



The Missing Muse

Ericka Scott



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by

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It still wasn't right. Aaron Carmichael tipped his head one way, then the other. Perhaps he just needed a little more light.

He strode over to the large picture window of his apartment and yanked on the cord. The entire blind crashed to the floor. Light poured through the glass. Much better!

The body of the sculpture was perfect, but the face. The mouth was all wrong. Now what? He couldn't wait until tomorrow morning when he saw her, Abigail Martin, in the elevator on her way to work. He sighed and picked up a tool.

A nick here and a nick there and then he cut her bottom lip off. "Damn it!"

He pawed through the tools on his tray. Where was the stupid thing? With a cry of despair, he threw the tray of tools to the ground. Oh, there it was, right at his feet.

After several tense moments, he stepped back. The lip was on, but now it was worse than ever. Moaning, he slid to the ground and beat his head against the wall. Ouch, that hurt. While rubbing his hand over the sore spot, he studied the sculpture.

Exactly captured was the curve of her shoulders, the tilt of her breasts, her slim hips, and those long, long legs. He'd stripped her naked in his mind each and every morning; he had no doubts that this was what he would find beneath her pastel-colored suits. Working with clay, he hadn't been able to duplicate the auburn highlights in her long brown hair, nor the intense blue of her slightly almond-shaped eyes.

His gaze fell to the mouth. Damn it all. He resisted the urge to slam his fist against the wall for his hands were too important to ruin. However, a well placed kick made him feel better. Closing his eyes, he tried to picture her again.

Perhaps if he recreated their encounters. He'd need some mood music. Those silly tinkling tunes management pumped in to calm nerves shattered by the city traffic and daily hustle and bustle. Music, that should do it.

Unfortunately, he didn't have a stereo. The clock radio would have to do. He ran to the bedroom and started to grab the electric cord. At the last minute, he

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hesitated. The last time they'd had a power outage, the alarm hadn't gone off and he'd overslept. If he unplugged it, he wouldn't know the time.

He pressed a few buttons when the sudden blare of music made him jump. Rock and roll wasn't going to cut it. He turned the knob, searching for something soft. Mariachi music? Nah. Finally, a soft sensuous tune wafted into the room. Perfect.

As he strode back out to the studio, he realized he couldn't hear a thing. Running back, he cranked the volume up as far as it would go. The sound hurt his ears, but out by the sculpture, it was perfect.

Now, where was that tool? He shuffled through the tools scattered on the floor and then spotted it right by his left toe.

As he bent to retrieve it, he heard a knock at the door. If he ignored the summons, eventually whoever it was would go away. The pounding continued and broke his concentration. With a sigh of irritation, he threw down his tool. He really should cover the clay. It would be disastrous if it dried out. However, this shouldn't take long. It was probably just a neighborhood kid selling cookies or trinkets. He'd buy something and send the tyke away.

He'd probably left his wallet in his dress pants. He ran to the bedroom as the doorbell peeled. Loud knocking quickly followed.

"I'm coming," he yelled.

A search of his pockets didn't turn up the wallet. Patting his back pocket, he felt a familiar lump. There it was, right where it was supposed to be.

The knocking intensified and the doorbell peeled three times in quick succession. Man, that kid must be desperate to sell him something.

He jerked open the door and caught his breath. It was *her*. What should have been an answer to his prayers was ruined by her expression. Her normally lush mouth was pulled into a tight angry line.

"What the hell are you doing up here? Training elephants?"

What did you say to a mad woman? "I'm sorry, elephants?"

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"I'm working on my column."

Her voice was breathier than he remembered. More seductive. And the way she tossed her hair was a thing of beauty. He looked back at her mouth.

"I've been blocked for days on end, and now I have to come up with three hundred words about Silas O'Shea's shitty paintings so that I can attend some bozo's opening at the galley tomorrow night."

He wished she'd close her mouth. It didn't even bother him that she'd call him a bozo. Because, if he didn't get her mouth just perfect, she'd be calling his work shitty as well.

As she opened her mouth to let go another stream of abuse, he grabbed her and pressed his mouth against hers. Her lips were as soft as he'd imagined, but now that they were closed, he wanted them open to him. He slid his tongue across the seam of her lips. With a small sigh, she opened to him. He slid his tongue into her mouth. She tasted of spearmint and seduction. A punch of desire shot through him and settled a couple of inches below his belt.

Too bad he had work to do. He pulled back and looked at her mouth. She had pouty, full, just been kissed lips. He memorized the curves.

"So, can you please keep it down?"

"Sure, and the bozo showing tomorrow is Aaron Carmichael. Make sure you spell it correctly." Before he lost the inspiration, he turned and made a show of tiptoeing over to the sculpture. It only took a couple of strokes and he was done.

Perfect.