

Loveswept⁵¹⁶

HELEN MITTERMAYER

Krystal

LOVESWEPT
WEDDING
CONTEST
See details
inside



Loveswept[®] 516

江苏工业学院图书馆
藏书章
Helen Mittermeyer
Krystal



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“You should lock your door when you’re in the tub,” Cullen said.

“Aargh!” Krystal sloshed water over the sides of the tub as she fought for control of her mind and body. Cullen! Had she conjured him up by wanting him so much?

“Shall I wash you?” he asked.

Startled, she sank back into the masses of bubbles. “Get out of here!” she insisted, sneaking a peek at him. That wonderful body . . . how dare he seduce her with his looks? She’d have him arrested for being a pervert—right after she’d kissed him about six or seven thousand times. “Leave.”

“Calm down,” Cullen said soothingly. “It’s me.” He gazed at her creamy pink body and thought he’d have his first heart attack. She was incredibly beautiful, strong and shapely. The sight of her made him crazy, just as her absence had. He’d scrawled her initials on memos and faxes, even called his partner Krystal by mistake. She just had to talk to him—she was wrecking his life, and he needed her.

“Cullen, you trespasser, voyeur, burglar—”

“Quiet down, they can hear you on the docks. You left the door unlocked.”

“Get out of here, you—”

“I’ll get you out of there first. In the mood you’re in, you could slip and fall,” he said.

“Hand me a towel, then wait in the other room.” How could she get out while he was there, looking too darn sexy? She splashed water at him. “Get out, Cullen.”

“We have to talk, Krystal,” he said, then reached down and lifted her straight out of the tub. . . .

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LOVE STORIES YOU'LL NEVER FORGET
BY AUTHORS YOU'LL ALWAYS REMEMBER

The Editors

*To my four children, who have tested the
theory of shock proof on me.
I think I'm almost there.*

One

He saw the curl first and blinked.

Red-gold and silken, it was incongruous with the janitorial, snoodlike head gear that held her hair to the back of her head. He couldn't see the face. Yet.

Cullen Hughson Dempsey was exhausted, and scarcely knew night from day. Seeing things wouldn't have been strange. How could he be sure of a red-gold curl? He blinked again. It was still there, and coming closer.

He rolled his shoulders and rubbed his neck to loosen the stiffness. Yawning, he stared again at the curl that swung back and forth as the person, head down, slowly swept a soapy-wet mop across the floor. It had to be a woman, he thought. No cruel fate would let a male have such magical strands. And a fairly young woman, judging by the smooth-skin of her cheek. Why would a young

woman be washing floors at night? Times were tough, but . . .

The only time her hypnotic motion changed was when she rinsed the mop, wringing it out and dipping it into the soapy water, then beginning her ritual again. Back and forth. Swish, slap, mop, steadily toward him.

Cullen inhaled deeply, smothering another yawn. Absently he wondered why she didn't use a scrubbing machine. It would be easier, but was perhaps too expensive?

The long journey from Kamchatka Peninsula, USSR, to San Jose, California, then on to his new base of operations in Seattle, Washington, had made him almost unbearably travel-weary. He'd only been settled in his new offices a week before he'd made the three-week junket to the Soviet Union, then gone on to finish closing up his offices in San Jose. Dempsey Fisheries, Inc. was now located in an upside-down, icicle-shaped building overlooking Pike's Market and the island-studded Puget Sound. He liked the view, the city, the people . . . and he liked reddish-gold curls.

Cullen didn't usually work after midnight at any time. His philosophy was to work hard, but sensibly, since playing hard was almost as important to him. Such a philosophy had granted him a measure of financial success, and he was now able to enter into lucrative international contracts—such as with the Russians, who would market his fish as he marketed theirs. Things were on an upward curve, and that included the decision to relocate to Seattle. But the move had created some problems, a few lost files, some irate letters that needed

handling, a couple of employees with ruffled feathers that needed to be smoothed . . . So, he'd worked late this night.

The noise out in the corridor had drawn him from his office, though, and that's when he'd spotted the shiny twist of hair. Now he was reluctant to leave the red-gold curl until he saw the face behind it. He stifled another yawn and propped his shoulder against the door jamb.

Slap! Swish! Plop! The slow rhythmic strokes brought her ever closer. He didn't take his eyes off the curl. Hair that beautiful didn't usually come with the floor scrubbers he'd seen. Most of them had been men, and the few women had been well into middle age.

When she raised one arm to wipe her perspiring face on her sleeve, she saw him. Startled, she reared back, grasping the mop in front of her with both hands. Surprise as well as a lacing of trepidation and wariness flashed across her features.

"Hi," Cullen said quickly. "I didn't mean to frighten you. I'm Cullen Dempsey, and I've just moved into the building. Generally, I don't work this late. I had to straighten out some files."

Why was he explaining to her, he asked himself, this lady with the beautiful skin, and the smudges on her forehead and nose? Maybe because he'd seen her fear, and he wondered about that.

"Oh." Heart thudding out of rhythm, Krystal Wynter stared at the man. Had she ever met him? No. He wasn't the least bit familiar. None the less, she scrutinized him again. It paid to make sure. One of the advantages of working nights was the solitude. She craved it. That was why she'd started

the office-cleaning business in the first place. As a rule she met fewer people at night, and those she met were complete strangers. That suited her just fine. No. This man was a new one. And a hunk. That's how some of her staff would've described him. Those broad shoulders, long legs, and strong thighs belonged on a linebacker, not a businessman. And his hands looked rough, the skin chapped and maybe even callused. His fine blue business suits didn't go with those rough hands. Who was he?

"Go right ahead with your work, sir," she said. She flapped her hand at his office, hoping he'd take the hint and disappear. "I'll be done here in short order and I shouldn't disturb you."

Dammit, she thought. He wasn't moving. He was big and determined-looking, with deep blue eyes and hair black as midnight, short on top and touching his collar at the back. As well groomed and natty as he was, had she seen him on the street, she would have bet he was a stevedore or lumberman. Muscles bunched right through his suit. He was a damned Paul Bunyan. Maybe, she thought giddily, he'd parked his blue ox Babe in the underground garage. Gad! She was getting light-headed from doing two workers' jobs. Who would have guessed that the flu would hit at Christmastime? And the snow! It always rained in Seattle, but two feet of snow? Never. Yet they had it. Her van's almost-bald tires were having a heyday skidding whenever she drove. That evening, rather than risk it, she'd carted her equipment on the bus in a large two-wheeled basket she could pull behind her.

"I'm in no hurry," Cullen said. He'd seen her quickly masked disappointment when he hadn't immediately returned to his office. He might have retreated if she hadn't been so patently eager to get rid of him. And if she weren't so intriguing. She was a looker. Her face was heart-shaped, and her eyes, which were a brilliant emerald green and slanted upward at the corners, were almost too big for it. She could have modeled with that face and coloring. And he would bet her body was good too. Though she wore shapeless coveralls and was leaning on her mop handle, he could tell her body was trim and in good shape. He could believe she was a model. An actress. A business manager. Even an entrepreneur—if she had the smarts—but instead she cleaned offices. Strange choice for an attractive young woman, he mused. And he had a real hankering to see her without the baggy coveralls. "And your name?" he asked.

"Mine?" Krystal didn't divulge her name, address, or social security number to anyone other than possible clients if she could help it. Anonymity worked the best.

"Yours," he said implacably.

"I'm KT Wynter of KT Office Cleaning. I'm filling in for one of my workers who has the flu. Strange weather for Seattle, isn't it? None of us expected snow this Christmas. Usually we get rain, not two feet of snow." She was babbling, stumbling over words as though they were boulders strewn in her path. That had happened to her ever since leaving San Francisco two years ago. She tried to avoid people whenever possible, and when she couldn't,

she was bumbling and unsure. Nothing made her more uncomfortable than questions.

Cullen moved toward her, noticing her infinitesimal step back. "Have you a long stretch to go?" He saw how warily she watched him, how she seemed to factor what he said and weigh her answer.

"Ah, yes," she said. "I'll be working for hours yet."

"So will I. Let me know when you're done, and I'll walk you down to the garage." She looked so startled at his statement, he wondered what kinds of men she knew? Something, someone, had made her unusually skittish.

"No need," she said. "I still have to do the fifth floor and—"

"Fine," he interrupted, determined not to let her get away. "I'll give you my number and you can call me when you're finished. I have enough to keep me busy." He didn't try to rationalize why he was pressuring the cleaning woman. Returning to his office, he copied down the phone number that he hadn't yet memorized or had cards for, and took the piece of paper out to the unsettled and unsettling janitor. Pressing the paper into her hand, he smiled. Before she could formulate a protest, he reentered the office, closed the door, and leaned against it, chuckling.

Krystal stared at the scrap of paper, then at the door, then back to the paper. What had happened? She'd been minding her own business, scrubbing along, wondering if she'd collect the money due from a few clients the next day, then . . . bam! That steamroller had appeared in front of her, rolled right over the top of her, and disappeared as

quickly as he'd come. She crushed the piece of paper and jammed it into the pocket of her cover-all. She'd forget about him. Once she was done on five, her last floor, she'd leave, on her own, by herself.

Trying to put Cullen Dempsey out of her mind, however, was easier said than done. While she scrubbed the last corridor, he danced around her brain like a mosquito. No matter how hard she swatted at him, he continued pestering her, stinging her.

Finally finished, thirsty, and hungry, she washed and rinsed her equipment and put it away. She knew she'd be the last of her staff in the building, because she'd taken on the extra floor. Yawning, she went to the ladies room on the fifth floor, used the facility, and washed as much of the surface dirt off her as she could. She'd shower at home.

After loading her wheeled carryall, she took the elevator down to the basement. That was where her locker was, and she was pretty sure Tall, Dark, and Persistent would forget about what he'd said, forget about her. In case he hadn't, she could avoid him there, since most of it was for the building's maintenance workers only. From the basement it was only a short walk to the parking garage, then up the ramp to the bus stop half a block away.

In the locker room she stripped off her soiled coveralls, rolling them up and putting them in a plastic bag, along with the hair net she'd worn. Before sleeping that night, she'd wash her coveralls, so they'd be ready to wear the following evening.

Not able to control her yawns, she took her

slacks and blouse from the locker, shook out the wrinkles, and donned them. Though they were slightly wilted, they'd do for the bus ride home through the after-midnight sleepiness of the city.

After putting on her coat, boots, hat, and gloves, she grabbed her purse and the bag on wheels. Shaking her head to clear it, she opened the door to the cavernous hall that led to the parking garage. She cautiously checked that she was alone—a habit she'd gotten into since having begun to work nights—then strode swiftly along the hall. Her rubber-soled boots made a thunking sound on the concrete floor. The yellowish lights gave the hall an eerie glow, and more than once she glanced over her shoulder.

She sighed when she reached the door at the end of the hall, longing to be home and in the shower. She opened the door, revealing the stairs that led down to the parking garage, and a damp coldness assailed her. She shivered. It always made her nervous to cross the dark garage, but it was the quickest exit to the street.

She was on the third step down when she heard the noise. Pausing, she took a deep breath and shifted her bundles so she could remove an atomizer from her bag. It was filled with a solution of ammonia and water. She removed the cap and dropped her purse and gloves into the cart, leaving her right hand free. Then, moving slowly, she shifted her cart down the last steps to the door at the bottom.

She yanked down on the security handle of the steel door and opened it, nudging her cart through

first and looking right and left before following it quickly.

"Hello. Planning to Mace someone?"

"Aaagh!" Krystal jumped back, right against the door. "You scared me," she said accusingly to Cullen Dempsey. "I don't like people sneaking up on me."

"I didn't," he said pleasantly. "Have you had a bad experience with a stranger?"

"Hasn't everyone?"

"I haven't."

"Lucky you. How did you know I was done?" It was a mere thirty feet to the exit from the garage, she thought. And she'd been on the track team in high school.

"I took a chance you'd be down here when you weren't on five." He smiled when he saw her frown. "You mentioned that five was your last floor."

"Did I?" Shifting her cart around to one side so that she could pick it up when she ran, she eased around him.

"Can I give you a lift somewhere?" he asked. "You look loaded down."

"No thanks."

Jumping forward, she shot around him and raced for the short set of steps up to the street. She was out of breath from panic and the weight of the cart when she reached them, but she didn't pause. It was on the last step that she either got careless or miscalculated. Her boot caught on the edge and slid on the slickness left by the snow. When she tried to save herself, her other foot slipped on the icy pavement. Flailing, she let go of the cart. It fell one way and she went the other, landing facedown

in a pile of dirty snow that had been cleared from the walk, still clutching her atomizer.

Strong arms lifted her from behind. "First, Miss KT Wynter," Cullen said, "I am not a rapist, nor a thief. I don't prey on women, and I apologize if I scared you." He stood her on her feet, fetched her cart and the small pieces of equipment that had scattered out of it, then faced her.

She tried to wipe her face clean and spit snow from her mouth at the same time. "All right," she said, nodding slowly. "I'm cautious. It's a habit."

"And a good one, if it doesn't drive you to paranoia."

"If that's how you see it," she said stiffly, donning her gloves before reaching for her things. Her hands were stiff, wet, and very cold.

"Don't be so damned touchy. I'm not intimating anything, or making a move on you."

Feeling teary and foolish, with one elbow stinging from having hit the cement support, she glared up at him, fighting for control. "Thanks for getting my things."

"Look, you're upset, and I'm feeling a little guilty about that. You wouldn't have run or slipped if you hadn't been trying to get away from me. Let me drive you home. I'll see you to your door and go. I don't like leaving you like this." He smiled and swiped more snow off her coat. "I suppose I could be putting myself at risk. If you decided to yell for a cop, I could be in trouble."

"I—I won't do that. But I can get home by myself. The bus stop is right there." She pointed to the corner. "And it takes me right to my street."

"Let me make amends by driving you. No strings,"

he said quickly. She was more than cautious, he mused, again wondering what might have happened to her. When she nodded shortly, he took her cart and her arm. "You keep the Mace and purse. Let's go."

"Mace is illegal. This is ammonia and water."

Krystal followed him back down the steps, her legs feeling rubbery. She smothered the inner voice that told her he could still be a rapist. What did she know about him? She was too tired to answer her own question.

She consoled herself by thinking that the drive to her house wouldn't take long. She had the third floor of a house not too far from the downtown area. It wasn't a new house, by any means. In fact, it was pretty ramshackle, but her landlady was amiable and she had the whole floor to herself, which consisted of one good-sized room and a bathroom. The view from her narrow attic windows was not spectacular—downtown and office buildings—but if she leaned a certain way out her bathroom window, she could see a portion of Mt. Rainier. She loved that. There was a permanence there, a beauty that was hers alone.

Soon she'd be moving, though, and the mere thought of that filled her with elation. She'd be poorer than she was now, but the building was in good shape. The downstairs, which had once been a store, she'd convert into an office and storeroom. Upstairs was an apartment, dirty, dusty, and musty now, but she'd make it better. She felt downright rich.

Cullen unlocked and opened the passenger door to a dark green Jaguar. As she settled in the