's acquaintance again.

After the show, she thanked the two Americans for their company and drifted into the ebb of traffic that would bring her closer to Purser Hamm. She'd waded through enough crowds to know that a sidestep here and there would bring her seemingly by accident into Ilea Hamm's line of sight.

She had just caught the purser's gaze when a delectable, scantily clad woman brushed by them. Nick could not help but look. The tight red dress left nothing to the imagination. The body it covered did not need anyone's imagination to be considered magnificent. Nick sighed, then remembered Ilea Hamm was next to her.

Their gaze met at about the same time, and Nick recognized the same mute appreciation for the scarlet-clad brunette. They shared a knowing smile and Nick said, "I suppose it's politically incorrect to stare."

Ilea's laugh was both sultry and suggestive. "If she did not want stares she'd wear something else." She nodded with a

challenging smile. “This week will be far too short. Excuse me, won’t you?”

Befuddled, Nick watched Ilea move toward the voluptuous and apparently unattached brunette and expertly strike up a conversation. The purser was not wasting any time. Great, Nick thought. I just became chopped liver.

Snorkeling was fun, even when one swam as badly as Nick did. She ended up on the same excursion as the two friendly Americans, and they took good care of her as they all floated facedown in the crystalline water. From the surface Paula would point out fish and sea anemones, while Joan dove down to examine creatures that lurked in the shadows. Back on board she thanked them again for their care. What some Americans lacked in decorum they more than made up for with their generosity of spirit. Carolyn was an American, after all. Bella Carolyn.

The third day her senses seemed to wake up all at once. The food tasted glorious. The air was a delight to inhale. The sea seemed to be a hue of blue-green she’d never seen before. The star-studded night sky left her speechless.

Having taken Joan’s advice about excursions for the rest of the cruise, she discovered a true enjoyment of sailing. Although all she did was sit back while someone else did the work, she loved the surge of the catamaran and was intrigued by the way the vessel worked. They skimmed over water she was assured was over twenty feet deep, but the coral and rocks on the bottom were plainly visible. The crew obviously loved their tasks. She found herself wondering how she could go sailing again, given her busy schedule. An interest in something that wasn’t musical—another thing that Patricia

had said she needed.

She went sailing on a bona fide wind-driven sailboat the following day and stayed up late for the shows and karaoke.

When she woke up the morning of her last full day, she was not at all sure where the week had gone.

Patricia need not know that she had been right, Nick decided. The cruise had been a long-overdue holiday. She'd almost forgotten about her next performance, her next recording contract. The mask of Maestro Frost that usually hid Nick from the world had been blown askew by some clean sea breezes. Patricia's chief complaint had been that the mask had stopped coming off at all, not even when they were alone.

Swimsuit, sunblock and a beach towel—they were no longer unfamiliar. She bounded up to the sundeck that last afternoon and stretched out for a lovely hour as the ship's bland played island and steel drum music in the background.

The path back to her cabin went by the lounge where the night's entertainment would be held. The lesbian band for their last night at sea was wrapping up a rehearsal. The final strains of a high-energy rock song sounded well-conceived and Nick was looking forward to the performance. She peeked through the slightly open door, more curious about the instruments they were using than anything else, and was almost knocked down by the exiting performers. They didn't give her a second glance as they hurried away.

She slipped inside the lounge, not sure what drew her. Two guitars rested side by side in standing racks, backed by a full set of drums, keyboards bristling with wiring, and a cello, also wired for the amplification. A cello, Nick thought, that

was what had caught her ear. It wasn't an instrument one automatically associated with rock music.

To one side, almost forgotten, was the ship's own grand piano. She stepped up to it, knowing that the rocking motion and the high humidity would have taken a toll on the instrument's voice. She set the top up on its brace and carefully tweaked a few strings with one hand. In tune, but just barely.

It had been a long time since she'd sat down to play just for the fun of it. She was always rehearsing or practicing so she could perform. The last time she'd played something just because she felt like it had been before Oscar had died. He'd asked for the Barber adagio. She'd later undertaken her variations recording because Oscar had said she had the sense of it in her grasp.

She didn't feel like the adagio now. She'd never played in a swimsuit before, that was a certainty. She didn't want to give in to the call of the keys. There was so little of her mask left. Surely she needed to keep hold of that little bit. Playing what her fingers were itching to perform would sweep it all away.

She touched the closest key and the Rachmaninoff seized her. The third movement surged in her hands and she played for her own ear, knowing her tempo was inconsistent, that her fingers were not up to the finer motifs in the cadenzas. She could hear Oscar's tart criticism of her romanticized entrance into the main theme, titled by someone else, "Full Moon and Empty Arms." Oscar wouldn't like it at all, but she played for him because she missed him. She played for Carolyn because that music would always remind her of Carolyn's romantic innocence. At the last, when the themes overlapped into a

crescendo of longing, she played for Patricia, because she should never have let her go.

Her tempo allowed the closing bars to ripple from her fingertips. Chords crashed with such energy she came up off the bench. Oscar had always maintained that music was not emotion. The emotion came from the players. She had trumped him with Bernstein, who maintained that the urge to compose was an emotion itself, the urge to communicate so the composer no longer felt alone. She forgot the orchestra was all in her ears as she signaled the last downbeat with a triumphant gesture, the final chord exuberant in found love and dancing happiness.

She caught herself on the music rack, dizzy with spent energy. Applause startled her and she turned with chagrin to see that a small audience had gathered. She was wearing a swimsuit, for God's sake, and so it seemed that her only choice was a humble bow. She quit the stage and was discomfited to notice Ilea Hamm among the listeners. Ilea mimed an elaborate bow and Nick wondered where the lovely and so very tall purser had been keeping herself all week. She'd thought they might have had a chance at what Carolyn would call a shipboard romance, but Ilea had faded from view after walking off with the red-gowned brunette.

No matter, thought Nick. She would not trade the past week for any other, especially the last half-hour lost in Rachmaninoff. Music so dear, played for the love of it - how could she have forgotten how alive playing for herself made her feel?

She dressed for the last dinner in her tuxedo. "Masked Ball" was the theme for the final evening. She had not thought

she'd feel like participating in theme evenings to that extent, but the gift shop had a supply of masks for those passengers who forgot to bring one. She selected one that covered her face from the nose up. Just before she put it on she realized the face in the mirror had filled out just a little, and glowed from all the sunshine.

She looked alive, even with the mask on. Ironic, she thought, that she had believed she wouldn't want to wear a mask, and yet tonight the mask would bring her the anonymity she had craved, anonymity she no longer wanted.

Though some had chosen the simple formal attire and mask solution Nick had taken, many of the couples had invested in full costumes, giving the dining room a festive air that bordered on hysteria. Never shy at showing their approval of the dining room pianist, the assembled women took to singing along. The pianist seemed to love the attention and Nick had an image of the poor fellow playing the same Montovani music week after week to a room full of people who ignored every note.

Misty-eyed, he launched into a spirited rendition of "It's a Small World." Nick choked on her soup when she realized the cruisers had decided to change the lyrics to "it's a gay world after all." It was too infectious to ignore and she joined in on the final chorus and the rousing applause that followed.

Emboldened by the mask and Champagne, she wandered into the tiny disco after the last of the night's entertainment was over. It was too hot and crowded to enjoy, and Nick conceded that perhaps she really ought to pack. Their bags were to be set out in front of their cabins by three a.m. This week hadn't been about finding romance, but uncovering all

the layers she'd wrapped herself in since Oscar's death. Oscar had been so good at protecting her. She hadn't realized she no longer needed it.

One last walk above deck, then, she thought. It seemed strange to know her way around so quickly now, recalling with ease which stairs would open to which section of the various decks. She wanted the main deck below the bridge, where the wind was fierce and cool at night and the stars were spread as thick as frosting overhead. She'd found that very few passengers braved the bow area at night, and she liked the solitude.

She stared at the smear of the Milky Way, committing it to memory. She hadn't seen it in years—it was simply not visible from large cities anymore. When she'd looked her fill she turned back to the stairs and discovered she wasn't alone.

She knew immediately who the tuxedoed, masked woman had to be. There was only one woman on board who was as tall as she was.

"I knew who you were before you arrived. VIP tags, you know." Ilea had to shout over the wind. "But I did not know until this afternoon. I cannot even put into words how you played. Only that it was marvelous."

Nick intended to flirt when she said, "You must have me confused with someone else."

"Do I?"

Nick shrugged.

Ilea put her back to the railing and leaned a little closer. "I'm on duty in ten minutes—we have the final cashiering to do. It will take the rest of the night."

“How tedious.”

Ilea shrugged. “It’s the job. It has fringe benefits, sometimes.” She looked down at her hands. “I just wish it wasn’t the last night. I think I spent my time unwisely.”

“I don’t know about that,” Nick said dryly. “I’m guessing you enjoyed yourself.”

“That I did.”

They said nothing as the bow rose and fell several more times.

“Nine minutes,” Ilea said, her lips inclined toward Nick’s ear as she stared at Nick’s mouth. “I had a wonderful time, but I still think I chose badly.”

Although she’d been half anticipating it, Nick was surprised by the kiss, and doubly surprised by the way her body responded. In a single heartbeat they went from a kiss to a full embrace, body to body.

The kiss aroused Nick to an extent that left her gasping when Ilea finally pulled away. She drew Nick into the shadow from the bridge overhead and pressed her against the cold steel bulkhead where it was a little less noisy from wind and engines.

“Say no if this isn’t what you want,” Ilea whispered.

Her hands were at Nick’s collar, undoing her tie, her buttons, pulling her shirt out of her pants.

“Dear God,” Nick breathed as Ilea pulled up her bra. The wind chilled her breasts, then Ilea’s mouth was on them, spreading fire with her tongue.

Ilea’s mouth came back for kisses while her hands were busy unzipping Nick’s slacks. “Say yes if this is what you

want.”

Fingers slipped down her abdomen. Nails lightly scratched.

“Say yes if this is what you want,” Ilea repeated.

Nick surprised herself again by the intensity of her answer. “Yes,” she groaned out. “Yes.”

It was so fast and so hard and so unexpected that Nick could only arch her back and let the soul-wrenching cacophony of sensation flow through her. The public place, the hurry, even the rise and fall of the deck under her feet brought all of Nick’s focus to the abandoned pleasure of her slick, receptive depths. Like noticing the beauty of the dense stars overhead, she was aware, as if for the very first time, of purely physical ecstasy, from the hard press of Ilea’s palm to Ilea’s teeth on her throat and shoulders.

Two minutes, at the most, of Ilea’s delectable assault led to the first ripple of orgasm. Ilea said something in a language Nick couldn’t follow but the plea was clear. She clamped down on her desire to cry out, but otherwise held nothing back as her climax left her literally staggering. Had it not been for Ilea’s body against hers she would have fallen. She felt post-performance dizziness, expected the call of encore!

“I have to go,” Ilea whispered. “I chose the wrong woman. I am so sorry. We could have been wonderful together.”

Nick found her breath. “I think we made excellent use of the time.”

Humor flickered in the pale blue eyes behind the mask.

“I don’t know—I had been hoping to find that mysterious

Maestro Frost somewhere, though.”

“She’s not here,” Nick answered. “Not tonight.”

There was still some life in the cell phone battery. She was about to find out if the service really was worldwide.

The call went through. After five rings, a grumpy voice answered.

“I woke you.”

“Nick?”

“I’m sorry I woke you. What time is it?”

“Did you call me at five o’clock in the bloody morning to ask me the time?”

Nick laughed. “No. I’m sorry. I just wanted to tell you that you were right. I’ve had a wonderful holiday.”

Patricia’s voice softened and Nick could hear the rustle of bedclothes. She was still reeling from what had happened with Ilea and yet it only made her desire Patricia more. “I’m glad, darling.”

“I sent you a postcard. You won’t have it yet. It wasn’t true, what I said. I was being pissy.”

“Okay,” Patricia said easily. “I’ll ignore it. You do sound...different.”

“I was an ass, Patri.” Nick used her pet name for Patricia deliberately. “You were right about that too. I felt so exposed after Oscar died that I never stopped being the grand maestro, not even with you.”

“Oh my,” came Patricia’s answer. “I am very glad...I worried about you for a while, darling. You were so depressed and I couldn’t reach you.”

The low-battery beep sounded in Nick's ear. "The phone is going to die in a minute. I want to see you when I get back."

"You know where I am," Patricia said.

Nick took a deep breath. "I'm hoping we can start over."

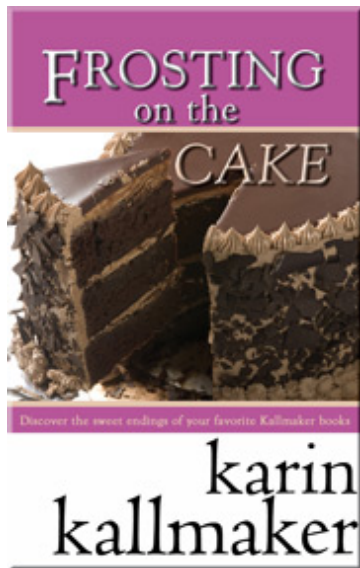
The phone died before Patricia could answer.

It didn't matter.

Who was the romantic one, now, Nick considered. For all her teasing of bella Carolyn for her romantic innocence, she felt the allure of a common bond, shared perceptions, like interests. She had had all of that with Patricia. Five minutes in another woman's arms and perhaps the most shattering climax of her life, yet her first thought when she'd gathered her wits was that she wanted Patricia in her life again. She glanced in the mirror and saw that she still wore her mask.

She took it off.

## Excerpt from Frosting on the Cake



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