

Continuing Sundown

by Angela Kubinec

The man's visit always makes Charles ill-tempered. Elizabeth sometimes regrets that she asked the man for his help, but she had little choice after Charles had his first heart attack. The man stacks the wood by the fireplace, as he does every Tuesday in winter. Charles makes his growling noise, Elizabeth pays the man, and the man leaves.

Charles stands, places a log on the fire and then sits with open arms. Elizabeth kneels, and places her arms around his waist, resting her head on his chest. He looks at her with the same gaze he did when he was younger, holding her in his lap, and explaining to her why they should not have children. Simply put, he wanted her to remember that he might not be alive to see them grown. Today, she thinks again, kindly, that he might have just been too vain to tolerate being mistaken for a grandfather. As she feels the warmth of the flames, she knows that placing the log is not just a desire for heat; it is his demonstration of saddening power.

He is generous as a husband, in heart and in spirit, and Charles still enjoys Elizabeth's younger interests and energy. In their years together, he has asked only for her loyalty, the preservation of her beauty, and her intellect. She has worked to maintain all three, with varying levels of success. Charles recognizes her efforts, and quietly wishes his friends were still alive to envy him as they once did. He wrote, they held court, and at one time there was even talk of writing a play for Elizabeth. She misses the envy of his friends, too, but mistakes it for loneliness.

Elizabeth feels his thinning arms around her, and cannot recall what her expectations were of him, or how her young love felt, but she knows she is grateful for their time together. He gave her everything she hoped for, with the exception of two things. Forgiving him for one was hard. She wants to forgive him for the other, but cannot.

