



"In the marvellous month of May
when all the buds were bursting,
then in my heart did
love arise.

In the marvellous month of May
when all the birds were singing,
then did I reveal to her
my yearning and longing."

- Heinrich Heine

Cherry Cottage

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Penny lifted her face to the sun, enjoying its heat. Winter hadn't been as bad as it had the year before but, like all Ontarians, at the first spring breeze she'd ditched her heavy winter coat and kicked her salt-stained boots in the back of the closet with glee. Apparently, the dozens of tourists clambering from their bus felt the same way. Well, most of them did as they strolled toward the Horseshoe Falls. Some of them hurried up the hill, no doubt headed for the casino.

"Nice day, isn't it?" a deep voice said from behind her. The warmth that flooded her, heading south in a hurry, had nothing to do with the sun.

She opened her eyes, and turned toward the speaker.

Compared to the tourists, Brian looked out of place in his scarred work boots topped by form-fitting blue jeans. Oh, what a form they fit too. Muscular thighs, and though she couldn't see it at the moment, a tight flat ass that would flex if she cupped it. His black leather jacket hid most of his chest, but he'd left the zipper down enough that a hint of white t-shirt peeked out. It couldn't hide the strength of his wide shoulders. Shoulders developed from years of hard labor instead of working out in a gym.

He laced his fingers with hers, his calluses rough against her palm. A blunt finger stroked the sensitive skin on her wrist. The edges of his full lips tilted up slightly. "Thanks for meeting me here, Penny."

Before she could reply, he bent his head and brushed a kiss over her lips. She tilted her head to return his kiss, but he pulled back. "Yeah, so, uh, why don't we go pretend we're tourists or something?"

The richness of his voice flowed like one of the local full-bodied wines, a blend of Merlot and Cabernet, burgeoning essences of black cherry, chocolate and spices. But there was a hesitancy in it today, as if he were unsure of something. Or wanted to tell her something but didn't know how.

When she looked at him, trying to figure out what was up, she could only see herself reflected in his mirrored sunglasses. "Brian? What's wrong?"

Avoiding her question, he tucked her hand into the crook of his arm, but kept his hand firmly on top of hers as they cut across the grass toward the gorge. The leather of his jacket creaked as they walked, the heat from his body a blast furnace that had her drawing closer.

Clumps of yellow daffodils and red tulips carpeted the gardens on either side of them in a blanket of color, a welcome break from the unremitting monotone winter had forced upon them.

Neither of them spoke, enjoying the warm spring breeze and the bright sun. Not that Brian was much of a talker at the best of times, but lately he'd been quieter than usual. Maybe he was just tired, especially after the long hours he had been working the past couple of months.

They slowed when a young woman crouched in front of one of the flower beds, her long hair blowing across her face in the spring breeze. She flipped it away from her face with a laugh,

tucking it behind her ear. Ten feet away from her, her husband lifted his camera and snapped a picture, then turned his camera sideways and took another.

Penny hugged Brian's arm closer. "Newlyweds."

The husband looked at them, hesitating. Brian smiled, loosening his grip on Penny's hand. "You want me to take a picture of you and your wife?"

The young man gave Brian a quick lesson on how to work the camera then joined his wife by the daffodils. Brian took several pictures of the couple amongst the flowers then directed them to shift so the mist rising from the Horseshoe Falls would be their backdrop. He moved with a confidence most men never mastered, his movements fluid, powerful. He said something to the girl who giggled in response, color rising into her cheeks and she hugged her husband's arm.

Two minutes later, he handed the camera back to the husband and shook his hand.

"Cute couple." He'd shoved his sunglasses up onto his hair, revealing light grey eyes, rimmed with a grey so dark it was almost black. Her heart thudded hard against her ribs as he rubbed his jaw. The bright sun cast shadows on his face, accentuating the two day's worth of beard he'd failed to shave. Damn, she'd always been a sucker for the rough and rugged look.

When they reached the gorge, Penny leaned against the stone and iron fence and peered down. No matter how many times she came here, the power of the water churning as it cut its way through the gorge never failed to impress her.

Brian's palm flattened over the small of her back, his fingers splaying beneath her sweater, his thumb stroking her spine through the thin cotton of her blouse until every nerve ending tingled. "Be careful. Wouldn't want you to fall over."

For his part, Brian paid no attention to the river. Instead his gaze burnt hotter than the sun.

His hand slid around Penny's back, pulling her away from the fence and hard against him. He bent his head to her ear, his beard scratching the tender skin of her neck, his breath hot, sending a shiver down her spine. She turned her head until her breath mixed with his, their lips inches apart. Her chin tilted up, wanting his mouth on hers again.

Excitement shivered along her spine and out through her limbs. Her fingertips brushed the stubble on his face, continued their journey, raking his hair, until she cupped his head and pulled him to her. When their lips touched, the majesty of the Niagara faded away, the power of the water swirling below nothing compared to her pulse as it tripped and tumbled in her chest.

Heat radiated into her belly, down to that secret spot between her thighs, swirling and tumbling like the water in the rapids below, until the ache was unbearable. "Let's go home."

Instead of the slow smile she was expecting, the one that sent her blood rocketing through her veins, he frowned. "Um, let's just go up to the falls, okay?"

She shivered as they walked through the mist from the falls, so Brian took off his leather jacket and draped it around her shoulders. She snuggled into the warmth, burying her nose into the neckline, breathing deep of the smell of his cologne mingling with the scent of sawdust from work.

They walked up the steps to the viewing area at the top of the falls. Dozens of tourists pushed their way closest to the iron railings, oohing and aahing, as the water thundered beyond them. Rainbows arched into the sky as the sun refracted in the mists.

Brian opened his mouth to say something when a dozen high school students raced past, dodging between them while yelling at each other.

Whatever he'd intended to say, he changed his mind. Another busload of tourists crowded around them, so he grabbed her hand and reversed direction, heading away from the falls.

"Where are we going?"

"For a drive. Away from all these people. This was a stupid idea." He quickened his pace, refusing to answer any more questions until they were nearly at the Rainbow Bridge. Muttering a curse under his breath, he unlocked the passenger door of his truck. "Hop in."

What had upset him? Was he angry with her? What had she done? What had so quickly changed his mood from playful to pissed-off?

Instead of climbing into the truck, he walked behind it, talking on his cell. Try as she might, she couldn't hear a word he said.

At the back of the truck, Brian pulled his cell phone from his back pocket. Aware that Penny was wondering why he'd dragged her away after insisting she meet him there, he kept his voice as low as he could over the noise of the passing traffic. "I couldn't do it, Jack. There were too many people around."

Jack chuckled then raised his voice and shouted, nearly deafening Brian. "Hey, Amy? Bri chickened out just like I said he would."

Amy called something in return, but Jack must have covered the receiver because whatever they were saying got muffled. A couple moments later Amy got on the line. "Bri, I know the place isn't at its best yet, but bring her over here. Take her to the garden out back – it's gorgeous right now. I'll put a bottle of wine out, you two can relax, and you can pop the question with no pressure."

Aw, great, he was supposed to propose in front of a crowd? "I don't know about that."

"Brian, do you want to marry her?"

"Yeah."

"Then suck it up, you big baby. Bring her out here; show her what you're planning to do with the place. Then drop to one knee and ask her to marry you."

Geez, Amy could have been a drill sergeant with the army no problem.

Jack must have taken the phone back because he replied, "Look, buddy, if you don't propose, Amy's never gonna let you forget it. We're done packing for the day and Amy's gonna take me out to dinner." In the background, Amy snorted and made a rude comment about just who'd be paying and how. "Anyway, we'll be out of your hair, and you'll have the place to yourself. I'll leave the key over the door so you can let yourself in. But drive slow, eh? Give us some time to clear out of here."

Brian heaved a sigh of relief. "Thanks, man. I owe you guys one. And tell Amy thanks."

"Yeah, well, good luck. Oh, and Bri? Don't chicken out this time."

"Bite me." He closed his phone and stuck it in his pocket. Chicken out. That's exactly what he'd done. It hadn't been the tourists, heck, it was midweek, there'd barely been a couple

dozen people around. When it came down to actually speaking, actually asking *the* question, he'd panicked.

"Everything okay?" Penny asked as he climbed into the driver's side.

"Yeah, sure." He heard the puzzlement in her voice. *Give her an explanation, lame-ass.* "It was too crowded, that's all."

Bawk bawk bawk bawk bawwwk, that little voice in the back of his head clucked, *just ask her, you big chicken.*

Not here. Not in his truck. How romantic would that be when she told her friends later? Or would that be when she laughed about it with her friends later? Shit, that meant he'd have to kneel down on one knee like a frickin' idiot.

Though he could tell she was curious about why he'd had her meet her at the Falls, she buckled her seat belt. "So what do you want to do from here?"

He started the truck and eased out of the parking spot, heading north on River Road as it wound along the gorge.

She'd rolled down her window, her hair catching in the wind. God, she was beautiful. Oh, sure, Jack thought her nose was a little too big and that she could stand to loose ten pound or so, but what did that big oaf know? Penny was perfect. Even though she'd been up since four a.m. and was probably dead on her feet, she hadn't pitched a fit when he'd phoned her up and asked her to meet him after work, had she? She didn't mind that he would never be the type to wear a suit or be able to afford to take her on trips like the people she checked in at the hotel. She hadn't even made a comment about the half dozen Tim Horton's cups rolling around on the floor, or the Harvey's hamburger wrappings he and Jack had tossed in the back after lunch.

Aw, crap, he'd forgotten to clean out the truck.

Before he knew it, his turn signal was on and he was turning into ... his future.

Shoot. His palms were sweating already, and his stomach was filled with ... not butterflies, it was jumping around like he'd swallowed a half dozen of those frickin' rabbits that kept eating the vegetables in his mother's garden.

"Why are we stopping here?"

Good question. He unbuckled his seatbelt and opened his door. "Stay there, will you?"

At least the driveway was empty, he realized as he walked around the truck. Jack and Amy had already cleared out, so there'd no witnesses to his humiliation.

He rubbed his hands on his jeans, and opened her door. "Come on, I want to show you something."

Bemused, she climbed out of the truck and put her hand in his, following him up the flagstone path to the front door. "Brian? Why are we here? What are we doing?"

"Just hang on, okay? Give me a minute. Everything will be fine." Or it would be soon. He hoped. Oh, God, he hoped it would be fine. He felt around the top of the doorframe and found the key Jack had left for him.

Penny waited as Brian fumbled, stabbing the key into the lock. What was going on with him today? He seemed so nervous. And why were they here? In all the times they'd driven past

and talked about how she'd loved the place, Brian had never before mentioned that he knew the owner.

She wasn't about to complain. This place had been calling to her since the first time she'd laid eyes on it. Oh, sure, the porch was sagging a bit, and the trim needed a fresh coat of paint, but the gardens were a work of art. Hundreds of daffodils and tulips blazed on either sides of the flagstone path. Beside the house, a cherry tree loaded with blossoms showered the lawn and front walk with petals. In a month or so, the lilac bushes lining the edge of the property would fill the air with their scent. In the fall, there'd be chrysanthemums and kale that would bloom past the first frosts. And to live right across from the gorge, in a house with a turret? What more could a person ask?

Brian finally managed to unlock the front door and pushed it open, his smile crooked and forced. "Come on in."

She ran her fingers over a brass plate by the front door. Cherry Cottage. 1877. "Won't the owners object to having strangers let themselves in and go through their place?"

"Oh, no, no, I've got permission. The owner hired me to fix the place up."

If he had permission, why was he acting so strange? So nervous? "So we're not, like, breaking in?"

"No. It's okay," He shook his head and made that little huffing sound he did when he was frustrated. *What was his problem?* "Look, just ... just come in, will you? You said you've always wondered what the inside of this place looked like, haven't you?"

Feeling like she was trespassing, Penny followed him inside.

"So, um, this is the hallway. It's all plaster too, no drywall in this place. They, um, painted all the woodwork though, but I figure I can strip it all down and get back to the original wood."

Some of his nervousness wore off as he took her through the rooms on the main floor. Boxes filled some of the rooms while others were completely empty. Was someone moving in? Or out? She hadn't seen a for sale sign on the lawn – if she had, she'd have cried. There's no way she could have swung purchasing a house on her own. If there was a house she wanted to buy, this was it.

Brian's footsteps echoed in the front room as he crossed to a huge oak panel, pulling it so it unfolded to become a wall, dividing the two rooms.

He ran his hand lovingly over the carved panels. "Look at the woodwork on this. They don't make things like this anymore. And the mantel, did you see the artistry in it?"

What she'd give to have him touching her with as much tenderness as he showed the carving around the fireplace. His hesitancy had been forgotten as he gave her an in-depth evaluation of the house, pointed out the details she would have missed, replaced with enthusiasm and pride in the workmanship. He led her upstairs, having to use his shoulder to open some of the doors, pointing out how two small bedrooms could be combined into one, where a whirlpool tub could be added, maybe a sauna in the corner. How the balcony off one of the bedrooms needed to be shored up. Then he led her down a narrow back staircase into a kitchen. "The kitchen needs a lot of work."

That was an understatement. It looked like it had last been remodelled in the fifties with a greying linoleum floor and arborite counters. "Nothing a good carpenter couldn't handle, I'm sure." A good carpenter like Brian.

“I was thinking new cupboards with glass fronts – maybe go for a Victorian look. But I can’t decide between cherry and maple. I could put an island here in the middle, and it’s definitely got to have granite counters.”

As he described his vision for the refit, Penny couldn’t help smiling. This was Brian in his element. “Whatever you do, I’m sure the owner will love it.”

He wound down, his hesitation coming back. “I hope so.”

Didn’t he realize that she knew he was a good carpenter? “Brian, the owner will be happy with whatever you do. You have an eye for detail. You see things others don’t. That’s what makes you good at your job.”

He stuck his hands in his pockets then seconds later removed them, interlacing his fingers and cracking his knuckles. “So, um, yeah, wait until you see the garden out back.”

Unable to figure out his sudden mood swing, she followed him out the back door. If she’d been in love with the front garden, the back was an idyllic haven. Two more cherry trees, laden with blossoms, first captured her attention. Beneath them more tulips of every color bobbed in the warm spring breeze. She wandered down the path, stopping to touch the myriads of daffodils, hyacinths, and bleeding hearts. At the back, roses trailed over an old fashioned gazebo, their leaves just starting to unfurl. In the summer the little building would be ablaze in color.

Inside it was as if someone had been expecting company. A tray with a bottle of ice wine and two glasses sat on the wrought-iron table by a rattan daybed covered with a faded but clean quilt and a dozen colorful pillows. “Brian? Is this for us?”

When she looked back at him, she stilled. He wasn’t looking at the gazebo, or the table, he was staring at her, his eyes dark against the bright sun.

Brian fought to catch his breath at the vision of Penny, her eyes bright even in the shadows of the gazebo. A shower of pink petals had cascaded over her as if even the cherry trees were saying she belonged there.

Ask her. Here. Now.

“Brian? What’s wrong?”

Nothing. Not as long as she was in his life. He had to tell her, had to ask her, but his emotions welled up inside him, catching in his throat, tangling on his tongue. When she looked up at him, said his name in a soft sexy whisper, he walked up the three steps into the gazebo and cupped her face in his hands. Lowering his head, he captured her lips with his. With a soft sigh, Penny relaxed against him. Her heart thudding against his chest, her hands crept up his back, to play with the hair at the back of his neck.

She backed up, pulling her with him until they both fell upon the daybed. “Make love to me, Bri. Here. Now.”

Her fingers pulled his shirt from his pants, then slid beneath the fabric, flattening over his back, urging him closer.

He couldn’t stop himself. He shifted until he was on top of her and set to work unbuttoning her blouse. The last one undone, he spread the fabric wide, and undid the clasp of her bra. Her eyes were closed, her nipples taut buds casting shadows in the muted light. So beautiful.

When he captured one nipple in his mouth and she arched to press herself deeper into his mouth, her moan filled the gazebo. He loosened his belt, then undid his fly and freed himself. Her hands pushed his away, fastening around his length in a sure, firm grip as she stroked.

He pushed her skirt to her waist, and fought with her panties until she released him to wiggle out of them. A glance down showed her open for him, glossy and swollen, lit by sunlight, the petals from her hair dotting the quilt she lay on like confetti. With a murmur of encouragement, she pulled him back over her until he was poised at her entrance.

His eyes scrunched shut as he slowly pressed into her, allowing himself to revel as her heat surrounded him. Equally slowly, he pulled back then buried himself deep once again until they both groaned. Penny wrapped her legs about him, digging her heels into his butt. Together they moved as if one, her breath changing to quick gasps, matching the rhythmic pulsing of her muscles as she approached her climax. He opened his eyes again, not wanting to miss the look on her face when she came, then with a groan, let himself take the leap as he poured all his love into her.

He collapsed, completely spent, and rolled to the side, tucking her against him as they bought caught their breath. They lay there a long time, not speaking just enjoying the birds as they darted through the trees. Brian hitched the edge of the quilt over them both when Penny fell asleep.

The sun was on the horizon before she stirred and snuggled closer. "Wouldn't it be great to have a place like this? It would make a great B&B, wouldn't it? Especially right here on River Road like this."

Ask her. Now. She gave you the perfect opening.

He opened his mouth but nothing came out. *Son of a gun from Boston!* He took a deep breath. And another.

Bawk bawk bawk! clucked his conscience again.

"Is the owner moving in or moving out? I didn't see a for sale sign on the lawn."

"Um, he's moving out. The owner had a stroke. He's not going to be able to look after himself anymore so they'll be moving him into a nursing home."

"So you're getting it ready for a sale?" He couldn't help but hear the hope in her voice. Then she huffed. "Rats, that means the real estate agents will jack up the price once they see what a good job you do. And somebody will jump on it. I know I would." She shook her head, her hair tickling his chest. "It doesn't matter, I couldn't afford it anyway."

He swallowed and forced the words out. "No, but we could."

Penny lifted her head and looked at him. "What?"

"We could afford it. If we bought the place together." Now he'd started, he couldn't stop talking. "We could live in the carriage house around the side. It's filled with junk right now, eh? But I was thinking that it could be made into a really nice apartment, we could live there while we're fixing this place up. We could live there even after the place is finished, and rent out all the rooms in high season. Or if we wanted we could rent it out as a sort of, I don't know, a private love nest for newlyweds or something. Or maybe people with little kids could stay there. We could put a mini-kitchen for them to cook or heat formula or whatever babies need. I could build a little play area behind it, you know?"

"Brian? Are you serious? You want us to buy this place and move in together?"

“Yes.” He raked his hands through his hair. “No. Not just move in. I mean ...Aw hell, I’m making a mess of this.”

You were supposed to get down on one knee and ask her. But no, you had to let your dick do the talking. This’ll make a great tale for her to tell your kids one day. I nailed your mother out in the back yard and then asked her to marry me while my dick was hanging out in the breeze.

He rolled to sit on the side of the bed, and tucked himself back into his pants. Penny had straightened too, and was struggling to pull her bra back into place. His jacket dwarfed her, but it belonged on her, as much as she belonged in this house. As much as his heart belonged to her.

As she rebuttoned her blouse, he knelt beside the rattan sofa. “I’m not asking you to just move with me, Penny. I’m asking you to marry me.”

Her hands stilled as her gaze settled on him, swept over how he knelt in front of her. The hesitation made him wonder if she was waiting for him to say “Just kidding.”

“I love you, Penny. I know you love this house and I want to fix it up for you. I want you to be able to stop working at the hotel and open your B&B the way you’ve always dreamed.”

Her hands stilled, hope flaring in her eyes as she looked over her shoulder, assessing the house. “Oh, Brian, I love you too. But can we afford this place?”

“You know Jack’s wife, Amy? The owner’s her uncle. He’s asked her to find a buyer. He doesn’t want a real estate agent, he wants it to go to someone who will love it like he did. When she mentioned it, I immediately thought of how you always said you liked the place whenever we drove by and told her not to tell anyone else until I’d had a chance to talk to you. You’d probably have to keep your job for a couple years while I fix this place up and get it in shape. But yeah, I think we can swing it.”

But she still hadn’t answered his question. He reached into the pocket of his jacket and withdrew a black velvet box, opening it to reveal the engagement ring she’d admired a few months back. His heart aching, he held his breath as he asked again. “So will you marry me, Penny?”

“Oh, Brian,” she breathed. “You remembered which one was my favourite. I didn’t think you were paying any attention that day.” She rested her forehead on his, her breath warm on his cheek. “Whether we get the house or not, I’ll marry you, Brian Morrison. But I don’t want a big wedding in a church. I want it in a garden like this, surrounded by flowers.”

He frowned. “Does that mean we have to wait until next spring to get married? Because I don’t think I can wait that long.”

“No, silly. There’ll be roses out in June, and chrysanthemums and asters and all sorts of flowers blooming in September and October.” She glanced over the garden.

“Then how about we aim for roses? And instead of confetti, we have the guests shower you with petals.”

He stood up suddenly, and swung her over his shoulder.

Penny giggled as she hung upside down. “Brian, what are you doing?”

“Do you remember that old saying from when we were in high school? That one about tulips?”

“You mean ... *Two lips in the garden, tulips in the park?*” She reached down and cupped his butt, squeezing lightly.

He spanked her behind in return. “Yup. I plan to prove that the best *tulips* of all are *two lips* in the dark.”

Biography

The only woman in a houseful of men, Leah often takes refuge in her office in an effort to avoid the dishes and dust bunnies. Writing about hunky heroes and hot sex is so much more rewarding than housework.

To learn more about Leah, please visit www.leahbraemel.com. Send an email to Leah at leah@leahbraemel.com or join her Yahoo! group to join in the fun with other readers as well as Leah at [http://groups.yahoo.com/group/Leah Braemel](http://groups.yahoo.com/group/Leah_Braemel).