

Ici
by Tina Whittle

She knocked, as always, even though she had the key in her back pocket, as always. She needed the boundary — as did he — the permission that came from unlocking and opening, entering and leaving, the lines between their separate lives clear, so that their coming together was equally clear and separate.

She heard the deadbolt disengage, the soft click of the titanium lock. When the door opened, she smiled up at him. "*Je suis ici.*"

He stepped back to let her in. "*Je suis ici aussi.*"

He held the door for her as she entered, locking it behind her again. He looked tired, the wrinkle between his eyes more prominent than usual. He was still wearing his holster, the dark leather contrasting against the white dress shirt, but the gun had been put away.

She frowned. "You are just getting in?"

He nodded and headed for the bedroom. She heard the snap of the holster as he pulled it off, then the small precise noises as he emptied his pockets on the bedside table. Watch, wallet, cuff links, cell phone.

She put her bag on the kitchen counter and pulled out the essential oils, the herbal liniment, the jojoba oil base, the shea butter. Her preparations relied heavily of the aromatics and the anti-inflammatories — rosemary and mint, arnica and echinacea — blended to relax knotted muscles, loosen tightened tendons. And then, for later, essence of damask rose and damiana — the first to soothe, the second to quicken — stirred into a cup of chamomile tea. An old recipe, taught to her by her dearly departed grandmother, who had lived full of life and carnal appetite until her last lusty breath.

She hummed to herself and slid out of her sandals, the tile floor cool beneath her bare feet. The wine came next, a Viognier, although that would be later too, for her alone. When they would talk. She had much to talk about this night, especially after their visit this morning, and the wine would be necessary, although she wasn't sure why, not yet. She'd known intuitively to bring it, that was all, and as she rummaged in the bag for the bottle opener, there was a little flicker of nervousness at the base of her spine, not unpleasant. A ripple of something in the works, energies crossing currents.

She'd laid out the cards before she'd come, breaking her rule of never asking for information about another person. The cards had been portentous, but their meaning still swirled just beyond her grasp, dark and oblique. This lack of comprehension had been annoying but not surprising. She knew it was the Universe's way of offering her a mild rebuke for daring to pull back the veil on his life instead of asking about her own, for bringing hunches to the Tarot instead of openness. She'd resigned herself to waiting for revelation.

Now she felt the first intimations of that knowing on the horizon, and she placed her small strong hands on her solar plexus, her third chakra, feeling the vibrations tingle into her palms. She had questions for him, yes she did. The Lovers did not show up without its reasons, after all, and they were usually powerful ones. Irresistible. She had hunches, yes, equally powerful ones. But she was saving them for the talk. Afterwards.

She pulled out the kitchen chair, but he still hadn't returned from the bedroom. She raised her voice. "Trey?"

He appeared in the doorway, shirt unbuttoned. "Yes?"

"Are you ready?"

"Yes."

But he still didn't move. She examined him closely. Yes, very tired, but something was different. His energy was usually steady, controlled, a slow burn. Tonight he sparked, like a cat whose fur had been rubbed the wrong way.

She reconsidered. "Never mind. We will begin in there. Go sit while I gather my things."

He did as she said, without argument. At least that much was normal. She smiled at an old memory, the first time they'd met. Sparks then too, soon fanned to flame.

Tell me, my hero of the hour, what are you doing after this little soirée? she'd asked, champagne glass at her lips.

He'd smiled down at her. *Whatever you tell me to.*

She gathered the vials and bottles and went into the bedroom. He sat on the edge of the bed, in the dark, still dressed. She looked at him, puzzled.

"Shall I get the table?"

He shook his head. "I don't think that's necessary, not tonight."

She regarded him some more, her head tilted to the side. She'd picked up the habit from him, and now it felt as natural as breathing to cock her head, get a slightly new perspective. There was a pattern to their sessions together. He'd sit backwards on the kitchen chair, arms folded, and gaze out the window at the skyline while she patiently unkinked every kink, bent and softened him. Neck and spine, back and shoulders. Sometimes, however, he required deep tissue work, and she'd unfold the massage table he kept in the closet and ready herself for the task, fists and fingers pulling and kneading to the point of resistance, then holding the pressure as he clenched his jaw, endured the pain. Those nights required extra tenderness afterward, when she finally took him to bed.

But this night was going to be something utterly different, she could tell.

She placed the oils on the bedside table, next to his things. And then she frowned. She recognized that yellow slip of paper. She'd collected enough of them over the years, far fewer than her driving warranted since Atlanta policemen were easily vanquished by the charms of a bright smile and a French accent.

She picked it up and stared, incredulous. "This is a speeding ticket!"

He looked over. "What? Oh. Yes."

Her eyes widened. "Ninety? In a forty-five zone?"

"There was a suspect—"

"A what?"

"A suspect, a BOLO. We spotted him during the interview at Beau Elan and—"

"We?"

He pressed his thumb between his eyebrows. "Eric's sister. You met her this morning."

She opened her mouth, and then closed it. She remembered the woman's eyes — clever hazel eyes that didn't miss a trick. Only they had, the most obvious trick of all, the oldest one, as they said, in the book. Trey had missed it too, although he had an

excuse. She wondered what the woman's excuse was, how she'd managed to avoid sensing that coiled electric energy. It must have felt practically incandescent every time she stood next to him.

"Tai," she said.

He nodded. "Yes. To ask Jake Whittaker about the photograph."

She crossed her arms. Now the cards made sense, comprehension shimmering and materializing. The Lovers. The Queen of Swords. Strength. The Tower. It was that last one that worried her, and she was not easily worried. She clucked her tongue when people went white-faced at Death — for there was compassion in Death, a sweet release, and a choice, always a choice — but even she suppressed a shudder when The Tower reared from the deck. The lightning strike, the fall, the desperate plunge. Sinking or swimming the only two options, because the fall was inevitable. And necessary, she reminded herself. Towers always crumbled, no matter how careful their construction. That was their natural fate.

She looked around the darkened bedroom, the white walls and black floor, the white sheets and the black pedestal bed. The black suit jacket folded neatly in the white chair. A carefully curated illusion without a crack in the facade. But she knew there was a crack. And she suspected it had hazel eyes and riotous caramel blond hair.

She hesitated, and felt the tingle at the base of her spine, the kundalini rising. So this was it then. She felt her breath catch. She'd been waiting for this tide to turn for over two years. Of course she herself had been in the cards too. The High Priestess, the Eight of Cups. She closed her eyes, dizzy with the understanding, then opened them quickly.

"Where does it hurt?" she said.

He looked surprised. "I don't know."

"But it does, does it not?"

He considered, nodded, and she bit the inside of her lip, grateful for the darkness. No, no tears. She had to be strong for this. Or, she thought, perhaps not. Perhaps she could be the tiniest bit drunk instead.

"Let me get a glass of wine," she said. "And we will begin."

She sat him at the edge of the bed, removing his shirt as she moved behind him. She started with the trapezius. It folded like a sinewy shield over the top of his back and shoulders and neck, protective and tight, and she knew that it had to be coaxed into relaxation, with long supple strokes. Effleurage. Only then could she begin to work the fibers and grain, the flex and tension of petrissage. The rhomboids next, then the deltoids, finally the latissimus dorsi at the base of his spine. This was the moment he'd relax too, usually with a slow exhale.

And so it was, almost exactly as it had been a hundred times before. Having him beneath her hands reminded her of walking the labyrinth at Chartres, each step new and old at the same time, memory and the moment merging into a gauzed haze, almost hypnotic. She had never been a keeper of scrapbooks or photograph albums, never saved love letters. She'd committed them to her mind and her heart with what she realized now was an errant faith. She remembered this every time she ran her fingers along the slash at his throat, the crosshatched silver scarring at the nape of his neck, on

his chin, at his temple. The mind was as fragile as paper, she knew now. Memories could burn into a fine ash and sift away, along with other pieces of the psyche.

The wine buzzed in her head, dampening the grief. It sometimes swelled in her chest like a knot she could not work out, thick and corded. But there was gratitude too, for what remained, for what was not lost. They intermingled, inextricable, like the memories and the present moment. Breath and body. Heart and soul.

He hadn't spoken. He rarely did. Words did not come easily for him, not anymore, and she'd learned to read his body with a kind of Braille. She was trained in energy work — Reiki and Deeksha and Tantra — and she used those techniques as skillfully as she used the ones she'd learned in massage school. She knew that touch was reciprocal, that the friction of every stroke, the glide and murmur of skin on skin, worked in her as well, opening and releasing and softening. This happened every time she brought someone to her table, every single session an intermingling, a communion, almost as intimate as lovemaking. She relished it, lived for it, thrived as it infused her, as she returned it, participating in that ancient cycle of giving and receiving. And so it was with him, but with him. . . She had to be careful with him this night. He could burst her heart wide open.

He dipped his head forward so that she could get her thumbs under the ridge of his skull, work her fingers against his scalp, release the tension there. She felt the shift as she did so, the last of his barriers coming down. His tea cup, her wine glass, both empty now. There was no light to turn out, only the glow of a single candle, honey-colored and warm.

"Yes?" she asked.

He nodded. "Yes."

She sat next to him then. He waited, as always, for her to begin. She placed her hand against the side of his face, kissed him lightly. He had not always been such a fine kisser — talented, yes, but not as technically proficient. Always curious, however, sensually so, always ready to learn and explore with her, to listen and watch and pay attention. His ability to focus, to fully inhabit his body, had astounded her at first. It had taken her years of meditative practice to do what he did naturally, organically, with ease. It had been what saved him, she knew. The slender thread that he followed back out of the labyrinth, back to her, back to life, back to himself. Back to a world that was blinding in its confusion and jarring in its complexity and layered with pain, fresh pain and old pain, body and soul pain. But he'd crawled back into it, on hands and knees.

She blinked away the tears again, but this time he noticed. He frowned, and she felt the first hint of the wall coming up, the uncertainly sending up a warning signal that his brain interpreted as a threat.

"What's wrong?" he said.

She shook her head. "Nothing."

"But—"

"Nothing is wrong. Nothing at all. I just have to tell you something."

"What?"

She pulled him in for another kiss, this one deeper, slower. And she felt the walls go down again, his mind releasing the reins once more, letting instinct and appetite have sway. And she felt it then, what he'd buried deep, what she was uncovering with

every touch, what he still couldn't see or know because it was too close but which sang in her head like the cards did, when the meaning coalesced and the tale told itself.

She felt the rush, the utter privilege and power of such a moment, of such a gift. It came with a price, as did everything, but she would pay it a thousand times over, let him go again and again and again until the last parting. It trembled now in her knowing, and she eased him back against the white bed, ran her hands over his chest, feeling his heart thumping, the quickening, the pull . . .

She bent her mouth to his ear. "Remember," she said.

"Remember what?"

"This."

He pulled back to look her in the eye. "I don't understand."

She pulled her tee shirt over her head, unclipped her hair from the topknot and let it cascade in red ringlets over her shoulders. The rest of the clothing would follow, soon enough. She'd take her time with that too, with everything.

"This is our last time together, you and I," she said.

He blinked at her. "What?"

"*Notre rendez-vous final.*"

"But—"

"Shhh." She kissed him quiet, working on his belt now. "It is good this way. With her here."

Now he looked a little panicked. "Who, her? Where?"

She pressed soft fingers against his temple. "*Ici*. In your head." She placed another hand in the center of his chest, feeling the beat-beat of the cardiac muscle, strong against her palm. "*Et ici*. In your heart."

Another head shake. "I don't—"

"You do. And you will."

She took her time with him. She could, since baffled and confused as he was, he relinquished all control to her, which was as she wanted. Because then he couldn't fight it. Then she would have something to hold onto as well, as her own heart expanded and shattered and knit itself whole again, stronger, larger. And she tried to remember, to inhabit every moment — every caress, every breath, every rhythm, every pulse, every call and response second of it.

And when she felt it coming, the inevitable release, she put her mouth against his ear again and whispered, "Say her name."

He ran his fingers into her hair and pulled her into a kiss, rougher and harder, but she pulled her mouth away, kept her forehead pressed against his, her eyes wide open.

"Say it," she said.

He shook his head, frustrated, but she shifted her hips and he closed his eyes, tangled his fingers tighter into the curls at the nape of her neck. She felt it in her too, rising like the phoenix, wings beating sparks and ash and golden fire.

"Say it."

"I don't—"

"You do."

"I . . ."

"Say it. Say it now. Let her in." She kissed him. "*Ici, mon cher. Toujours.* Say her name."

And she heard it, sibilant, a surrender, a prayer, a mantra, an incantation, a spell, a confession, from his lips to the entire Universe.

"Tai," he whispered. And she brought him over the edge, finally, as into deep waters made wild by tumbling falls.

She said goodnight at the door, as always. He'd offered to walk her to her car, as always, but she declined, as always. She liked the sound of the door closing, the locks tumbling. She needed the finality of it, especially this time.

He regarded her warily. He'd make sense of things eventually, but for now he was exhausted. Sleepy. The chamomile finally kicking in.

"Are you sure?" he said.

She nodded. "I told you this time would come eventually. You agreed."

"I did." He frowned, then shook his head. "But I didn't expect . . . I mean, I don't . . . Are you sure?"

"Yes. The cards do not lie. And neither does your heart." She patted his chest and smiled. "You will see."

What he did next almost undid her. He placed his own hand over hers, pressed it against his chest, and her knees wobbled, and she had a vision of reaching into his rib cage and taking his heart with her, the color and clarity of the desire to do exactly that rushing through her. Except that his heart was not hers to take, and it never had been, and she knew this as she knew her own heart, sovereign and blood-red beneath the delicate armor of her breastbone. And then she felt the tears again, fierce with wanting. And she saw herself in her bed at home, sobbing. In the elevator too, and on the drive home, the road made watery and blurry. Such was the price, the necessary sacrifice. Yes, she'd gladly pay it, again and again. But it was never easy.

"*Je suis ici,*" she whispered.

He nodded. "*Je suis ici aussi. Toujours.*"

She pulled her hand back while she still could. "*Toujours.*"