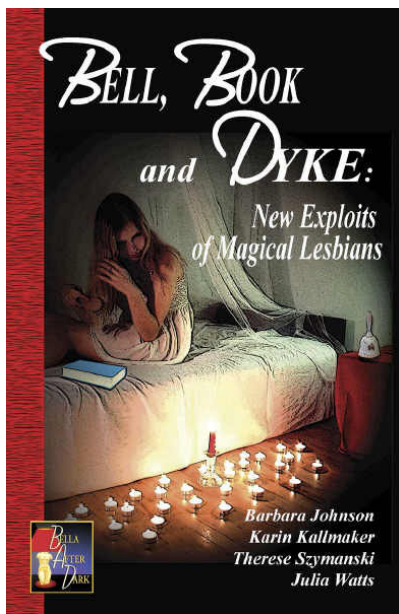

**Excerpt from *Bell, Book and Dyke:*
New Exploits of Magical Lesbians**



BELL, BOOK AND DYKE IS A LESBIAN EROTICA ANTHOLOGY OF FOUR NOVELLAS BY KARIN KALLMAKER, BARBARA JOHNSON, THERESE SZYMANSKI AND JULIA WATTS.

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CHAPTER ONE
FROM THE NOVELLA
“UNBELIEVER”
BY KARIN KALLMAKER

“In conclusion, it is essential to understand that use of words such as *primitive* or *modern* are value judgments and unnecessarily juxtapose...”

My own droning voice was putting me to sleep—it was one of those afternoons that I understood why some students dozed off in my lectures. The overheated room was muggy from fifty jackets piled near the hissing radiators to steam off snow, and the packed-to-capacity lecture hall had taken on a quiet that spoke more of dazed insensibility than of rapt attention.

However, the echo had not died from my final remarks when an intrepid young woman with a serious

expression raised her hand. “Professor Carnegie, I just want to be certain that this class fulfills the Values and Concepts Curriculum.”

I held back my sigh. “If you’ll note the opening disclaimer on the syllabi I handed out when you arrived, you’ll see that it fulfills the VCC only if you elect to complete a twenty-five-page thesis in addition to the weekly essays and attendance.”

A massive sandy-haired youth in the back was still not sure, apparently. “So if I do that, it counts?”

Words of one syllable work best sometimes. “Yes, if you do that it counts.”

I presumed he, and those of similar build near him, were football players. Go Blue Hawks. Like the rest of my students, some of the athletes would be bright, some not, some looking to get through easily and the rare few inspired by the topic. “Twenty-five pages does not mean twenty-four and a half, nor will fifty meandering pages be better than twenty-five well-conceived ones. The largest font you may use is twelve-point Courier, double-spaced, one-inch margins. That information is on the syllabi as well.”

Oh, the cleverness of me, I thought as I answered more questions. Clever to have figured out how my own academic interests could fulfill a core curriculum credit, thus guaranteeing a minimum enrollment every semester for *Persistent Theology: A Survey of Godmaking*. Certainly I had colleagues who considered my astute positioning to be pandering to administrative dictates and abandonment of

academic ideals. Our students should learn for the sake of learning, not for the sake of employment—that was a sentiment I often heard, and from colleagues who had completed the last bitter detail of their Ph.D., just as I had, solely for the purpose of being able to teach at such august institutions as the University of Massachusetts at Danvers.

It wasn't in my nature to point out that their academic career objective could render, by their own definition, a Ph.D. a “vocational” degree. Truth, like falsehood, is a matter of perspective.

As for the legitimate goals of the required course I had created and taught for the last four years, I personally believed that a course that imparted a critical approach to learning, be it about peanut butter or piebald ponies, was badly needed by most college freshmen.

“As my very last comment in setting the tone for this course, I want to make it clear that use of the terms *Right* and *One True* in regards to mystical, spiritual or theological belief will not be tolerated in this course. You are not here to debate cultural holy books or determine which—if any—stairway to heaven is real. You are here to learn the history and social mores of twenty-four different cultures, how to compare their similarities and differences, and view the use of formalized religion as a social maintenance mechanism. To pass this course you must demonstrate that you can discuss the use of theological and spiritual ideas to create social governance, rules and order. Lectures will not be derailed into discussions of Right and True. Anyone who exhibits disrespectful behavior of any kind will be asked to leave.”

The faces of two young women in the front row fell and I hoped that didn't mean they'd spend the course answering every fact I presented with, “But Dr. Carnegie, Jesus said that was wrong.”

As the students gathered books and jackets and eddied out into the hall, I heard one of the young men say to a buddy, “Stairway to heaven—never heard it called that before.”

“Me neither,” his companion replied as they muscled their way out the door.

Feeling old, I slowly packed my satchel as the room emptied. The lecture hall ceiling was ablaze with rainbow prisms caused by the winter sun reflecting off the snow outside. The light was beautiful, but cold. I mused to myself that at least one lover in my past had said the same of me. My twin, Kylie, had received all the warmth, and once upon a time I'd groused about the random act of nature that had given her, it seemed, so much life, and me so little. The perspective of time had changed my outlook. Sighing, I gathered my things and braced myself for the rest of my afternoon.

The beginning of a new quarter provided a fresh start with fresh students, and a reconnecting time with the graduate students in my care. The holidays now behind us, the serious ones would buckle down to their research and questions with renewed enthusiasm. Snow and ice were just proof that being inside with books and a crackling fire was not just good sense, but essential to both physical and academic survival.

I was beginning a new year and would, in all probability, see its ending. At home, Kylie would be taking a long nap after a scant lunch. She would not see spring, let alone another new year. We both knew it. We were both scared. The winter had never seemed so bleak, so desolate. A department meeting was the last place I wished to invest energy.

Carl was in the power chair, coffee steaming on the table in front of him. We had to select a new department chair today. Carl wanted the job, of course, but he'd not approached me for support and his “Good afternoon, Hayley,” was distant.

Mike, Trina, Jenny and Lotham, professors of history all, were in the “not even thinking about running this meeting” mid-table spots, leaving me the chair facing Carl. It was the chair of the tacit second-in-command. Susan's goals were higher than that, so she stayed at the window, pulling power to her by standing.

Annoyed with the predictability of it all, I took a folding chair, abandoning any pretence of participation in the meeting's outcome.

Carl started talking and I stopped listening. My success as a teacher was two-fold: my courses were well-attended and I refused to get caught up in factions. The week three lecture in my course was all about the use of factions to enforce social order and divert social pressure for change. I liked to think I am smarter than that.

Smarter, usually. This year, with the frozen Massachusetts winter making it hard to breathe and even

more difficult to stay warm, it was just smart to stay below Carl’s and Susan’s radar. I was cold, tired and wanted to teach my courses, read my books and spend time with Kylie.

To my immense relief, Susan it seemed had done her politicking before the meeting. She’d rightly figured I couldn’t care less, and had spent her time on the swing voters, Jenny and Lotham. Carl had presumed his ego was the Ohio of electoral votes somehow, but Susan carried the popular vote, which is how we played the game. I cast my vote for her because she already had enough to win and I knew that people in folding chairs got to vote last. Presidential elections were sometimes decided with less care.

Free to head for home, I bent my head into the bitter wind and began the short walk.

After I gratefully shut the front door between me and the now swirling snow, I gave Bast her dry food and fresh water and received my daily dose of fur, purring and disdain. Kylie’s lunch dishes still contained a half a boiled egg and half a slice of toast, both of which showed signs of nibbling by Bast. At this point, Bast ate more than Kylie did. We were quickly approaching the time when someone would have to check on her during the day when I could not.

I quietly slipped upstairs to her room to make sure she was asleep. She didn’t have much strength, but as usual, she’d kicked off the blankets. I pulled them back over her

and she didn't stir; she'd rest for at least another hour. Bast, now sated, cuddled on the comforter against Kylie's back. Kylie had wisely told Bast she hated that, when in fact she adored Bast's warmth. But, as anyone who has shared living space with a cat can advise you, it never pays to tell the creatures your true feelings.

My nose had barely begun to thaw over a steaming cup of peppermint tea when the doorbell rang, followed by the rumbling sound of a departing delivery truck. I scooped the package off the porch before the temperature in the house fell fifteen degrees. My brief look at the snow took in its change from light, fluffy and picturesque to heavy, wet and slushy. The temperature was dropping; in the morning there would be ice everywhere.

Bast, having no doubt thought I had left the house again, had roused herself and was, therefore, caught in the act of eating the Dreaded Dry Food. After a surprised glance at me, she retired quickly to a corner to heave up most of it. Our nightly rituals of one kind and another complete, I took the package and tea up to my study while she returned to the comfort of Kylie's warmth. A touch to the switch and flames blossomed in the fireplace under the wood that I'd left stacked ready for a night's work. When Kylie woke she'd join me, her toes close enough to the fire to get crispy.

Computer grinding to life, I tore the thick envelope from my parcel and tossed it on the fire. A layer of black paper – thick, slightly sticky – was tightly bound around what was obviously a large book. I had a few things on order, but what emerged from the wrapping was not

anything I recognized. At least I didn't think so – the heavily tooled leather cover was crowded with designs but nothing that could be construed as a title.

I set it down for a moment to poke the now crackling fire and switch off the gas, then returned to examine the heavy book. It was oversized and at least four inches thick. Lounging into my large, comfortable desk chair, I studied the cover again, tracing the most prominent design with my eyes. And again. It almost seemed familiar. Celtic? Teutonic? My eyes followed the whorls a third and fourth time, but now the design didn't seem familiar at all.

Slightly dazzled, I jumped when the study door banged open. Kylie gave me a brilliant smile. I thought fancifully that, when we were kids, Kylie had been the brilliant flare of the sun and I the pale moon. Her smile today, for all its brightness, was like the last flare of a candle before the wick drops forever into the wax.

I was surprised to see that half the logs were well-consumed. They'd been fresh only moments ago. My computer screen was slowly changing hues, indicating it had been idle for some time. But I'd just turned it on. A glance at the clock on my desk reminded me the night was not so young – had cleaning up after Bast taken that long?

“I'll get dinner started,” I told Kylie, after settling her in front of the fire.

“I was going to try,” she paused to fill her lungs. “Try to make it myself. You were...so quiet.”

“Here, let me put this on your lap and you take a look.

I can’t make anything of it.” I glanced guiltily at the fire where I’d tossed the outer envelope. “I don’t even know who sent it.”

The book seemed to weigh more than Kylie did. Even as I looked at her, my mind replayed moments in the past, delighting in watching her surge with speed to intercept a pass and run rings around the other team’s forward. College glory seemed so long ago.

Her thin fingers traced the cover design. “Beautiful work.”

“Yes, but I can’t place it.”

Shaking my head free of the beginnings of a headache, I slipped on my reading glasses and immediately felt more clear-headed. Eyestrain, I decided, and I popped a few tablets once I reached the kitchen.

Kylie’s appetite was difficult to tempt. The key was to offer her variety in small quantities. A strawberry sliced into five delicate pieces would work, along with a plump Medjool date, pitted and sliced as well. Several mouthfuls of cottage cheese would provide badly needed calories. I found a tin of olives from New Year’s Eve preparations and added several to her plate. When we were kids our mother had called such a meal “French” and we’d both felt quite worldly munching a bit of brie with crackers and sliced apples. Only now did I appreciate that our mother had been cleaning out the icebox with such meals. A couple of cashews finished her plate. I’d be pleased if she ate it all, but it was unlikely.

Using most of the same ingredients, I made myself a

curried chicken salad and headed back to the study where it would be warmer.

Kylie looked as if she was waiting for a kind, easy breeze to take her someplace warm. When once I had envied the gene sequences that had made Kylie such a glorious star, I now felt a familiar stab of guilt. She would die before our thirty-eighth birthday. I would not.

She ate the olives slowly as I sorted through mail. Bills from specialists went into the tub where I put the details of Kylie’s deterioration. I tossed my 2004 Queer-Quotes-for-the-Day into the recycle bag. My 2005 appointment book was empty except for departmental requirements, but mentally every day was marked “Save for Kylie.” I would not allow myself to see the emptiness of spring, summer or the rest of my life.

“I could have done chemo,” Kylie volunteered. “And I’d have eaten as much.” She slowly hooked a soft lock of dark hair behind one ear. “I’m sorry. Not that hungry.”

“It’ll keep. I’ll put it on the table next to you so you can snack if you want. So, what did you think of the book?”

“You were always the thinker.” Kylie lifted the cover. “You know my best work. With rule books.”

“You’re the only person I know who can recite the balk rule in baseball, that’s for sure.” Kylie’s passion had always been for sports. Not being able to play, after the disastrous collapse in college that had led to diagnosis of her heart condition, had been a crushing blow to her spirit. Even with a bad heart, however, one could officiate from the sidelines. Even with degenerative bones and joints one

could keep score and run statistics. Even chronic fatigue allowed her to watch, for an hour or two.

Advanced uterine cancer, however, was the Bitch Goddess, the Destructor, She-Who-Must-Be-Obeyed.

“What will you do with this?” Kylie patted the cover.

I lifted the book from Kylie’s lap, still trying to discern the title. “Read it—I’m sure I ordered it for research.”

“It’s blank.”

I realized then that I’d been so taken with the cover that I’d not opened it to look for a title page. Quickly thumbing through the tome I saw that Kylie was right. Blank, every last page. The book felt old, but perhaps it was someone’s idea of a gift? A journal or elaborate notebook?

When I’d tossed the envelope on the fire I hadn’t realized there was no packing slip. I had no idea who had sent it. Frustrated, I pulled up my list of items I had on order for research and scanned it for anything I might not have understood was the book now propped up on my desk. But my quick perusal didn’t turn up listings that noted my loan request was a “leather-bound edition” or even an “antique.”

“Well, that’s vexing,” I said to Kylie. “I have no idea what this is.” I flipped the pages once again as I considered how to go about identifying the book and, more importantly, to whom it should be returned. It was nice to look at but useless to me. My shelves were already far too full.

“I’m sure you’ll figure it—oh, damn!” Abruptly, there

was only firelight to illuminate us.

"Don't worry. I was thinking we'd lose power." My computer switched to battery and the monitor glare helped me find the long-nosed lighter in my desk. A few minutes later my office was softly illuminated by several oil lamps. The fire continued to warm the room and I'd slept on the small divan near it more than once when weather insisted we all remember our tenuous grasp on survival. Kylie, however, would quickly chill, so I brought several more blankets as I helped her to the sofa. I'd be able to warm up my own bed enough to sleep.

Kylie drifted to sleep after swallowing her meds. Reading by oil lamp light was a prescription for a headache, but I could sort and file papers with no trouble. And so I filled the rest of my evening with tidying up for the new quarter's onslaught of papers to grade and administrative memoranda.

From university paperwork I turned to the large pile of reports and letters from all the specialists who had seen or wanted to see Kylie. Most of them wanted to see me as well. We were a pair for the medical textbooks. Our DNA had been sampled and resampled, compared, clucked over and declared a puzzle. Our genes were identical but our physical health had diverged wildly. I'd been tested for everything Kylie suffered from and been judged soundly healthy, if a bit too wide in the hindquarters.

I had letters from geneticists wanting to clone us, scientists wanting tissue samples, researchers (sometimes with a shocking lack of humanity) asking to conduct Kylie's

autopsy. Hospitals from Los Angeles to London asked for pieces of her as if she was a bit of furniture. They asked me, as if I knew, how two things that were the same could be so different.

A lot of it I chucked, but a few things I kept to discuss with Kylie at some other time. There would come a point when she needed to be in a hospital. She had choices with a dozen worldwide offering to provide care in return for her body, both before and after her death. She'd accepted there was something to learn in the process of her dying, but we'd agree to be in denial, for a little while longer. If she could get out of bed, use the toilet and make a meal, she wanted to be here.

As I swallowed back tears of bitterness and depression I would not allow Kylie to see, I came across our father's Christmas card to me, reminding me that I was obliged to send him some sort of response. Last year I'd put it off until nearly Easter, and then only written a letter so that his Easter missive didn't begin with a comment about not getting a reply to the Christmas card.

Figuring a handwritten note might look longer than a few sparse paragraphs from my word processor, I found writing paper and pen, took the brightest oil lamp to the chair next to the fire, and sat down to compose something suitable. At the last moment I grabbed the mysterious book to serve as a writing platform.

I supposed that Kylie had written him back, though it would have taken her some time to do so. When our parents had divorced they'd had the brilliant idea that they

should each take one of us, and Kylie as a result could talk to our father in ways I could not.

Dear Father, I wrote dutifully. My pen stilled as inspiration faded. I glanced at his Christmas card, postmarked Montpelier, for help. *I am glad your rhododendrons will survive the frost again this year.*

The rare acquaintance who inquired about the rift with my father rightly concluded that it was due to the fact that he was a fundamentalist bigot and I was, though not put into practice recently, a lesbian. It did not help that I was also a "heretic" in his estimation. Kylie, who had embraced some of his religion during her teens, could stand him; I could not.

We exchanged greetings at all major religious holidays when piety is at its most false and obligatory. I knew that somehow or other I was supposed to be old enough to forgive his rejection of me, but given how little actual affection there had ever been between us, I saw no reason to change the status quo. I was old enough to decide what was and was not worth my time and attention. Changing my father was not.

My pen had not moved for several minutes and I set it and the paper aside with a heavy sigh. With just the book on my lap I could not help but turn it over to examine it one more time. Peering through my glasses I studied the cover again, but whatever pattern I had seen earlier refused to reemerge. I set my glasses aside to rub the bridge of my nose as I idly flipped pages one last time. Just as I was about to push the heavy thing onto the floor a log split on the

fire. In the abrupt flare of light, the page under my hand appeared now to have writing.

I closed my eyes for a moment, then cautiously looked again. A handwritten script spilled across the pages. The fire dimmed and so did the writing. Intrigued, I carried the book closer to the fire. The ink leapt into full color, deeply blue.

I turned to the very first sheet and discovered what might be a title page, but the letters were so crowded and stylized I could still make out nothing of use. I studied it for a moment, turned the page to the next, studied it, then on to the next.

After twenty pages or so I suddenly yawned. To my amazement the mantel clock reported that my next class began in less than five hours. Kylie had not stirred in all this time. Her meds knocked her out for the majority of the night and most of the day.

Bast agreed reluctantly to share my bed with me, as long as I shared the down comforter with her. The deal was struck. My head spinning with fatigue, I plunged into sleep.

###

I woke with a serious ache in my back. I supposed it was from hunching next to the fire for so long the previous evening. The power was back on, and it took only ten seconds to discern that I had twenty minutes to get to my first class of the morning. Students hated eight a.m. classes only slightly more than their instructors did.

I woke Kylie with a gentle hug after I set a steaming

cup of Irish Breakfast tea, a cookie and her morning meds on the table next to the sofa. “I’m terribly late—will you be okay?”

“I will when I’m not dizzy.” Kylie closed her eyes again. “You go on.”

I swore my way through my shower, appeased Bast, then hurried out the front door, already late.

My boots hit the first patch of ice and I involuntarily skated the short length of my walk. My yelp of alarm warned off other pedestrians as I windmilled madly for balance. A man grabbed for me but missed and—certain I was about to beat Kylie to whatever happened after death—I spilled across the hood of a slow moving Jeep.

The amazing thing was that I landed on my feet. Though I was shaking like a leaf, I had injured my pride more than any part of my body. Oh, my shoulder would tell me all about it for a week, but that I was alive seemed miraculous to me.

The driver of the Jeep clambered out with expressions of alarm and I recognized my neighbor. She’d moved into the cottage next to mine at the beginning of winter break, but I’d seen little of her after the moving van had departed. Kylie sometimes reported on comings and goings and the return of the odd piece of misdelivered mail.

“Are you okay?” She put one arm around my shoulders, being about my height, and guided me toward the sidewalk. “That was some dance number.”

“I forgot about the ice. I’m fine, really. It wasn’t your fault.” I thanked the man who’d tried to save me and

assured everyone I really was okay. “I’m late for class...power outage...no alarm.”

“Can I drive you? Though I don’t know why I bother. It’s such a short walk.”

“Driving is actually not a good idea today.”

She shrugged, her blue eyes alight with mirth. “I grew up in Phoenix and have been hoping to find someone who could tell me things like that. Oh—stay still.”

She had the look of someone who had spotted a spider about to bite my jugular. I froze. She very carefully reached toward my left eyelid, however, and pulled her hand back to show me a fine fiber from my snow cap.

“It was headed right for your eye.” There was no mirth in her gaze now, but an intent, evaluative look. “Why don’t I put my car back and we can walk together. You can tell me about how to assess this white stuff all over the ground and I’ll convince myself I really didn’t break four of your ribs with my car.”

A few minutes later we hurried toward the university gates with our breath steaming the air in front of us. Credentials were quickly shared and absorbed in academic shorthand. Her summary was, “Lit. comp, no tenure in Phoenix. Perishing for lack of paper, but hope to put out next year.”

I answered with, “Humanities, tenure barely. Unspectacularly published...” I hesitated, but decided that I had no energy for academic posturing. I am what I am. “See that building over there? Gray roof? That’s the business and economics building. I’ve got the same last

name as the robber baron who paid for it, so...I am left alone to research what is of interest to me and very few others.”

“Which is?” She tramped without hesitation across the icy ground, her shiny new boots breaking the crust easily, though I guessed she weighed a good twenty pounds less than I did. The slender frame was discernible even under the winter wrappings. She looked perhaps in her early forties but I had yet to see her hair – it was tucked up inside her snow hat without a single tendril to give a clue.

“The intersection of religion and social code. The divergence of morality and scripture.”

She avoided a snow-covered hummock. “You mean why is thou shalt not kill a matter of morality and not religion?”

“It is a nearly universally held law, regardless of supporting scripture.”

“If you don’t count women and children.” She had a tiny frown line between her light, finely sculpted brows.

“Exactly. Religion can be surprisingly amoral when it comes to treatment of what is considered property. One can kill property in most religions. The differences are often in the definition of what a person is or isn’t, hence one can kill nonbelievers and infidels, too.”

“The current climate in our country must frustrate you.”

“Not particularly. I’m a historian. This is a phase.” Our steps matched in rhythm as we neared the social sciences building.

“Ah. So, all of history is one passing phase after another?”

“For the most part, yes.”

She smiled then, a perfectly readable I-know-something-you-don’t-know smile. I hate that. “When does a phase take on permanence?”

“Depends on your timeframe. Humanity is a phase in the longevity of the planet.”

“But the planet is not?”

“It is in the timeframe of the universe.”

She held the door open for me. “Then it really does matter where one sets one’s frame of reference, doesn’t it?”

Ahead, I spied two of my grad students whisking into the classroom, no doubt immediately relieved to see I was not yet there. “A day trader sets it in seconds. A geologist in aeons.” I shrugged.

She waved in parting as I put my hand on the classroom door. “Our souls set the only timer that matters. Thanks for the walk.”

Hoping her last comment didn’t indicate some sort of cultish adherence to the latest God of the Week, I breezed into the classroom to apologize to my students and begin the working part of my day.

It was only later, feeling tenderness in my ribs and reflecting on a surprisingly intriguing conversation that I realized I did not know my neighbor’s name. I would have to ask Kylie when I got home.

“Aurora Lowell.” Kylie stretched her feet toward the fire as she picked at her dinner. “She’s hot and she’s gay.”

Kylie’s frank assessment startled me. “How would you know? Are you finally coming around to my way of thinking about sex?”

“We got her *On Our Backs*.” Kylie’s wan face lit with a teasing smile. “Good article about G-spot stimulation.” She took a shaky breath as a laugh threatened. “You girls aren’t shy.”

“No,” I agreed. “When it comes to pleasure and the female body, I think we dykes lead the way.”

“Pity I never tried.”

Oh, how I agreed. Our father’s attempts to indoctrinate both of us into his Temple of Righteousness had failed utterly with me, but Kylie had been attracted to something in it. The ritual, the comfort of knowing your spiritual place in the order of things, whatever it might be for her, I didn’t understand it. But I firmly believed that it had kept Kylie from exploring her sexuality fully.

“Honestly, I can say there are a few high points to it, though I’ve not often experienced them.”

“You should ask her out.”

“Don’t be ridiculous.”

“Hayley.”

I looked up from my monitor. “What?”

She gazed at me for a minute before saying, “I won’t be here forever.”

My eyes stung with sudden tears. “I know that. I want

to spend all the time with you I can.”

“I worry about you.”

“Don’t waste the energy, I’m fine.”

“When was the last time you laughed?”

“Today, reading the latest government promises to build unity between the parties.”

“Danced?”

I shrugged.

“Fucked?”

“And your point?”

“Life’s short, even if you live to be a hundred.” She set her barely touched dinner to one side. “I wish I’d tried a lot of things.”

I surreptitiously dabbed at my eyes. “Such as?”

“Xstasy—wish I’d tried it.”

“You’re not serious!”

“Just once. And I wish...I’d danced naked around a bonfire.”

“Sounds fun until the cops show up.”

“There was a woman who loved me.”

I blinked. “Really? I mean, I’m not surprised, but you never mentioned it.”

“I wish I’d said yes. I think...” She turned her head to gaze into the fire. “Wasting love is a real sin.”

“Didn’t you love what’s-his-name? In college. You wore his ring for a while.”

“I think I did. I got sick and he left.” She shrugged, or

at least I thought the tiny movement of her shoulders was a shrug. Then I realized she was crying.

I held her gently against me, trying not to cry myself. One of us had to be strong, but so close to her I could feel our hearts beating in the same rhythm. Her depression echoed in me.

“I’m so scared, Hayley.”

“I know.”

“What happens afterward? Where am I going?”

I cursed my academic mind that could so easily distance me from the emotion in her plea. It was the eternal question of all societies. But this was not some theoretical discussion—this was Kylie.

And there was no comfort I could give her, no superstition or faith that she would believe from me. Kylie hadn’t been shocked when I said I’d been to bed with one of her teammates in high school, but she’d turned ashen when I’d announced I did not believe in God. There was no tale of Cloud Nine or Heaven Hereafter that I could convincingly offer. Our father would pour her full of his assurances that there was a Plan for us all, and when she surrendered to the Will she would be Healed or Taken, according to the Design.

That was why he did not know how sick Kylie was. If our mother had still been alive I’d have told her. But not him—he’d take Kylie away to pray for healing and forgiveness because only a sinner was struck down. In his world, the sicker Kylie got, the more it must be Kylie’s fault.

I held her tight until she cried herself out, then helped her to bed, feeling utterly inadequate.

It was barely nine o'clock and there was certainly work I could do. The study always seemed quiet and dark after Kylie left, as if she still cast light wherever she went. Bast made a huge show of loving me, but I knew she was really after the warmth from the computer monitor. We settled which part of the desk I'd be able to work on and she curled up, watching me with her pleased yellow eyes.

The damn mystery book took up too much space. I didn't know how to send it back from whence it came, and I could hardly spend another long night poring over pages that only revealed themselves by firelight. The scribe had been very clever, to be sure, but it was useless to me.

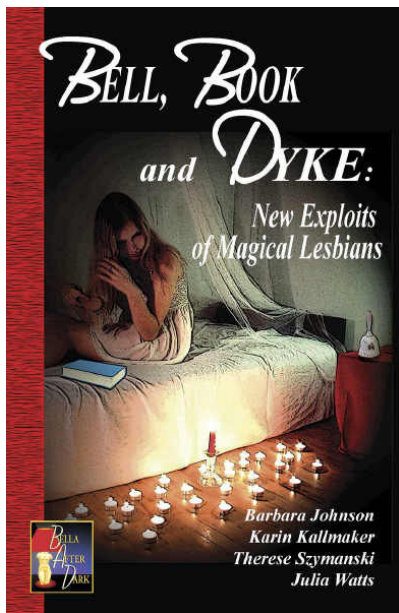
I pushed it away, then decided I could at least get it off my desk. Next to the fire would be fine. I'd show Kylie the writing tomorrow night. As I set it down I saw the remnants of my ill-begun letter to my father and cast it wearily into the flames. I sank down in the chair with the book on my lap, warming my hands, and considered what to do next.

I jumped when Bast brushed past my ankles with her “I want out of this room” yowl. I had no recollection of opening the book, but it was on my lap and I was tilted awkwardly toward the firelight to make the writing visible. I shut it, annoyed with myself, and then gasped in pain as I tried to stand. My left leg was asleep and my back stiff.

Stamping to get the circulation going in my leg, I stared in amazement at the clock. It was past midnight. And yet I'd just sat down.

I let Bast out and she resentfully scrambled downstairs toward her litter box. I peered in on Kylie, but she appeared to be asleep. I felt stupid with fatigue and guessed I had simply fallen asleep after not enough rest last night.

Excerpt from Bell, Book and Dyke



BELL, BOOK AND DYKE IS A LESBIAN EROTICA ANTHOLOGY OF FOUR NOVELLAS BY KARIN KALLMAKER, BARBARA JOHNSON, THERESE SZYMANSKI AND JULIA WATTS.

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