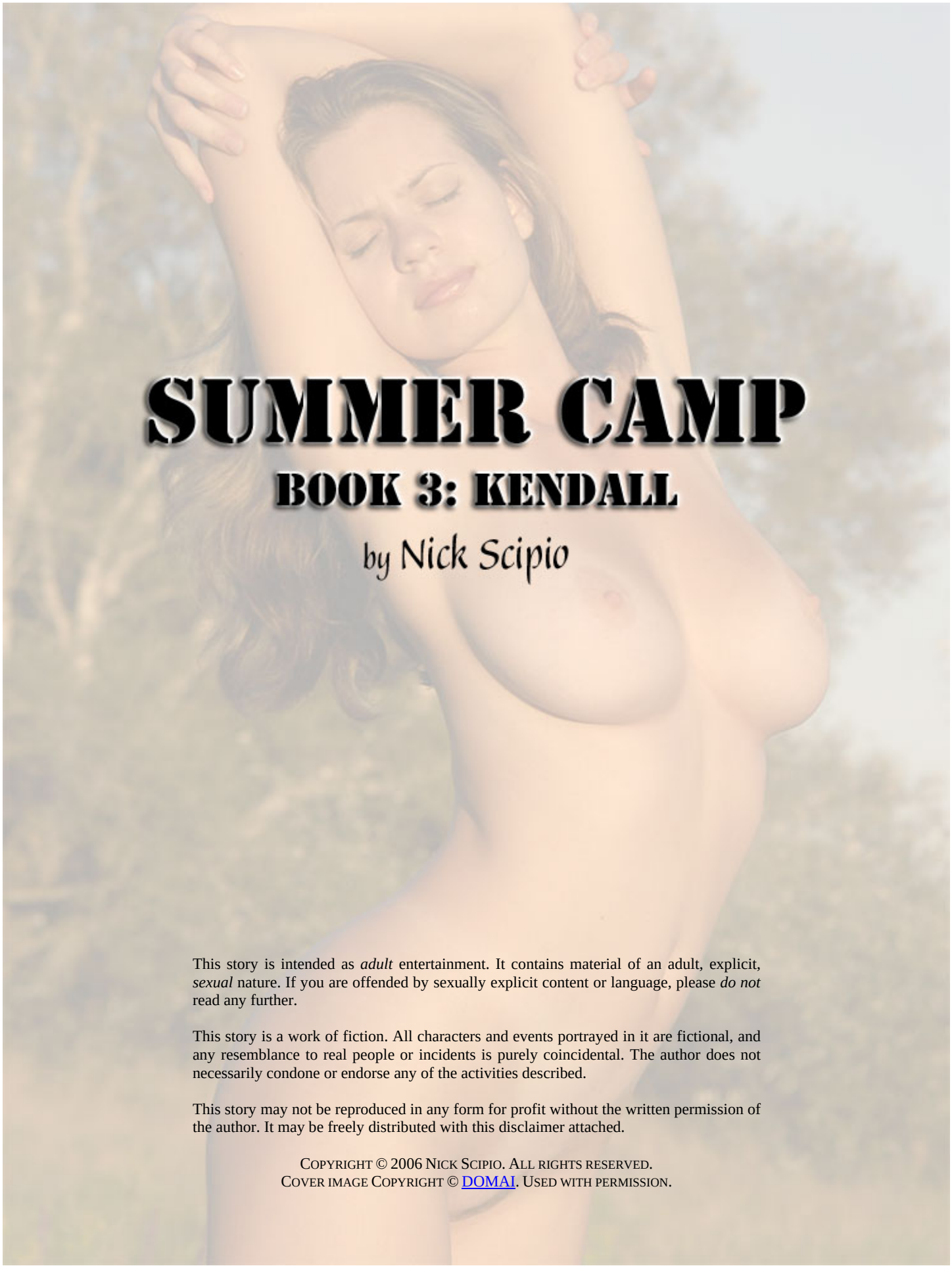

SUMMER CAMP

BOOK 3: KENDALL

by Nick Scipio

This story is intended as *adult* entertainment. It contains material of an adult, explicit, *sexual* nature. If you are offended by sexually explicit content or language, please *do not* read any further.

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Author's Note

With Book 3, I begin the part of the story that has always given me problems—not with the story itself, but with the title. Believe it or not, I was never very happy with the title "Summer Camp," and once you start reading Book 3, you'll understand why.

For those of you who read the story solely for the nudist camp and its denizens, I'm sorry—very little of Book 3 takes place at The Pines. I hope you enjoy the continuation of the story, but you won't read about camp life. Don't say I didn't warn you, though. The title notwithstanding, this has always been a coming-of-age story about *Paul*, and his focus is now college.

For everyone else—and I think you're the majority—I hope you enjoy how Paul, Gina, and Kendall grow and change in college. They have many challenges ahead of them, but remember, they're only human. You'll have to read to find out what happens, of course, but you knew I was going to say that.

Thank you for reading.

Nick Scipio
May 3, 2004
Southeastern US

CHAPTER ONE

"Paul?" my wife called softly from the door to my office.

"Huh? Oh, sorry," I said. Then I shook my head to clear my thoughts. "How long have you been standing there?"

"Not long… a few minutes. You were thinking."

"About her," I said, nodding at my wife's tactfully unspoken question.

She smiled in understanding, her eyes full of sadness and comfort. Then she walked around and leaned against the edge of my desk.

"I guess I've been sitting here a while," I admitted, "just thinking about her." Then I looked at my watch. Two hours had passed since I'd talked to the lawyer. Two hours and half a lifetime. Once again, I shook off the past and focused my thoughts. "When do you want to tell the girls?" I asked.

"Tonight," she said. "After dinner."

I nodded.

"I thought I'd cut up veggies for stir-fry while you pick up Laurie from practice," she said, changing the subject to the routine of our lives.

I was glad for the distraction. "What time do I have to be there?" I asked.

"They're usually through by seven."

"Okay. What about Emily and Susie?"

"Em's at Missy's house," she said. "I told her to be home by seven. And Susie's at dance class. I'm picking her up before I go to the grocery store."

"That reminds me," I said. "I need to tell Trip and Wren about the funeral."

"They'll want to go," my wife said, nodding. "You can tell them in person if you stop by their house and pick up Em on the way to get Laurie."

"Yeah, that's a good idea. But before then, I've got a million things I need to do," I said. "I need to call the office to tell them I'll be out of town for a few days. And before we leave, I've got Bread Company drawings to approve. I'll also need to have someone cover a Taipei conference call for me. I've got to call the airport and tell them to have the company plane fueled and ready for tomorrow evening. I need to have my black suit pressed—"

"I'll take care of your suit," she said. "I can drop it off when I pick up Susie. Then I'll pick it up tomorrow after the girls and I go shopping for dresses."

"Thanks," I said. Then I paused and shook my head in reflection. "When did our lives get so busy?" I asked semi-rhetorically. "It wasn't like this when we were younger."

She smiled in gentle reproach. "Yes it was, honey," she said. "Even before we were married, we were constantly busy."

"Yeah, I guess we were," I said with a rueful laugh. "But life still seemed less complicated then."

"It wasn't."

"No, I guess you're right."

With a smile, she leaned down and kissed my forehead.

I pulled her onto my lap and she laid her head on my shoulder. Then I wrapped my arms around her and rested my cheek against the top of her head. I took a deep breath and savored the

fresh scent of her hair. We sat like that for a few minutes, simply holding each other in comfortable silence.

"I'd better let you get busy," she said at last. "You've got lots of calls to make."

I nodded absently.

"Be sure to call your parents, too," she said as she stood and smoothed her shorts. "You need to tell them when to meet us at the airport."

"Okay, I'll call them."

With that, I blew her a kiss. As she closed the door behind her, I stared at the phone for a long moment. Even though I had a myriad of things to do, my mind was a million miles away.

I was thinking about the past.

I think we all remember the past as a less complicated, more carefree time. But our memories are dimmed by the passage of time. The minutia of life fades into the background, overshadowed by major events.

When I left home for college, my future seemed certain. I looked forward to learning new things, and to basking in the satisfaction of accomplishment. Unfortunately, I had no idea that so many of life's major trials lay before me. Nor had I tasted the bitter bile of failure or felt the pain of loss.

In retrospect, college wasn't such a carefree time after all. The first year was the hardest. Some things came easily, but I discovered that success wouldn't be handed to me on a silver platter like it had been in high school.

I didn't realize it at the time, but the crucible of college made me stronger; in more ways than one, it tempered me.

✧ ✧ ✧

In late August of 1981, our four-car caravan arrived in Knoxville and I followed my parents' station wagon as we turned onto the University of Tennessee campus. Around us, traffic slowed to a crawl. I'd seen the campus on football game days, but it seemed even more crowded now—crowded with new students, their possessions, and their families, as well as purposeful-looking older students.

Beside me, my soon-to-be-sixteen-year-old sister, Erin, pulled the rubber band from her blonde hair and glanced at me as she let down her ponytail. I grinned as she turned to watch the stream of people moving along the sidewalks. I guess there *were* a lot of cute guys for her to look at. I certainly had my fill of cute girls to look at.

Then I looked into my rearview mirror. Behind us, Gina and her sister Leah rode in Gina's yellow convertible Bumble Bug. Her parents, Chris and Elizabeth, brought up the rear in their station wagon. I chuckled to myself when I realized that I'd been girl-watching. I had more than enough girl in Gina. *In Gina* and *Kendall,* I thought.

It had been two years since Gina, Kendall, and I had become lovers. During that time, our relationship had evolved. Gina's family also lived in Atlanta, so I'd spent far more time with her. But I sometimes felt closer to Kendall. At nineteen, Kendall was only a year older than Gina and me, but she was *two* years ahead of us in school.

While both girls were smart, sexy, and very beautiful, they were also very different. Gina was adventurous and outgoing; Kendall was more studious and introverted. Kendall was the reflective one, while Gina tended to act before she thought things through. Both of them wanted

to be medical doctors, but even in that regard, they were different. Gina wanted to be an OB/GYN, while Kendall wanted to be a psychiatrist.

And what about me?

In 1979, when I began my junior year in high school, I took an art class simply to fill a requirement. Not only had I been surprised to learn that I loved fine art, but I enjoyed drawing as well. For months, I drew things in my notebooks. And if I finished a test before the end of class, I'd often find myself sketching window frames, doorways, or building façades. I still couldn't draw people very well, but I could look at a building and then sketch it—completely from memory—down to the last detail.

When Gina's family decided to build a new house, in early 1980, my life gained some much-needed direction. I watched the architect breathe life into the house plans, combining simple elements to create an overall look, a design. In my mind's eye, I didn't see the plans—dark blue lines on paper—I saw *the house*. All through the spring and early summer, I watched their house come together exactly as I'd imagined it. At that point, I knew what I wanted to do with my life.

I wanted to be an architect.

So I turned down a wrestling scholarship (to UNC Greensboro) and began looking at architecture schools. I applied to the University of Tennessee, Auburn, and my hometown school, Georgia Tech. I also applied to Virginia Tech and UCLA (even though I wanted to stay in the southeast; it was a compromise decision).

In the end, three things convinced me to go to UT. First, their College of Architecture had an excellent design program. Second, they were spending millions of dollars on their program and constructing an entirely new Art & Architecture building. And finally, Kendall was already a student at UT. She was probably the most important factor in my decision, since I could find a first-class design school and an A&A building virtually anywhere. I couldn't find Kendall just anywhere.

My decision to go to UT had been the spark for my first real fight with Gina, since she wanted to go to UCLA. I didn't want to break up with her, but I wanted her to be happy. I wanted her to go to UT and be happy with me. She, of course, wanted me to go to UCLA and be happy with her.

We argued about it for weeks. In the end, she tearfully decided to go to UT. Then I made the mistake of trying to talk her out of it. I knew she was making the decision for the wrong reasons, but it was her decision to make. Finally, I let the matter drop, and her mood improved drastically. I knew she still wanted to go to UCLA, but she actually seemed happy about going to UT with Kendall and me.

So here we were. As the traffic moved, I shook off my reverie and returned my attention to the present. Then I glanced over at Erin.

While Gina and I were looking forward to seeing Kendall, Erin and Leah were eager to see Kendall's brother, Drew. Over the past two years, he'd grown to look even more like his father. Where I'd stopped growing at 5'9", Drew topped me by at least six inches. And while I weighed a solid 180 pounds, he probably tipped the scales at more than 230 pounds.

Surprisingly, Drew and I actually enjoyed each other's company. He didn't have Kendall's keen intellect, but he did have her sense of people. And where Kendall was sometimes shy, Drew was outgoing and friendly. I guess that's why he attracted girls like bees to honey. He certainly

had Erin's attention, her long-distance boyfriend notwithstanding.

"When are Drew and Kendall going to get here?" Erin asked, as if reading my mind.

"Their dad couldn't get off work today. So they're driving up from Chattanooga tomorrow."

"Ah. Okay."

"You're really looking forward to seeing Drew, huh?" Despite her tanned complexion, I could tell that Erin was blushing. "What about Sean Sullivan?" I asked. "I thought *he* was your boyfriend."

"Duh," Erin said. "I'm not going to *do* anything with Drew. But that doesn't mean I don't want to see him."

"That's cool."

"But just because I'm not going to do anything with him doesn't mean I can't… um… *think* about it," she said, wiggling her fingers and grinning.

"You're horrible," I said to her, laughing.

"No, I'm just hot." Then she fanned herself. "And I don't mean that in a good way. Can we open the windows?"

"Yeah, sorry. Having the windows up on the interstate is nice, but…"

"Now, we're roasting," she finished.

With that, we unzipped the Jeep's windows and rolled them down. It wasn't *much* cooler, but at least we had some air movement.

"I wonder what's taking so long," she said.

"I dunno. I guess there are a lot of people moving into the dorms today."

Down the street from the Presidential Complex, traffic came to a dead stop. The Complex held my dorm, North Carrick Hall, Gina's dorm, South Carrick Hall, another dorm for men, Reese Hall, and an identical dorm for women, Humes Hall. The middle of the Complex was a large concrete courtyard, with benches and a few scattered tables.

The Carrick dorms were really two towers of the same building, which sat on the west side of the courtyard. Reese Hall was on the north side, while Humes Hall faced it from the south. The east side of the courtyard held the Presidential Court, which was a fancy name for the dining hall.

The entire Presidential Complex was fairly new, and the suites each had air conditioning and private bathrooms. If I had gotten my housing forms in too late, I might've had to settle for living in Hess Hall, with no air conditioning and communal bathrooms.

Kendall would live in the comparative luxury of the Apartment Residence Hall. That was the official name, but everyone called it the Andy Holt Apartments (since it was on Andy Holt Avenue). The suites were actual apartments, with two bedrooms, one bath, and a kitchen. I hadn't actually seen the apartments, but they looked spacious on the housing form diagrams. Unfortunately, they were for upperclassmen only.

Kendall and her roommate, Abby, had originally planned to live in Morrill Hall—an upperclassman dorm between the Presidential Complex and Andy Holt Apartments—but they'd gotten a break at the last minute. Two of Kendall's friends needed roommates for their apartment, so Kendall and Abby had changed their housing requests.

When traffic moved again, I looked up at the Presidential buildings and thought about how I'd handle having Gina or Kendall over to visit. Since the dorms were intended for freshmen and

sophomores, the visitation was mostly Option C. With C visitation, I could have a girl in my room any time between noon and midnight on Thursday and Sunday, and between noon and two in the morning on Friday and Saturday. (We had *no* visitation on Monday through Wednesday.)

Those hours didn't sound all that generous until I started reading about A visitation, which offered *no* opposite-sex visitation. Both North and South Carrick had A-visitation floors, which everyone called the "Virgin Vault." Fortunately, The Vault was by request only, so I wouldn't accidentally be stuck on a floor where I couldn't bring Gina or Kendall to my room.

By contrast, the Andy Holt Apartments had 24-hour visitation and very few restrictions. The floors were segregated by gender, but other than that, the staff didn't really care who came and went. So I'd be able to visit Kendall whenever I wanted to.

When traffic still hadn't moved much after ten minutes, my mom got out of the station wagon and walked back toward us.

"I'm going to go see what's going on up there," she said. "I'm sure it's just the normal rush of students moving into dorms, but I'd still like to see for myself."

Erin and I both nodded.

"I'm going to get Elizabeth and we'll scout ahead. Okay?"

Once again, we nodded.

Then Mom walked back to Gina's car. In the rearview mirror, I watched as she told Gina and Leah what she was doing. A minute later, she walked back to the Coulters' station wagon. Elizabeth got out and the two women walked up the sidewalk toward the Presidential courtyard.

When they returned, about fifteen minutes later, Elizabeth went to Gina's car and Mom came to the Jeep.

"Yep," she said, "it's just a crowd of students and their parents."

"Okay."

"The dorms have luggage carts we can use to haul your stuff upstairs, but you have to have a student ID to use one, and the waiting list is already pretty long."

I nodded.

"Also," she continued, "the driveway for both dorms is only a couple of cars wide and there's not much parking, so that's the biggest hold-up. You and Gina should probably park your cars somewhere and then walk back here. As soon as you can, use your IDs to get on the waiting list for a cart. Then we'll just wait till it's our turn," she said.

"Okay."

With that, she straightened, waved to Elizabeth, and then stepped back. I checked my mirror and saw that Gina was already taking advantage of a momentary lull in traffic. As she waited for me, I pulled out in front of her.

I figured that parking was going to be a problem, but as soon as we got past the cluster of residence halls, traffic thinned out. We drove for less than a minute and then parked in a large non-commuter garage at the end of Andy Holt Avenue.

"God," Gina said as we got out of our cars, "I had no idea there'd be this many people here today."

"Well," I said, "I guess everybody decided to move in at once."

"I guess."

Even though summer in Knoxville was about as hot as Atlanta, I was glad to be out of the

Jeep. My shirt was sweaty and stuck to my back, but at least there was a slight breeze.

As the four of us walked back toward the Presidential Complex, we mostly gawked at all the people and cars. We'd thought that getting to campus early on the first day of move-in would mean we wouldn't have to wait long. Unfortunately, a *lot* of people evidently thought the same thing. By the time we got back to our families' station wagons, they'd moved about twenty feet.

Gina and I merely waved and then headed up the hill toward the dorms themselves. Erin and Leah tagged along, excitedly talking about guys, different families, guys, anything that caught their interest, and guys. Gina and I merely grinned at each other.

Outwardly, I tried to project an air of calm, but inside, I was incredibly nervous. I really had *no* idea what we were supposed to do, but I didn't want to appear uncertain (or ignorant) by asking someone. So I basically kept my mouth shut and followed the crowd.

Unfortunately, following the crowd left me ample time to think, which meant I had *too* much time, so I worried. What if they didn't have my room ready? What if they'd lost my paperwork? Would I have to live in Hess Hall? What if they accidentally put me in the Virgin Vault? What if my roommate was some big, dirty redneck? What if he was a militant Rastafarian?

Militant Rastafarian?! What the…?!

I had to laugh at myself for that one. Treacherous imagination. Gina looked at me, her expression puzzled.

"It'd take too long to explain," I said.

From the look on her face, she was just as nervous as I was. Tentatively, she reached for my hand. As we twined our fingers together, a feeling of calm washed over me. I was still anxious, uncertain, and a little lost, but at least I had Gina beside me.

When we reached Carrick Hall, it was a confused mass of people, cars, trucks, luggage carts, and too many other things to take in at once. People and their belongings were *every*where, in all shapes, sizes, and colors.

One family was unloading the trunk of a Mercedes, while the people behind them were taking things out of a beat-up old pickup truck. Some people were dressed nicely while others apparently wore whatever wasn't *too* dirty that day. One family of six was dressed entirely in UT's orange and white. Another family had a U-Haul trailer *and* a loaded station wagon, and I wondered where they thought they were going to put all that stuff. Yet another family had a…

"What're we supposed to do?" Gina asked, breaking my train of thought.

"Let's head inside and get our names on the waiting list for luggage carts," I said as confidently as I could. "Have you got your ID with you?"

She nodded and patted her purse.

We'd gotten IDs when we came to Knoxville for Freshman Orientation. I pulled out my wallet, retrieved my card, and brandished it with a flourish. I was still nervous, but at least I had a purpose, if only for the moment.

"Is there a line?" Gina asked.

"I guess it's inside," I said, pointing toward the entrances to the dorms. "Let's get on your dorm's list first, then we'll get on mine."

"Um… okay."

When she didn't move, I looked a question at her.

Then she laughed nervously. "Um… which one is *South* Carrick?"

I laughed and pointed to the building closest to us, on our right. With Gina, Erin, and Leah in tow, I started making my way through the crowd.

Once we reached the lobby desk, a woman took Gina's ID card, wrote her name on the list for luggage carts, and then returned the card. Gina was about to walk away when I stopped her with a gesture.

"How long is the wait?" I asked the harried woman at the desk.

"What's this look like," she asked, "a help desk?" When she saw my shocked expression, she gave us an apologetic look. "Sorry. I guess it'll be about an hour."

"Okay," I said. "Thanks."

As we stepped away from the desk, a girl returned a cart. Instead of heading over to North Carrick, I stopped to watch what happened. The woman behind the desk returned the girl's ID and then immediately glanced at the list. Almost before the girl turned away, the woman looked out at the dorm lobby.

"Sheldon!" she shouted. "Karen Sheldon!"

Across the lobby, a brunette and her mother stood up. When the brunette reached the desk, she handed over her ID. While she did, her mother held the cart and then they headed toward the exit.

"What're we waiting for?" Gina asked.

"I wanted to see how that cart thing worked," I explained, indicating the cart exchange with a toss of my chin.

"Oh. Okay."

With that, Erin and Leah joined us and we threaded our way through the foot traffic in the breezeway. Heading into North Carrick, we got behind a guy with a heavily loaded luggage cart. At the threshold, the cart lurched and then abruptly halted. The guy shoved it, but it didn't budge. He shoved again, but it was so heavily loaded that he couldn't move it.

"You get the front," I suggested to him when people started to bunch up behind us. "I'll push from back here."

The guy's mother, who was smaller than Erin, smiled at me gratefully.

"Thanks, man," the guy said. Then he backed the recalcitrant cart out of the doorway, skirted around it, and shoved his way through the other door. While he lifted the front wheels, I heaved from behind. We repeated the maneuver at the second set of doors and then entered the dim coolness of the lobby itself. "Thanks again, man," he said once we were inside.

"No problem," I said.

"Thank you very much," his mother said softly.

"You're welcome," I said. "Have a nice day."

With that, they headed across the lobby to the elevators, only to join *another* line of people. Around us, utter chaos reigned. I counted three carts, loaded or empty, moving within the lobby. A lot of people had decided to forgo the carts and were simply ferrying things upstairs by hand.

"You know," I said, "if our cars get to the front of the building before we get a luggage cart, I say we should just carry our stuff upstairs by hand. I mean, neither of us have too much."

Gina nodded.

"And with all eight of us, it won't take long to get things to our rooms." Then I glanced around and spotted the guy with the luggage cart list.

"ID?" he asked when I stepped up to him.

I handed it over.

"Welcome to UT, Mr. Hughes," he said as he wrote my name on his list.

"Um… thanks."

When he handed my card back, he used his pen to point to the group of people manning the desk.

"One of the Resident Assistants can get you checked in and give you your move-in packet," he said.

"You mean you're not a Resident Assistant?" I asked.

"I'm the Hall Director," he said. Then he held out his hand. "Wade Snow."

"Pleased to meet you, Mr. Snow."

"Pleased to meet you, Paul," he said. "Everyone around here just calls me Wade."

"Oh, okay. Hey, how'd you know my name?" I asked.

He grinned and nodded toward the ID I still held.

"Oh. Duh!" *Jeez, I haven't been here five minutes, and I'm already making a fool of myself.*

"That's okay, Paul," he said. "I was a little overwhelmed on my first day too."

"Yeah. Lots of stuff to figure out."

"Lots and lots," he agreed. "One of the guys'll take care of you," he said, glancing to his left.

I turned and realized that people had formed a short line behind me while I was blithely chatting. "Thanks," I said. Then, "About how long is the wait for a cart?"

"Probably an hour, maybe more" he said. "But check back every fifteen minutes." Then he pointed to a chalkboard. "I post the names of the next men on the list." Three names were written on the chalkboard: McArthur, Fox, and Witter.

"Oh, cool."

"Uh-huh. Have a nice day, Paul," he said. "Enjoy your stay at North Carrick."

As I nodded politely and stepped aside, he was already looking past me to the next person in line.

"He seems cool," Gina said as we headed toward the closest available Resident Assistant.

"Yeah," I agreed

Behind us, Erin and Leah took up station by one of the groups of couches. They seemed to be having fun just people-watching, so I turned my attention back to the desk.

"ID?" asked the RA. He was about my height, but softer. He wasn't pudgy, exactly, but he looked sort of cherubic. "Welcome to North Carrick, Paul," he said as he read my ID. Then he turned to a desk at the back wall. From a box marked "G-H-I," he sifted through manila envelopes until he found the one marked "Hughes, Paul Dean." He read the label and then smiled. "You'll be on my floor," he said. "I'm your RA, Cary. Cary Prescott."

I held out my hand. "Paul Hughes. Oh, duh. You know that." *That's* twice*! Jeez!*

"Nice to meet you, Paul," he said with a grin. Then he opened the envelope and pulled out a sheet of paper. "Okay," he said, turning it so I could read it, "this is your Move-In form." He pointed to a line on the form. "You're in room 415D. Once you're in the suite, that's the room on the right, but there are signs on all the doors. Okay?"

I nodded.

"I don't think your roommate has checked in yet," he continued, "so you've got first choice of

beds." Then he pointed to the envelope. "Your dorm handbook, room key, and mailbox combination are in here, along with a copy of this form. Okay?"

Once again, I nodded.

"This is your mailing address," he said, pointing to the form. "The post office is in the South Carrick lobby. Use your mailbox combination to open the box with 'N', for North, and your room number on it, so you're N415D." He looked up to make sure I understood.

"November four one five delta," I said. "Roger."

He gave me a funny look.

Inwardly, I cringed. *Paul, you dork.*

"I'll stop by this week to do your room inspection," he continued.

"Room inspection?"

"Yep," he said, nodding. "Just to see what's already damaged so we don't charge *you* for it."

"Damaged?" I asked.

"Well, not really damaged," he explained. "More like nicks, scrapes, and scuffs. The rooms are clean and everything works, but they're not brand-new."

"Ah. Okay."

"Anyway, I'll post a list of inspection times on my door—my room is the first room to the left, once you get off the elevators. Okay?"

I nodded.

"We have a mandatory floor meeting on Friday at five o'clock, in the fourth floor lounge. I'll post a notice on the floor's bulletin board. Okay?"

"No problem," I said.

"Great," he finished with a smile. "Do you have any questions?"

"Not really."

"Okay, then." With that, he grabbed a pen and pointed to a line on the form. "Sign here," he said. "This basically says that you've gotten your move-in packet."

I signed.

"Here you go," Cary said, taking the form and handing me the packet. "Welcome to North Carrick."

"Thanks." When I turned, I almost knocked Gina over. "Sorry," I said.

"That's okay," she said. Then, "Do you think we should go get my move-in packet now?"

"Sure."

With that, we rounded up Erin and Leah and headed *back* across the breezeway to South Carrick. I could tell that Gina was a little nervous, so I put my arm around her while we stood in line.

Compared to the relative efficiency of North Carrick, South Carrick was a madhouse. My dorm had seven or eight people working the front desk, but South Carrick had only three. And they all looked stressed. We ended up standing in line for almost fifteen minutes. Finally, Gina got her move-in packet (she was on the sixth floor, in 607A).

"Why don't we head down to the street and see where our parents are," I suggested.

Then the four of us wended our way through the crowd and walked to where our families' station wagons should have been. It took us a moment to find them, though, since they'd moved farther than I'd expected. When we approached the cars, Mom and Elizabeth got out and met us.

We quickly told them about checking in, and how long the wait for carts would be.

"Your dad thinks we'll get to the front of the dorm in the next thirty minutes," Mom said. "So the wait for a cart isn't going to kill us."

"Have you seen your rooms yet?" Elizabeth asked.

Gina and I shook our heads.

"You should go see what they look like."

Tentatively, Gina nodded.

"Leah," Elizabeth said as we turned to go, "why don't you and Erin stay here with us."

"But *Mom*," Leah protested.

Instead of complaining, Erin took one look at Mom—who nodded discreetly—and agreed.

"You can see their rooms when we move their stuff in," Elizabeth said. Then she turned to Gina and me. "We'll see you when you get back."

As we walked up the sidewalk, Gina reached for my hand. I clasped it and then smiled at her.

We decided to see her room first. When we got on the elevator—after ten minutes of waiting—we huddled together in the back corner, packed between a luggage cart and several people carrying armloads of stuff. I wrapped my arms around Gina and pulled her against my chest. When she turned her head and smiled gratefully, I kissed her temple.

The people with the cart got off on the second floor, and then the other group got off on the fifth floor. On the sixth floor, we got off and went looking for Gina's room. It was close to the elevator, so we found it quickly. With a deep breath, I opened the door.

Each suite held an entryway that spanned the width of the two rooms. Instead of being rectangular, the foyer was deeper in the middle, so each of the room doors was set at an angle. A black phone with a long, long cord hung on the wall to our left. The shower was also to our left, while a door enclosed a long, narrow toilet room to our right.

Both room doors had hand-made signs on them (with flowers and butterflies). The sign on the left read "A – Gina Nicole Coulter / B – Faith Catherine Bennett."

"Do you know your suitemates' names?" I asked. When she shook her head, we wandered over to the other doorway.

The sign on the right read "C – Naomi Michelle Ackerman / D – Iris Eliza Weinberg."

"I wonder what they're like?" Gina said.

"Probably just like you… nervous," I said with a grin.

"You're nervous too," she accused.

"Yeah. I guess I am. But we'll survive. Now c'mon, let's see what your room's like."

We walked back to the left door and Gina opened it with her key. From the doorway, we surveyed the room. It was about ten feet wide and fourteen or fifteen feet deep. The right wall held metal sliding-door closets at each end and a vanity counter in the middle (complete with a sink). A mirror was mounted on the wall above the sink, with two medicine cabinets flanking it. The space beneath the vanity held dresser drawers, three on each side.

One bed was against the inner wall, to our left, and the other bed was across the room by the outer wall. Between them—on the room's left wall—was one long metal double desk with shelves above it. Each side of the desk had a pull-out drawer, a chair in front of it, and a fluorescent light underneath the shelf.

All the metal surfaces (the closets, drawers, and desk) were covered with a dark wood-grain

vinyl veneer, while the floor was plain linoleum tile. The walls were bare off-white-painted cinder block and the ceiling was equally bland. In other words, the room was stark.

"Great," Gina said sarcastically.

"It'll look better once you get some posters up and some sheets on the bed," I said as positively as I could.

"I guess. But it's hot, too."

"I can fix *that* right now," I said. Then I headed across the room to the air conditioner. I turned it to High Cool, and with a whine of protest, it clattered to life. The air wasn't exactly cold, but it *was* cooler than the sweltering room.

"So this is where I get to live for the next year?" Gina asked rhetorically.

"Yep. Which bed do you want?"

"Does it matter?"

"Only to you, I guess," I said.

"Then I guess I'll take the other bed," she said, nodding to the far wall. "It'd be nice to be by the window."

"Sounds good to me." At her glum expression, I pulled her close. "What's the matter?"

"I dunno," she said. "I guess I just wasn't ready for how… bare the rooms are."

"Would you like to get bare in the bare room?" I asked with a grin as I made a show of eyeing the door.

She shrugged noncommittally.

I cupped her ass and ground my hips against her.

"I guess I'm not in the mood to fool around," she said.

"That's okay. We probably don't have time anyway." In reality, I wasn't in the mood to fool around either, but I wanted to cheer her up.

"We'd better go see what your room's like," she said "and then go back downstairs."

"My room probably looks exactly like yours, only in reverse."

"Reverse?" she asked, her brow furrowed.

"Yeah, reverse. I'm in 415*D*, the room on the right. So my room will probably have the closets and sink on the *left*, with the desk on the right."

"I guess."

"C'mon," I said. "Let's go see if I'm right."

After we locked her room, it took us several minutes just to get an elevator. Fortunately, we were near the top of the building, so it was nearly empty when the doors opened.

On the way through the North Carrick lobby, I checked the chalkboard: Vaughn, Malin, and Estores. It took us another ten minutes to get an elevator. My suite was all the way at the end of the hall, right beside the fire exit.

The suite's foyer was exactly the same as Gina's, with the shower on the left, the phone by the door, and the toilet room on the right. Before I looked at my door, I checked the door to the left. The sign on the door wasn't as elaborate at the one on Gina's, but it served its purpose. It read, *A – Glen Carter Otis / B – Tracy James Ingram*. The sign on my door read, *C – Robert Terrence Marion / D – Paul Dean Hughes*.

"That's me," I said.

"Duh, goof," Gina said.

When I opened the door, the room was laid out exactly as I'd predicted. And it was just as hot as Gina's had been.

"I think I'll take the bed over here," I said as I walked across the room to turn on the air conditioner. "That way, we'll both have the bed by the window."

She nodded.

"Hey," I said, "c'mere. This air conditioner works a lot better than yours." The unit had started without protest and the air was actually cold.

Reluctantly, Gina walked toward me.

"What's the matter?" I asked as I gathered her in my arms.

"I dunno," she said with a shrug.

I considered bringing up the UCLA versus UT argument, but I decided to let sleeping dogs lie. Instead, I simply hugged her tight and then held her for several minutes.

"Thanks," she said softly. Then she wiped the corners of her eyes.

"Are you ready to go back downstairs?" I asked.

She smiled wanly and then nodded.

On the way back to the elevator, we passed several other families and their sons. I discreetly studied the guys, wondering what they were like. I really had no idea how well I'd get to know any of the guys who lived around me, but I wanted to at least make an effort.

By the time we got back downstairs, Gina had cheered up a bit, but she was still a little glum. I checked the chalkboard, but my name still wasn't up there. Then I looked at my watch. It had only been forty-five minutes since I'd put my name on the list, so I didn't worry.

When we found our parents' station wagons, they were actually in sight of the Presidential Complex driveway. I kissed Gina and then she went back to her family's car.

"What were your rooms like?" Mom asked when I got in the back seat of our station wagon.

I described the rooms. "And since my room's only on the fourth floor," I said, "I figure we can just haul stuff upstairs if we don't get a cart. I mean, I don't have *that* much stuff."

"Except two hundred pounds of free weights," Dad said.

"Oh, yeah. Oops."

"That's okay, son," he said. "We'll manage."

"Was it like this when you two went to college?" Erin asked.

Mom and Dad looked at each other and shared a grin.

"Kind of," Mom said. "We didn't know each other when we first went to school, though."

Erin and I nodded. We both knew the story. Dad had been an NROTC midshipman at the University of Florida. His upper class mentor had been Mom's older brother, Hank. Uncle Hank had introduced Mom to Dad, and the rest was history.

"It was twenty years ago," Mom continued, "so there were fewer people. But yes, it was pretty much the same."

"Do you remember that blue dress you were wearing the first time we met?" Dad asked her.

"Oh, God," she said, "don't remind me."

"Tell us what happened," Erin begged.

"Erin, jeez," I complained. "You've heard this story a million times."

"So? I'd still like to hear it again."

"Your mom had this great blue dress," Dad said, ignoring my protest. "It was tight, and short,

and really showed off her figure. When Hank brought me home for dinner the first time, she was wearing it."

"But I'd gotten too much sun that day," Mom added, "and my mother had put lotion on my back and shoulders to keep them from drying out."

"So when I shook her hand," Dad said, "the strap of the dress slid down her other shoulder."

"You couldn't decide whether to look at my face or my chest," Mom said, laughing.

"Like hell," Dad said. "I was a fourth class middie with my mentor standing over my shoulder." Then he turned to us. "Do *you* think I was going to stare at his sister's chest?"

"Yeah, Dad," Erin said. "You probably did."

"They know you too well," Mom said to Dad with a smile. "And whether you stared at my chest or not when we first met, you couldn't keep your eyes off me at dinner."

"What was I s'posed to do?" Dad asked. "Your dress kept falling down. I couldn't see any of the good stuff, but I got quite a show."

"Is that why you asked me out?" she asked.

"No, of course not," Dad said with feigned defensiveness. Then he grew serious. "Your brother wanted me to watch out for you after he graduated."

Uncle Hank was three years older than Mom, but his F-4 had been shot down in 1966. Even though he and his radar intercept officer safely ejected, Hank was later killed by his North Vietnamese captors. The RIO spent the next six years in captivity. Mom and Dad didn't talk about Hank much, but I knew that they still thought about him. Mom even kept a picture of him—in his flight suit—on her dresser at home.

"I still miss him," she said quietly.

"Me too," Dad echoed.

"What was he like?" Erin asked.

I don't know why, but she liked hearing Mom talk about him.

So for the next twenty minutes, Mom and Dad told us about Hank, laughing as they recalled the good times they'd had together. Erin and I had heard most of the stories, but retelling them seemed to lift Mom's spirits. And I had to admit that it was a good way to pass the time. Finally, we neared the small parking lot for the Carrick dorms.

"Okay," Dad said, "now we have to find a parking space."

"I'll go check to see if I'm on the board yet," I said.

"Can I go?" Erin asked.

"Sure. C'mon."

Behind us, Gina and Leah got out of the Coulters' station wagon.

"You check with your front desk and see if your name's close to the top of the list," I said to Gina. "I'll check over here," I said, hooking my thumb at North Carrick.

"Okay."

When Erin and I reached the board, I was disappointed. The names were: Wiesmeier, St. George, and Brighton. But as I was about to turn away, a guy returned a cart to the desk.

"Wiesmeier," the hall director shouted a moment later. "Lyndon Wiesmeier!"

When Lyndon Wiesmeier trundled off with his cart, the hall director erased his name. A surge of excitement ran through me when he wrote "Hughes" on the board. Then my heart sank when he immediately erased it.

"Why'd he do that?" Erin asked.

To our surprise, the director then wrote "P. Hughes" on the board.

"Do you think that's you?" Erin asked.

"I guess so. There must've been two Hugheses on his list. Cool."

Back outside, Gina looked disappointed.

"They said it'd be another hour," she said.

"That's okay," I said. "I'm third on the list."

While we were inside, Dad had found a parking space. And as we watched, a pickup's reverse lights came on. Chris waited for the truck to back out and then pulled into the vacated spot.

"Okay," Dad said once both families had gathered by our station wagon, "what's the plan?"

"I'm third on the list for carts," I said. "So it shouldn't be long. But my room's only on the fourth floor. Just waiting for the elevator takes ten minutes. I mean, I can walk up carrying most of my stuff." Then I looked at Dad. "Except the free weights, of course."

"Except the free weights," he agreed.

"With all eight of us," Chris said, "it shouldn't take too long."

"We should still station someone in the lobby, so we can get the cart when Paul's name is called," Dad said.

Chris nodded.

"And then," Dad continued, "we can use the cart to take Gina's stuff up to her room." Then he turned to her. "What floor are you on?"

"The sixth," she said.

"Yeah, I definitely don't want to carry stuff up six flights of stairs *after* carrying stuff up four flights," Dad said. "Even with all of us, it'll probably take two or three trips for each room."

Chris nodded again.

"Okay," Dad said, turning to me. "You give your ID to Erin. She can wait in the lobby and use it to get the cart when they call your name."

Erin and I both nodded.

"Erin," he continued, "meet us back at the car when you get the cart. Okay?"

"Roger wilco," she said, imitating one of his sayings with a grin.

Dad grinned in reply and then looked at all of us. "Is everyone ready?"

As one, we nodded.

"Then let's get this show on the road," he said.

I handed my ID to Erin and she headed into the dorm to wait. Then we opened the back of the station wagon.

"Wait a minute," Dad said. Then he looked at me. "How do we get to the stairs? Do we have to go through that crowd?" he asked, tossing his chin in the direction of the people in and around the breezeway.

"Hold on a second," I said. In my mind, I "walked" through the building, keeping myself oriented with the outside world as I mentally navigated from the lobby to my room. Then I looked up. "There," I said, pointing. "My room's on the north end of the building, right next to the stairs."

"Okay," Dad said. "Where do the stairs come out?"

"Probably down there," I said, pointed at the concrete courtyard between North Carrick and

Reese Hall. It was below ground level, which meant we'd have to climb an extra flight of stairs, but it was still better than waiting forever for a cart and then the elevator.

"Leah, why don't you go check it out real quick," Dad suggested.

She nodded and then headed toward the north end of the building. While she was gone, Dad, Chris, and I surveyed the boxes, baskets, and bags in the rear of our car. When Leah jogged back, she was grinning.

"There's a door that leads into the building," she said, panting slightly. "It was propped open with a chair, so I looked inside. It was a stairwell."

"Okay," Dad said. "We're good to go. Let's load up."

With that, we each picked up an armload of my things and headed toward the fire escape door. Not surprisingly, several other people were using the stairs as well. We passed people coming back down and were followed by more people behind us. There weren't nearly as many people in the stairwell as the lobby and elevators, though, so we didn't have to wait at all.

When we reached the fourth floor, I led everyone to my suite. Inside, I unlocked my door.

"My bed's the one by the window," I said.

After we set my stuff down, my parents and the Coulters took a quick tour of the suite. They were curious, but I had to stifle a grin when I realized that they were also catching their breath. Fortunately, the air conditioner was still blowing cold air, so the room temperature was *almost* comfortable.

"Pretty much like I remember from when I was in college," Dad said. "Cinder block walls and plain linoleum floors."

"And loud, squeaky beds," Chris said as he tested my roommate's unoccupied bed. Then he looked at Dad and shook his head in mock sadness. "Just like I remember."

"You are *incorrigible*," Elizabeth said in amusement. "Come on, you randy old terrier, let's get the next load."

"Terrier?" Chris protested. "I was just making an observation. Can't have squeaky beds now, can we?"

Mom and Dad grinned at each other as we filed out of the room. Even Gina smiled at her father's antics. I locked the door behind us and we headed down the fire stairs. Back at our car, we were surprised to find Erin waiting with the cart.

"Three carts came in at the same time," she said excitedly. "I just gave that guy your ID when he called your name."

"Cool," I said.

"Let's get your weights, son," Dad said. "We can put everything else on the cart too, as long as we've got it."

After we loaded the rest of my things on the cart, I gave my room key to Gina.

"Y'all can head up the stairs and cool off in the room until I get there," I said.

"I'll go with you, son," Dad said.

After nods of agreement, Gina and the others headed toward the fire stairs. With me pushing the cart and Dad guiding it from the front, we headed toward the breezeway entrance.

"The floors in your room are kinda bare," Dad commented as we reached the dorm entrance. Then he nodded at the people selling carpeting rolls in the courtyard. "We'll get you a nice piece of carpet to put down. How's that sound?"

"Sounds cool," I said.

Then he turned nostalgic. "I remember my father driving me to college for my first summer," he said.

"First *summer?*"

"Uh-huh. Since I was in the NROTC program, we had to do orientation and a *lot* of PT, physical training. I had to get uniforms, too."

"That must've sucked," I said.

"Nah. I worked my ass off, but I had a good time. There were a lot of things I didn't like about the Navy, but NROTC was fun." Then he leaned toward me and lowered his voice. "And your mom may joke about it," he said with a sly grin, "but I think she went out with me because she liked the way I looked in a uniform. So yeah, I had to wear the thing, but it had its fringe benefits."

I couldn't help but laugh.

Dad merely shrugged, still grinning.

Fifteen minutes later, we crammed ourselves into an elevator. We smiled at the other family and then got out when the doors opened on the fourth floor. Then, surprisingly, Dad laughed.

"What?" I asked.

"I was just remembering," he mused. "My first roommate in college was a guy named Oswald Knapp, and the first thing we did was figure out a way to let the other guy know if we had a girl in the room." He laughed again. "We said we'd hang a necktie around the doorknob to warn the other guy not to come in."

"What's so funny about that?" I asked.

"Neither of us *ever* had a girl in that room. But that's what I remember about him, having that serious discussion about how to wave off the other guy."

"That *is* kinda funny," I said, chuckling.

"Yep, old Oswald and I had our priorities straight."

Before I could ask anything else about my dad's time in college, we reached my suite. Then we maneuvered the cart into the foyer.

"We need to get you a broom," Mom said before we even made it all the way into my room. "And we really should clean your room before you unpack."

"Uh, okay," I said.

While we quickly unloaded the rest of my stuff (and stored the free weights in the bottom of the closet), Mom and Elizabeth talked about making a trip to the store to buy cleaning supplies. While they made plans, Dad and Chris looked out the window at the courtyard below.

"We were going to get Paul a rug for the room," Dad said.

"That's a good idea," Chris agreed. "We'll get one for Gina too."

Gina and I looked at each other and rolled our eyes. I guess our parents were having more fun sprucing up our rooms than we were. Ah, nostalgia.

"Okay," Mom said, breaking Gina's and my moment of amused camaraderie. "Elizabeth and I need to go to the store. We'll take our car and meet you all back here."

"When you get back," I said, "you can park in the garage at the end of Andy Holt Avenue."

Mom nodded.

"While you're gone, we'll use Paul's cart to move all of Gina's things in," Dad said.

"And then we can get rugs for the kids," Chris added.

"I want to sweep and mop this floor before you put down a rug," Mom said.

"And we need to do the same for Gina's room," Elizabeth added. "I'm sure it's as dirty as this one."

Dirty? I mused. *My room isn't all* that *dirty.*

The women, however, had different standards. They all seemed eager to clean our rooms, and I wasn't about to stop them.

Dad clapped twice to get our attention. "Okay, chop-chop," he said. "Let's go."

Mom and Elizabeth headed off in our car while we loaded Gina's things onto the cart. We couldn't quite fit everything, so we'd have to make two trips. It took us longer to move Gina's things, because there were more people waiting for the elevator in South Carrick. But we eventually managed to get her completely moved in.

When Gina and I went to take the cart back, she shook her head in amusement.

"God, our parents have just taken over, haven't they?" she said.

"Yeah," I said with a chuckle. "But hey, I'm getting a clean room. I'm not gonna complain."

"And we're getting rugs," she added.

"And we're getting rugs," I agreed.

"So maybe it's not so bad after all." Then she turned reflective. "I just wish I could paint my room. I mean, that white is just *ugly*."

"What's the matter with white?"

"It's ugly. U-g-l-y. And boring. Ugh."

"I didn't think it was that bad," I muttered.

"Of course not," she said. "'Cause you're a goof."

"But I'm *your* goof," I said as I wrapped my arm around her.

"Yeah, you're mine." Then she grinned shyly. "Thanks for putting up with me," she said. "I know I'm not in the best mood."

"Don't worry about it. I mean, I've got no clue what we're supposed to do next either."

"Good. I was beginning to think that I was the only one who was clueless."

"Nope," I said. "We're clueless together."

✧ ✧ ✧

When Mom and Elizabeth returned, they cleaned the rooms in a whirlwind of activity. (My room was far cleaner than I thought I needed, but I wasn't about to complain.) After the floors dried, we put the rugs down. They didn't cover the entire floor, but they *did* cover the main expanse of linoleum. More than that, however, they softened the room and made it seem more inviting.

Then my family headed back to my room while Gina and her family stayed in hers to help her unpack. Mom and Erin made my bed for me while I put my clothes in the drawers and closet. While we did that, Dad set up my VIC-20 computer and monitor, and unpacked my school supplies.

I still hadn't seen my roommate or either of my suitemates, but I figured I'd meet them soon enough. To my surprise, the phone rang as we were putting the finishing touches on the room.

"Hello?" I answered tentatively. I had *no* idea who could be calling my room.

"May I please speak to Paul?" the voice said.

"This is he."

"Oh. I didn't recognize your voice."

"Who's this?" I asked.

"It's Gina, goof."

"Oh. Sorry. Yeah, these phones are kinda scratchy."

"Yeah. Anyway, we're done over here and my mom wanted to know if y'all wanted to go out to dinner somewhere."

"Sure, hold on." Then I covered the mouthpiece and turned to my open door. I started to shout into my room, but then I realized that the long phone cord would actually reach (and then some). "It's Gina," I said as I stepped into the room, still holding the receiver. "Elizabeth wants to know if we're ready to go to dinner."

"Sure," Dad said. "I'm starved."

"We didn't have lunch," Mom pointed out.

"Nope. And I could eat a cow," he said.

"Gina?" I said as I put the receiver to my ear.

"Yeah?"

"Sure, we're ready for dinner. Meet you downstairs in five minutes?"

"We'll see you there," she said.

Downstairs in the lobby, things had slowed down. Most of the crowds had thinned out, but there was still a steady trickle of people moving into the dorms.

Outside, we met Gina's family and then headed toward the parking garage.

"Before we eat, I want to check into the hotel and get cleaned up," Mom said.

"Me too," Elizabeth added.

"If y'all're going to get cleaned up at the hotel," I said, "Gina and I should probably go back to our rooms. I mean, if we go to the hotel with you, we won't have any clothes to change into."

Gina nodded.

"Okay," Mom said. "Why don't you two go get cleaned up while we find the hotel. Then we'll call you when we're ready to eat."

"Actually," I said, "Gina and I can just shower and then meet you at the hotel. You're staying at the Radisson, right?"

"Right," Dad said.

"Okay," I said. "We'll just meet you there when we're done."

"Sounds like a plan," Dad said.

I put my arm around Gina as our parents continued toward the garage. When they were out of earshot, I turned and grinned at her. "Has your roommate moved in yet?" I asked.

She shook her head. "But I think my suitemates have. I haven't seen them, but some of their stuff was there when we left to meet you."

"Well, I'm the only one in my suite, so d'you just wanna grab some clothes and come over to my room?"

"That sounds like a *great* idea," she said.

"Okay, let's go."

Ten minutes later, Gina and I walked into my suite. I made sure that my suitemates hadn't moved in while I wasn't looking. They hadn't. And since my roommate hadn't magically

appeared, we had the entire suite to ourselves.

"God, I'm tired," Gina said. "I didn't realize I'd packed so much stuff."

"Same here." Then I grinned at her. "I'm not too tired to fool around, though. You wanna take a shower with me?"

"I thought you'd never ask."

Since the suite's outer door didn't lock, we wrapped towels around ourselves before heading into the foyer.

The shower itself was actually two tiled areas: a vestibule, screened by a shower curtain, and then the shower stall itself, which was also screened by a curtain. Gina and I stepped into the vestibule, shut the first curtain behind us, and hung our towels on wall hooks. Then we grinned in anticipation as I turned on and adjusted the water.

"God, this feels good," she said as she stepped under the water. She wet her raven hair and then luxuriated in the heat of the spray.

For a moment, I merely admired her body as the water sluiced over her. The combination of an Indian mother and a Caucasian father had given her an exotic café au lait complexion. And since we were nudists, she didn't have any tan lines. When she lifted her arms to run her fingers through her hair, I wanted to tweak her dark brown nipples.

She'd gained a little weight since we first started dating, but she'd gained it in all the right places. Her stomach was still soft and flat, but her breasts and ass had filled out a little. Then my eyes traveled lower, to where her hips flared from her slender waist. A week before we left for college, she shaved her pubic hair for me. Although she still shaved her labia, she was letting the rest of her bush grow back, so she had a darker triangle of stubble on her mons.

"What?" she asked.

"Huh?"

"You were staring at me."

"Oh. Sorry. I guess I was just thinking about how beautiful you are. You're so… wow."

She smiled and lowered her dark eyes.

I stepped toward her and pulled her into my arms.

Her wet breasts crushed against me as she wrapped her arms around my waist. Then she kissed my chest. "I love you so much," she whispered.

"And I love you," I said.

"Thanks again for being patient with me. I'm sure I'll get to like it here."

"You will. It'll be better once classes start. Then we'll be too busy to worry about being away from home."

"I guess," she said.

"Trust me."

"I do. I guess I'm just feeling lonely already. I mean, I don't know anyone here except you."

"And Kendall," I said.

"And her. But, I mean, what if my roommate's totally weird or something? What if she goes psycho and cuts up all my clothes? Or what if she smokes pot all day and we both get busted, even though I haven't done anything? Then they won't let me into medical school."

"Is that the kinda stuff you worry about?" I asked.

Miserably, she nodded.

"I wouldn't worry about your roommate," I assured her. "I'm sure she's just like you. Although," I mused, "if she's smart, beautiful, and sexy, then I think you'll have to seduce her."

"Ha! Like that'll happen."

"Okay, then *I'll* seduce her," I said, grinning.

"Can I watch?" Gina asked.

"What is it your mom says to your dad? 'You are *incorrigible*.'"

She nodded, her mood beginning to brighten.

With that, I gently pushed her backward and stuck my head under the spray of water. Then I turned us around so my back was to the showerhead. She looked up at me in shock as I pressed her against the back wall.

"God," she said, "that wall's cold."

"Sorry. It'll warm up in a minute."

"How?"

"With you pressed against it, it'll warm up. Trust me."

"What d'you—"

Before she could finish her question, I bent down and kissed her. Her lips parted and my tongue gently probed her mouth. She whimpered and then clutched me tightly. Our breathing quickened as we continued to kiss. When I finally pulled back, I gazed down into her liquid brown eyes and smiled.

"I love you," I said.

Instead of answering, she twined her fingers through my hair and pulled my head down again.

We pressed our bodies together and continued kissing. Without pulling my lips away from hers, I cupped her left breast. Her nipple hardened as soon as I latched my fingers around it. She whimpered into my mouth when I tugged the little brown bud.

"God," she said when we broke the kiss long enough to catch our breath. "You make me so hot."

"Hot enough to forget all your worries?"

"Hot enough to forget my *first name*," she said. "Now kiss me some more."

Needless to say, I did as she asked.

As our tongues sparred with each other, I reached up and pulled her hand from the back of my neck. Then I put it on my semi-hard dick. She gripped me firmly as I returned my hand to her breast.

For the next several minutes, we simply kissed and fondled each other. I wanted her to suck me, but I also wanted to take my time and enjoy her lips. Finally, I pulled back.

"See? I told you the wall would warm up," I said.

"That's not all that's warmed up," she said as she squirmed a little.

"Oh?"

"Mmm hmm. I told you, you make me incredibly hot."

"Good," I said with aplomb. "So let's get washed up. I don't wanna get waterlogged."

"Unnnnh."

"Oh? Did you want to do something before we get cleaned up?"

"Paul," she half-whined.

"What do you want?"

"You know," she said.

"Tell me."

"I want your dick."

"Oh? Did you make an appointment?"

Instead of answering, she stroked my length insistently.

"Do you want me to see if I can squeeze you in?" I asked.

"I want you to fuck me."

"I think that can be arranged."

"Good."

"But later," I added. When she began to pout, I kissed her. "We really *do* need to get cleaned up."

"But…?"

"Here," I said, "I've got an idea." Without waiting for her to reply, I turned her around, lowered my hips, and pressed my erection against her ass. After a small adjustment, I found the opening between her thighs and slid my dick forward.

She hissed in pleasure as my swollen glans brushed over her labia. Then I pulled back, tilted my hips, and probed her opening. She thrust her ass back at me, giving me a better angle. With that, I eased into her. As advertised, her pussy was incredibly hot. I paused for a moment to savor the feeling as her inner walls gripped my shaft. Then I reached for the washcloth and soap.

"Oh, God," she groaned. "Fuck me." When she realized that I was lathering the washcloth, she looked back with curious irritation. "What're you doing?"

"We need to get cleaned up, and I want to fuck you. So…"

"You're kidding," she said, stunned.

I shook my head and then rocked my hips. My cock moved within her and she closed her eyes in pleasure.

"Keep doing that," she begged.

"Not a problem," I said. Then I set the soap back in the soap dish and began to wash her shoulders. As I did, I slowly thrust into her.

"Oh, God, your dick feels so good."

"Uh-huh."

Then I gently scrubbed the washcloth over her brown skin, leaving a trail of suds. With my hips still moving slightly, I washed her arms and then her back. When I reached her hips, I gripped them and pumped into her at full speed. Slapping noises filled the shower stall as my hips slammed into her ass. After less than a minute, I buried myself inside her and shook my head to clear it. Then I reached around to wash her stomach and dangling breasts. Finally, I pumped into her a few more times before washing her legs (as far as I could reach, that is).

"Okay," I said at last, "rinse off."

She groaned when I gripped her hips and pulled us backward. I ducked to the side to let the water spray over my shoulder and rinse her back. With my dick still buried inside her, I pulled her mostly upright. As I did, the water washed over her shoulders and arms. When she was rinsed clean, I swept her hair out of the way and kissed the nape of her neck.

"Now let me wash your hair," I said.

She shook her head. "Keep fucking me."

"Uh-uh. I'll wash your hair… while you kneel in front of me."

"Huh?"

"Suck my cock while I wash your hair," I said.

I didn't have to ask twice. In a flash, she pulled off me, groaned at the loss, then turned and dropped to her knees. When she captured my dick with her mouth, I reached for the shampoo bottle. As she sucked, I lathered her hair, massaging her scalp and working the suds into her dark tresses. Her lips felt incredibly good, but she needed to rinse her hair so I could get cleaned up as well. I didn't want to, but I finally pulled her off my dick.

"Rinse your hair," I said.

"Let me keep sucking," she begged.

"Uh-uh," I said, pulling her to her feet.

"No. You wash, I'll keep sucking."

It wasn't a bad idea, so I didn't stop her as she returned to her knees. Then she took my cock as far into her mouth as she could. For a moment, I couldn't concentrate. So I let her suck me, her lips dancing over my erection. Her hair was still full of shampoo, but she didn't seem to mind—she was completely focused on my dick. Finally, I shook my head to clear it and reached for the washcloth.

As she fellated me, I washed my chest and upper body. Then I lathered my stomach and upper thighs, taking care not to get soap near her mouth.

She kept sucking while I washed and rinsed my hair. I wanted to let her make me come, but I also wanted to fuck her some more. So after a few minutes of indecision—and enjoyment—I pulled her off my dick and lifted her to her feet.

"Rinse your hair," I said.

She nodded obediently and stepped under the spray.

"You've got me so worked up," I whispered to her, "I'm going to take you back to my room, bend you over the sink, and fuck you silly."

"Oh, God," she breathed, "hurry up and turn off the water."

We dried off and then streaked back to my room, where Gina bent over the counter. Then she reached between her legs and looked over her shoulder expectantly. After a momentary pause—to tease her—I stepped behind her and rubbed her slippery pussy with the head of my cock. Then I gripped her hips and buried myself inside her.

As slammed into her, I glanced at her reflection in the mirror. For a moment, I watched as her breasts swayed with each thrust. Then I let my gaze drift upward. She had her eyes closed, her face a mask of pleasure. She looked more beautiful than ever.

"Come… in… my… mouth…," she said when she felt me increase my pace. "Please, come in my mouth."

When I pulled out of her pussy, my shiny erection bobbed gently. She straightened, turned, and dropped to her knees, moaning as she tasted herself on my shaft. Then she tried to swallow me whole. She could only take the first half of my dick, but she lavished attention on what she *could* swallow.

After only a minute of her hot mouth, I arched my back and felt my muscles tense. With an almost silent groan, I erupted. She locked her lips around my shaft, just below the glans, and pumped me with her fist. Each time I spurted into her mouth, she whimpered. After three strong

spurts and a couple of weaker ones, my orgasm began to subside.

Gina kept sucking me, and when I finally looked down, I realized that her hand was between her legs. She was busily rubbing her clit, working herself toward her own orgasm. With her lips locked around my shaft, her breath whistled through her nose as her release drew near.

Finally, she tensed up. With a low groan, she climaxed, her face contorted in ecstasy. For a long moment, she remained in that position. Then she released my manhood, sank back on her heels, and closed her eyes. It took her a moment to catch her breath. When she did, she looked up at me and smiled.

"God, I needed that," she said. "Thank you."

"No, thank *you*."

"We should shower like that more often."

I nodded.

"I thought you were crazy when you grabbed the washcloth," she said. "But that was kinda fun."

"I'm glad you liked it. Now, let's get going. We've still gotta meet our families."

When she nodded, I helped her to her feet. Then I drew her into my arms and kissed her. For a few moments, we simply held each other, both of us enjoying the post-orgasmic closeness.

✧ ✧ ✧

"So," Dad said after dinner, "what's the plan for tomorrow?"

"I'm supposed to call Kendall tonight," I said, "and tell her what room I'm in and where you all are staying."

Around the table, everyone nodded.

"They're going to leave Chattanooga by seventhirty tomorrow morning," I continued. "It'll only take 'em an hour and a half to get here, but she doesn't know how long it'll take to get through traffic."

Kendall had moved into UT dorms the previous two years, so she had first-hand experience with the traffic and crowds.

"Judging by today," Dad said, "I don't think tomorrow will be any different."

"That's what I figured," I said. "So I guess we should expect her call around ten. I don't know how long it'll take to get her moved into her apartment, though, but I don't imagine it'll be too long."

"That sounds like a plan," Dad said. When everyone nodded, he looked at Gina and me. "Do you two want to have breakfast with us, here at the hotel?" he asked. "Or do you want to eat on campus?"

"Don't condemned people usually get a last meal?" Chris asked with a grin. Then he turned to us. "Come eat at the hotel. You want to wait as long as you can before you have to start eating cafeteria food."

"Oh, it's not that bad," Elizabeth chided him.

"Still," Chris said. "We should probably give the kids one last good meal or something. You know, it's tradition."

She rolled her eyes at him and then turned to us. "It *would* be nice for all of us to have breakfast together," she said.

Gina and I glanced at each other, read the agreement in the other's eyes, then nodded.

"Eight o'clock?" Dad asked.

"Sounds good to me," I said.

Gina nodded.

"In that case," Mom said, "we should give the Paytons a call before it's too late. Then we'd better let you two get back to campus. We've got another long day ahead of us."

Elizabeth, Dad, and Chris all nodded. Erin and Leah merely looked at each other and grinned. After a little more small talk, we all headed up to our families' rooms. (Our parents had gotten adjacent rooms and then opened the connecting doors. Erin and Leah were staying in a room across the hall.)

Gina and I went into the Coulters' room to call Kendall. We gave her our phone numbers, room numbers, and the hotel's phone number. Since she had some last-minute packing to do and we were both tired, the conversation was short. She sounded excited, though. Finally, we said goodbye and hung up.

"I can't wait to see her," Gina said.

I simply nodded in agreement as we walked into my parents' room. We relaxed for a few minutes and then Gina and I excused ourselves so we could head back to campus.

"Paul?" she asked tentatively as we pulled into the parking garage.

"Yeah?"

"Um… do you think your roommate's moved in yet?"

"I doubt it. I mean, if he was gonna move in today, he'd've probably already been there. You know?"

"I guess."

"Why?" I asked. "What're you thinking?"

"Do you think I could spend the night in your room? I guess I'm just not ready to spend the night by myself."

"Sure," I said. "That'd be great."

"Thanks."

The North Carrick lobby was much quieter than earlier in the day, but there were still quite a few people milling around and relaxing on the couches. Mostly, they were guys who probably lived in the dorm, shooting the breeze and getting to know one another. A couple of them looked up as Gina and I passed by. I felt a surge of pride when I realized that they were watching her.

When we got to my suite, no one had magically appeared. My suitemates still weren't there, and my room was exactly how we'd left it. When I locked the door behind us, Gina flowed into my arms.

"Thank you," she whispered. Then, "I love you so much."

"I love you too," I said.

"Are you ready to go to sleep?" she asked.

"Well, I'm ready for bed, but I'm not ready to go to *sleep*," I said with a grin.

With an answering grin, we raced to see who could get undressed and into bed first. I won, but not by much.

Both of us were used to sleeping in queen-size beds, and even though the single bed was extra long, it was still too narrow for us to have much room. Fortunately, we didn't really care how much room we had.

CHAPTER TWO

When I woke up the next morning, Sunday, I was a little disoriented. I was on my left side, with my back to the wall and my arms around Gina. It took me a moment to realize that I wasn't in my room at home. When I did, I grinned to myself. Call me goofy, but I was excited to be living in the dorm. Sure, it wasn't as nice as my house, but it was still my first home away from home.

Gina stirred when I kissed her shoulder. Then I reached up and turned off my alarm (it was only a little after six; the alarm had been set for six thirty). Since my room faced east, pre-dawn light was already filtering through the blinds. I don't know why, but I've always been an early riser, and the sight of the sun's light filled me with the urge to get moving.

I kissed Gina again and she mumbled something. We didn't have to be at our parents' hotel until eight, so I figured we had a little time to fool around. Well, my morning hard-on figured we had time to fool around a little. So I pressed it against the soft swell of Gina's ass. Then I reached under the covers and cupped her breast.

"Izzit time to get up?" she asked groggily.

"Not yet."

"Mmmmm. Okay. G'night."

Instead of letting her go back to sleep, I nuzzled her warm neck and inhaled her scent. Then I kissed her again.

"Mmmmm, tha' feels nice," she mumbled.

When I ran my hand down her flank and rested it on her hip, she snuggled back against me. I gripped my erection and gently probed between her legs. Once my dick was comfortably nestled between her soft thighs, I returned my hand to her hip. Then I walked my fingers up her arm and gently cupped her breast.

"Mmmmm," she murmured.

Her nipple grew erect when I gently tweaked it. Then I began dry humping her ass. As she slowly awoke, I continued fondling her breast. When she yawned and stretched, I ran my hand down her side and let it rest on her hip.

"You're so hard," she said softly.

"Mmm hmm."

"What time is it?"

"A little before six thirty," I said.

"That's too early."

I kissed her shoulder again and then let my right hand drift toward her sex. "No it's not," I whispered. "It gives us just enough time to fool around before we have to meet our parents."

"But what if I wanna sleep?"

"I have ways of making you horny," I said in my best faux-sinister voice.

With that, I gently slid my hand lower. My fingertips brushed over the short hair on her mons but quickly reached the smooth skin of her labia. She sighed and parted her legs.

At first, I gently rubbed my fingers in circles over the base of her clit. Her pussy was still dry, so I concentrated on getting her worked up. After all, I didn't want to rasp my fingers over her sensitive inner folds.

After a few minutes, she sighed again and spread her legs further. When I tentatively slid my finger lower, I felt her heat and nascent moisture. She whimpered as I ran my middle finger along her dampening slit. As I spread her moisture, I pressed my hips against her ass. Then I started kissing her, concentrating on her shoulder, neck, and the sensitive spot behind her ear.

For the next several minutes, I teased her clit and slowly worked my finger into her. The whole time, I continued kissing her.

"Oh, God," she breathed, "that feels so good."

"Mmm hmm. Welcome to North Carrick, Miss Coulter," I said. "My name is Paul, and I'll be providing your wake up call this morning."

"Mmmmm, nice."

"And if you'd like, I can provide you with breakfast in bed."

"Breakfast in bed?"

"Yes," I said. "You can enjoy your breakfast of champions in an extensive range of positions. In addition, it comes complete with a high-protein vitamin injection."

"A high-protein vitamin injection," she echoed with a sigh. "Mmmmm."

"Yes, Miss Coulter," I said. "Your server will provide you with unlimited use of his injection tool."

"Mmmmm," she purred. "I think I'd like that."

"Yes, of course, Miss," I said. "Now, if you'll just lift your leg, I'll be happy to insert the injection tool."

When she raised her right leg, my dick sprang forward. I pulled my finger from her drenched pussy and reached between us. She gasped when I began rubbing my glans over her labia. Then I set the tip at her opening and eased forward. The crown parted her lips and then slid into her. I hooked my right hand behind her knee and pulled her leg up so I had a better angle. Then I began thrusting.

"Yes," she hissed. "Your… injection tool… is wonderful."

"Thank you, Miss. And if I may say so, your pussy is also wonderful. It'll be my pleasure to inject you this morning."

At that point, we stopped talking. The bed squeaked as I fucked her, but at the time, I didn't care. All I cared about was her pussy and how it surrounded my cock with warm wetness. I could almost feel the flutters when her muscles contracted around me. As I pumped into her, she arched her back and groaned softly.

"Oh, God," she gasped. "You're… hitting… that… spot."

Instead of answering, I continued thrusting. For the next few minutes, I merely plowed into her and concentrated on her reactions. When I felt the first quiver of her orgasm, I grinned to myself and began kissing her earlobe. With a low groan, she reached the point of no return. Her pussy clenched my cock and I had to force my way into her. Then I draped her leg over my hip and reached for her pussy. As her climax peaked, I began rubbing her clit, sustaining the peak and even driving her higher.

At first, she tried to stifle her scream by clenching her teeth, but the sensations of her orgasm were too intense to suppress. When another wave of pleasure washed over her, she cried out and clutched at the sheets, her back arching as ecstasy battered her senses. As her pussy spasmed around my invading organ, I felt a gush of moisture. She cried out again, softer this time, and

then went limp.

"Oh, God," she panted. "Oh, God. Oh, God. Oh, God." When she calmed down a little, she looked over her shoulder at me. "Oh, my God. That felt *so* good."

I nodded.

Then she reached back to caress my face. "Keep fucking me," she said.

"You're not too sensitive?"

"I'm sensitive, but I want to feel you come inside me."

"You want your 'high-protein vitamin injection'?"

"Mmm hmm."

"Your wish is my command, Miss." With that, I resumed thrusting.

She tensed up as the sensations overwhelmed her. "Oh, God, my pussy is tingling all over."

"Good tingling, or bad tingling?"

"Good," she said quickly. "*Very* good." Then she put her hand on my hip and drew me forward. "Keep fucking me. It feels so good."

She grimaced when I slid into her, but her expression softened as her pussy gradually became less sensitive. When I cupped her breasts and started thrusting quicker, she put her hands over mine and urged me on.

In a few short minutes, I was ready to explode. With one final jab, I buried myself inside her and erupted. She groaned low and soft as my come bathed her inner walls. I held on and simply closed my eyes in bliss. When my orgasm subsided, she turned her head and we grinned at each other as we panted.

"We hope you enjoy your stay at North Carrick, Miss Coulter," I said facetiously.

"I will, thank you. The service is *excellent*."

✧ ✧ ✧

When Kendall called us at the hotel, shortly after ten, we headed over to campus. It was just as crowded as the day before, with people and cars all over the place. We parked in the garage and then walked up the street to the Andy Holt Apartment building.

As soon as Kendall saw Gina and me, she ran toward us. I caught the tall girl in my arms and easily lifted her off her feet. When I set her down again, I gave her a sound kiss (a chaste kiss, of course, since we *were* in front of our families).

"Hi," I said.

"Hi yourself."

For a moment, I gazed into her bright blue eyes and it seemed like all was right in the world. Then she blushed and turned to Gina. The two girls hugged each other in greeting.

"How was moving in?" Kendall asked Gina.

"Horrible. My room's ugly."

"It's not so bad once you get some posters up and decorate a little," Kendall said.

"Well, it's still ugly," Gina said.

"You'll get used to it," Kendall said.

Behind us, our three families were greeting each other with hugs and handshakes. When Erin and Leah let go of Drew, he came over to me. As he extended his hand, Kendall and Gina went to greet the others.

"Hey, Paul," Drew said, his voice deep and even.

"Hey, Drew."

Instead of gripping my hand and trying to crush it—his handshake was almost as strong as my own—he simply squeezed once, firm but not challenging. As our eyes met, I silently chuckled at the memory of him confronting me about Kendall. He'd been a little drunk at the time. Worse, I'd convinced him that trying to bully me wasn't going to work (I dropped him with a wrestling take-down).

Surprisingly, he hadn't been bitter about it. And when he realized that I wasn't going to take advantage of his sister, we became friends. Gazing up at him as he towered over me, however, I knew I'd probably have a tough time taking him down again.

"Don't even *think* about it," he said with uncanny insight.

"Not on your life, Drew," I replied. "Not on your life."

"Good." Then he leaned down conspiratorially. "Kendall would kill me if you and I got into it again."

"You and me *both*," I said.

"That's for sure."

"Drew," his father called from the other side of their truck. "Let's get the Scout and this trailer unloaded before it gets any hotter."

"Okay, Dad," Drew said.

"Kendall," Adam said, "go get your room key and find out where we need to take all this stuff."

"Okay, Daddy." Then she turned to Gina. "You wanna go with me?"

"Sure," Gina said.

Then the two girls waved to me and headed toward the apartment building's lobby.

For a moment, I watched Kendall as she walked away from the parking lot. She was as tall as I, with long, long legs that ended in a gorgeous ass. Even wearing a pair of Bermuda shorts, her legs looked good. Then my eyes rose to her flared hips and narrow waist. From behind, I couldn't see her breasts, but I could still remember what they felt like: soft, round, and full. Since the day was so hot, she had her dark hair pulled back in a ponytail, which swished as she turned her head to talk to Gina.

"Hey, man," Drew said softly, "do I stare at your sister like that when *you're* around?"

"Sorry, man," I said, feeling my face heat.

Then he laughed. "It's cool. Kendall *is* hot, though" he said. "It's too bad she's my sister."

"Dude, it's not like you have any shortage of girls."

He shook his head. "Nope. Speaking of which…" Then he leaned close again. "Is Erin still serious about that Sean guy from camp?"

"Yeah," I said. "I think she is. Sorry."

"No, no problem. It's cool," he said. "I just don't wanna horn in on some other guy's territory, you know?"

"I know."

"She was pretty hung up on him when we were at camp."

"Yeah," I said.

"That's cool. I'm sure he's a nice guy." Then, "Good for her, I hope she's happy."

"I think she is."

"How about Leah?" he asked. "Is she going with anyone?"

"Not that I know of," I half lied. A week before, Leah and I had had sex, but we'd done it with Gina's consent (and later, with her participation). And while I knew Leah was interested in me, the Coulter sisters had a rule about not stealing each other's boyfriends. In reality, I think she enjoyed the sex with me, but she was more into girls (and the occasional guy, such as Drew).

"Cool," he said.

"What about Trish?" I asked. Drew normally hung out with Trish Delozier when he was at camp.

"She's just my summer girlfriend," he said. "It's cool. Neither of us really want a heavy commitment, so we just get together while we're at camp."

"Oh."

"Besides," he said, "I like to keep my options open."

"Uh-*huh*."

"So if Leah's available…," he said.

"Good option," I finished.

"Yep."

"Are you talking about us?" Leah asked as she and Erin joined Drew and me.

"We sure were, darlin'," Drew said, affecting a drawl. "I was just tellin' Paul how hot you look in those shorts."

Erin snorted with laughter, and if it weren't for Leah's dark complexion, her cheeks would've been beet red.

While we waited, Drew just about charmed Leah out of the shorts in question.

About fifteen minutes later, Kendall and Gina returned.

"I'm in apartment 304," Kendall said.

"Super," Adam said, "we won't have to wait for the elevator."

"She always manages to get rooms on the lower floors," Drew explained ruefully.

I nodded. I'd stayed in both her rooms in Clement Hall (but her parents didn't know that, of course).

"And we always end up taking everything up to them by the stairs," Drew continued.

"Aw, Drew," Leah said, "that shouldn't bother a big strong guy like you."

"Oh, it doesn't," he said. Then he turned to me. "But just once, I'd like to load all her books and stuff on one of those carts and ride the elevator. Just *once*, you know?"

"I know, man," I said. "We had to haul all my stuff up to the fourth floor yesterday. Except my free weights, that is."

As we opened the U-Haul trailer's doors, he looked at me and furrowed his brow. "What'd you bring weights for? Why not just work out in the Sports Bubble?"

The Sports Bubble was between HPER (the Health and Physical Education Recreation building, but everyone just called it "hyper" or the "hyper building") and the student aquatic center, and it was literally a big bubble. Imagine a building-sized inflated white bubble of plastic fabric—that's the Sports Bubble.

"I guess I wanted to have some weights in my room," I said, trying not to sound defensive.

"What'd you bring?" he asked.

"A curling bar, a couple of dumbbell bars, and about two hundred pounds of plates. Why?"

"Dude," he said as he picked up two milk crates full of books, "two hundred pounds is nothing." Then he indicated my chest and shoulders with a glance. "*You* know that. Besides, they've got every weight machine you could want in the Bubble. And HPER's got a weight room *full* of free weights."

"Yeah, I know," I said as I grabbed two milk crates myself. *How many books does one person need?* I wondered as I got a glimpse of the inside of the trailer. Then I returned my thoughts to the conversation with Drew. In reality, I knew about the Bubble, but I *hadn't* known about HPER's weight room. Since I'd been to UT so many times, I had skipped the campus tour during Freshman Orientation. In retrospect, that had probably been a mistake. "Hold on," I said, "how d'you know all this, Drew?"

"I just know it, I guess," he said. "I've got a couple of friends who play football here, though. And I've seen the weight rooms on recruiting visits."

"Recruiting visits?" I asked as we all trooped, ant-like, toward the apartment building.

"Yeah. For football."

"Oh. Yeah. Okay."

"They're not *official* recruiting visits, though. I can't have those until my senior year actually begins. But I've already talked to the linebackers coach. Twice."

"Drew's one of the top linebackers in the country," Adam said from ahead of us.

"Dad, you don't know that for sure," Drew said.

"I know what your coaches say," Adam said. "And I know what the scouts say. Those scouts see a lot of football players, son."

"Scouts?" Leah asked from behind us.

"*Dad*," Drew protested.

"Drew had college scouts looking at him all last year," Adam said proudly, ignoring his son's grumblings. "They said he's one of the quickest linebackers they've seen, especially for his size. And he was only a junior then."

"Dad, c'mon."

"After we got home from camp," Adam boasted, "Drew even got a phone call from Coach Majors, UT's Head Football Coach."

"Really?" Leah asked. "Cool."

At that point, we reached the building. The fire escape door was propped open, and we weren't the only people using the stairs to move belongings into the apartments. With each of us carrying boxes or crates, however, the conversation died. On the third floor, Kendall led us toward her apartment. As she went to put her key in the lock, the door swung open. A tall, buxom blonde stepped back, surprised.

"Kendall," she said. "Hi." Then she realized there were a bunch of us in the hallway. "Y'all come on in," she said, stepping back.

"Thanks," Kendall said.

"Phoebe and I took the back bedroom," the blonde continued. "So you and Abby can have the front bedroom. Okay?"

"Sure," Kendall said as we all filed into the apartment and then turned left to head down the hall.

Once we stacked our boxes in the first bedroom, we all crowded into the living room.

"Everyone," Kendall said, "this is Vivian Fourier. Viv and I went to school together in Chattanooga."

"Hi, Mr. Payton," Vivian said as she stepped forward and shook Adam's hand. Then she turned and greeted Melissa. "It's good to see you again, Mrs. Payton."

As Kendall introduced the rest of us, I studied Vivian. She was about as tall as me, with long, tanned legs, a slim waist, and full, attractive breasts. With a start, I realized that she was practically a blonde version of Kendall. (Vivian was actually a bit slimmer, with slightly smaller breasts.) Finally, I tore my eyes away from the blonde girl as Kendall turned to introduce me.

"And this," she said, "is my boyf—" Flustered, she darted a glance at Gina. A half-second later, she looked at her parents. "Um… this is my boyfriend, Paul," she said at last.

Gina's and my parents knew about our three-way relationship with Kendall, but Kendall's parents still thought I was her boyfriend and Gina was simply her friend. I was pretty sure that Kendall's mom suspected what was really going on, but she kept it to herself. Drew probably knew as well, but he hadn't said anything either.

"Hi," I said, extending my hand.

"It's good to finally meet you" Vivian said as she shook my hand. "Kendall's told me so much about you." With a warm smile she squeezed my hand once, released it, and then turned to Kendall. "Hey, I wish I could stick around, but I've gotta go meet *my* boyfriend. Just put your stuff in your room and wherever else you can. Phoebe and I figured we'll just sort things out when we all get our stuff here. Okay?"

"Okay," Kendall said.

"It was nice to meet y'all," Vivian said with a smile. Then she turned to Kendall. "Phoebe and I cleaned the place last night, so it should be spotless."

"Thanks!" Kendall said.

"Ugh. It was horrible. And Phoebe's a neat freak. So we scrubbed the place top to bottom. Anyway, I'm already late, so I'd better run. Have fun moving in," Vivian continued. "And I'll see you tonight. Bye."

"Bye," we all echoed.

After Vivian left, Kendall gave us a quick tour. The apartment's entry foyer led to the center of the apartment. The living room and a small kitchen were to the right. The living room was already furnished with a couch, chair, end table, and a kitchen table with four chairs (by the kitchen, of course).

The main hallway was to the left, with bedrooms on the right, study areas on the left, and a bathroom at the end of the hall on the left (although the sinks were at the end of the hallway). Each bedroom held two beds, a dresser, a closet, and an air conditioner. The rooms weren't *quite* as plain as the ones in the Carrick dorms, but they definitely weren't fancy.

After our tour, we headed back downstairs. With all twelve of us, it only took two more trips before we emptied the trailer. Except for the books—*lots* of books—most of the stuff was pretty light: just clothes, linens, and a large stuffed bear (named Paul, of course).

"We should've brought some tea," Melissa said as we caught our breath after the final load.

"I don't think that little refrigerator could make enough ice to cool two drinks, let alone twelve," Adam said.

"Still," Melissa said, "I'd love a glass of ice-cold tea right now."

"I've got an idea," Mom said. When everyone turned to her, she continued. "Why don't we ladies run to the grocery store and stock Kendall's kitchen for her? We can pick up a Styrofoam cooler and a bag or two of ice. Then when we get back, we can make some tea and lemonade."

"And while we're gone," Elizabeth said, "Kendall, Gina, and the girls can get Kendall's stuff unpacked."

"Drew and I can move all the books and set up the crates here," I said, indicating a wall in the living room. "We can sorta create bookshelves."

"What're we supposed to do?" Chris asked, indicating my dad and Adam.

"Make yourselves useful," Elizabeth told him.

"I've got to take the trailer back to U-Haul," Adam said.

"We can help him with that," Chris said.

"Shirker," Elizabeth teased him.

"Honey," he said, "returning trailers is serious business."

"I'm sure it is," she said. "So serious that it takes three grown men to accomplish it." Then she smiled. "Just don't get side-tracked."

"Yes, ma'am," he said.

"Okay," Dad said. "It sounds like we've got a plan."

With that, Mom, Elizabeth, and Melissa headed out, followed by Dad, Chris, and Adam. Kendall and the other girls headed into Kendall's room to begin unpacking. Drew and I merely looked at each other as we suddenly found ourselves alone.

"Why do we always get the grunt work?" he asked me with a wry grin.

"'Cause we're the grunts?"

"You got *that* right, man."

It actually took us less than fifteen minutes to haul all the book-laden milk crates into the living room and arrange them against the wall. They actually made pretty good shelves. We were *just* about to sit down and relax when we heard someone trying to open the front door. A moment later, when the door still hadn't opened, Drew and I went to investigate. I swung the door open and…

"—must've given me the wrong key."

"Hey, Abby," I said.

She looked up in surprise. "Paul! What're you doing here?"

Abby had been Kendall's roommate since the two girls were freshmen. I hadn't seen her in several months, but she looked just like I remembered. She wasn't as tall as Kendall, but she was a few inches taller than Gina, maybe 5'6". She had sandy blonde hair and blue eyes, with a cute face and a heartbreaking smile.

With a start, I realized that I was standing in the doorway. Then I realized that her family was standing behind her.

"Come on in," I said as I belatedly stepped aside. "We were just helping Kendall move in."

"Paul," Abby said once I shut the door, "this is my mom, Patricia, and my dad, Bud. And that's my brother, Walt. Mom, Dad, this is Kendall's boyfriend, Paul… um… Paul…" She frowned as she tried to recall my last name. "Hughes!" she blurted a moment before I had to remind her.

"Pleased to meet you, Mr. and Mrs. Evans," I said as I shook her parents' hands. Then I shook

Walt's hand. He was about Erin's age, and sturdy, but shy.

"Call us Bud and Pat," Abby's father said.

"This is Kendall's brother, Drew," Abby said.

After another round of handshakes, Abby went looking for Kendall. While she did, I explained that our parents were out buying groceries and returning the U-Haul trailer.

"Do you need any help moving Abby's stuff?" I asked.

"No," Bud said, "we can get it."

"Seriously," I said. "We just finished moving everything in here. We were just going to sit down, since we didn't have anything else to do. We'd be happy to help."

"We wouldn't want to impose," Abby's mom said.

"It's not a problem, ma'am," Drew said. "Like Paul said, we'd be happy to help."

"Okay then," Bud said. "I'm not one to turn down free labor. Come on, boys."

Abby didn't have as many books as Kendall, so with just the four of us men, it only took three trips to get all her stuff. About the time we brought in the last load, Dad, Chris, and Adam returned. A few minutes later, our moms arrived with armloads of groceries.

After introductions, the women started putting food away while the men opened the beer my dad and the others had brought back. When Kendall came out of her room, she stopped dead in her tracks.

"What?" I asked, a beer halfway to my lips.

To our surprise, she started laughing.

"What?" her father echoed.

"It's a *dry* campus, Daddy," she said, still laughing as she pointed to our beers.

"Oh, *shoot*," he said. "I completely forgot."

"Do you think they'll give us detention hall?" Chris asked.

"Can we take the beer with us if they do?" Bud asked with an eager look.

At that, all the men laughed.

"What's all the ruckus out here?" Elizabeth asked as she emerged from the kitchen.

"We can't have beer here," Chris said. "It's a dry campus."

"The kids aren't here *a day*," Elizabeth said, "and you're going to get them kicked out of school."

"It's not that bad," Kendall said. Then she turned to us. "Just don't let anyone catch you with that. It's *technically* a dry campus, but no one's real picky about it unless you're obvious."

"Gentlemen," Chris said, raising his beer bottle, "to undercover beer."

"To undercover beer," we chorused.

Elizabeth merely shook her head and returned to the kitchen.

Later, when Bud tried to pay Kendall's father for half of the groceries, Adam refused.

"You've got to let me give you *some*thing," Bud said. When Adam still refused, Bud tried another tack. "Okay, then," he said, "do y'all have plans for the rest of the afternoon?"

"No," Adam said.

"Then y'all come on over to our house. We can cool off in the pool and throw some steaks on the grill."

"Did he say 'steaks on the grill'?" Chris asked my father.

"I believe he *did*," Dad replied.

"What do you make of an offer like that?" Chris asked.

"It'd be rude not to accept."

"Rude."

"Besides," Dad said, "we'll have to check out the 'Knoxville Method' of grilling."

"Exactly," Chris said. "It could be *any*thing."

"Gas," Dad said.

"Charcoal."

"Wood."

"Smoking," Chris said.

"Slow roasting," Dad countered.

"The possibilities are endless," Chris agreed with mock earnestness.

"Y'all're men after my own heart," Bud said with a good-natured laugh. Then he stuck his head into the kitchen. "Patty, I invited everyone over to grill out and cool off in the pool. Is that okay?"

"Sure," she said. Then, "Does everyone have a swimsuit?"

"We can stop by the hotel and get our bathing suits," Mom said from the kitchen. (The Radisson had a pool, so everyone had brought their suits.)

"We don't have ours," Melissa said.

"You can borrow one of mine, Mom," Kendall said.

"I've got an extra suit that'll fit you, Adam," Bud said.

"Walt probably has a suit that'll fit Drew," Patricia said.

After a general chorus of agreement, we made the rest of our plans.

✧ ✧ ✧

The Evanses lived in a neighborhood full of twenty-year-old houses with big lawns. Their pool wasn't as nice as the Coulters', but it was incredibly refreshing, so we didn't complain. While Bud, Dad, Chris, and Adam threw steaks on the grill, the rest of us goofed off in the pool.

Abby's poor brother, Walt, almost died of shock when he saw Erin and Leah in their bikinis. Abby and her mom wore one-piece swimsuits, while my mom and Elizabeth had donned modest two-piece suits. Melissa was a little uncomfortable in one of Kendall's high-cut bikinis, but she looked good in it. (She *was* the prototype for The Goddess Kendall, after all.)

Eventually, Erin coaxed Walt out of his shell. He was still diffident and painfully shy, but he started loosening up. Leah mostly flirted with Drew, while Kendall, Gina, Abby, and I hung out in the shallow end of the pool.

Our fathers, of course, tended the grill. When the food was ready, Adam said grace and then we dug in. We sat around the patio on chairs, benches, and even the wide edges of the brick planters. While we ate, the conversations ranged far and wide.

Bud was a plumbing contractor and Patricia was a substitute teacher. He was also a former Army man, so he and Adam had a lot to talk about. Bud also had a fondness for grilling that the other men shared. Our moms talked with Patricia about raising teenagers, sending them off to college, and a dozen other things.

Erin, Leah, Drew, and Walt sat together. Walt, as it turned out, was also a football player. And even though he wasn't as serious about it as Drew was, it gave them something to talk about. Kendall, Gina, Abby, and I talked about life in the dorms, the best dining halls, and things like

that.

Too soon, however, the time came for us to go. Dad had a trip to fly and Chris had to go to work the next day. So they planned to drive the Coulters' station wagon back to Atlanta that night. Adam had to work as well, so he had to head back to Chattanooga. Since Mom and Elizabeth would have to drive through Chattanooga on the way to Atlanta, they had planned to give Melissa and Drew a ride home on Tuesday.

After we helped Bud and Patricia clean up, we thanked them for being such gracious hosts. Then Adam said goodbye, got in his Scout, and headed toward Chattanooga. The rest of us went back to the hotel. Once there, Dad and Chris packed their suitcases and loaded them in the station wagon. Before they left, Dad took me aside.

"Are you ready for this, son?" he asked.

"I think so."

"I think so too." Then he looked at me seriously. "When I first went to school, it took me a while to figure out how everything worked. For a couple of weeks, I was on auto-pilot."

I nodded.

"But I always knew that if I really needed anything, my parents would help. You probably want to try to do everything on your own—I know *I* did—but we'll help you if you need it. With advice, money, or just someone to talk to."

"Thanks," I said.

"College is a big change," he said. Then he chuckled darkly. "It was a big change for *me*, at least. But I know you'll do fine. You've got a good head on your shoulders and you know how to use it."

"Thanks, Dad."

"Do you remember a couple of years ago," he asked, turning philosophical, "when you asked me about something you had to tell Gina, but didn't want to?"

"Yeah." At the time, I needed to tell Gina about Amy—a girl I had cheated on Gina with—but I didn't want to. In oblique terms, I had asked Dad about it.

"Do you remember what I told you?" he asked.

I nodded.

"I quoted Polonius, from *Hamlet*."

I nodded again.

"You read *Hamlet* in high school, right?"

"Uh-huh."

"Polonius was saying farewell to his son, Laertes, and he gave him a lot of good advice. I don't remember the whole speech, and I'm no Shakespeare, but I do remember this: 'This above all: to thine ownself be true.' If you're honest with yourself, son, you'll never go wrong. Remember that."

"I will, Dad," I said.

"I know you will, son," he said. "You're a good man."

Suddenly, my chest tightened and I blinked several times to clear my eyes.

When he extended his hand, I gripped it. Then he pulled me into a hug. "I'm proud of you, son," he said, his voice thick with emotion.

"Thanks, Dad," I said softly.

When we separated, we both smiled diffidently.

"Here," he said as he reached into his pocket. "Here's something for you." Then he handed me a folded envelope.

He'd written "For an emergency, from Dad" on it.

"I'll go ahead and tell you what's in there," he said, "so don't open it." When I nodded, he continued. "It's fifty dollars." Before I could reply, he said, "I know you've still got money left over from your birthday and graduation, but I want you to keep this in reserve."

I nodded.

"When I left for college, my father gave me an envelope with twenty dollars in it. That was a lot of money in those days, and it was certainly a lot of money for my father. He told me to use the money only in case of an emergency."

"What happened to it?" I asked.

"I kept it all through college," he said. "It was like my father was always there, just in case I needed him. And when I graduated, I opened the envelope and took him to dinner with the money." Then Dad looked at me earnestly. "You don't have to do the same thing, but I want you to know that I'm always there if you need me."

I swallowed hard, and once again, I had to blink to clear my eyes. "Thanks, Dad," I said.

"You're welcome, son."

For a drawn-out moment, we were silent.

"You'll do fine, Paul," he said at last.

"Thanks, Dad. I'll try."

"I know you will. Now, let's head back inside before your mom sends out a search and rescue party."

Ten minutes later, we all said goodbye and they drove off. Then I took Kendall, Gina, and Abby back to the apartment. We hung out there for a while, but we were all tired. So we made plans to meet Kendall for breakfast and then I kissed her goodnight. Finally, Gina and I headed back to our dorms, around eleven o'clock.

"Paul?" she asked as we walked up the hill to Carrick.

"Yeah?"

"Will you call me when you get to your room?"

"Sure."

"Thanks," she said.

In the breezeway, I held her for a moment. Then I kissed her goodnight and we each headed into our dorms. When I got to my room, the paper sign from my suitemates' door was gone completely, and the sign with my name on it was on the floor of the foyer. At first, I picked it up and tried to tape it back on my door, but the tape wouldn't hold. Then I realized that I was trying to salvage a simple piece of paper with my name on it, so I crumpled it.

Since it was so late, I decided not to introduce myself to my suitemates (if they were even there). When I unlocked my door, I discovered that my roommate had moved in, but he wasn't there. Instead, I found a note taped to the mirror.

Hi roomie. Sorry I missed you. I'm spending the night with my girlfriend. Catch you later. He signed it "T."

His stuff was mostly piled on his bed or shoved in the closet. I didn't see any possum skins or

water bongs, so I figured he wasn't a redneck or militant Rastafarian. Then I headed back into the foyer to call Gina. After two rings, a strange voice answered the phone.

"May I please speak to Gina?" I asked.

"Gina? Who? Oh, yeah. Sorry. Hold on a second." I heard her knock on Gina's door and then heard the scrape of a palm covering the mouthpiece.

"Paul?" Gina said.

"Hi," I said. "Have you met your roommate yet?"

"Uh-uh. She's moved in, but she's not here. She left me a nice note, though. She's spending the night at home."

"Same here," I said. "My roommate's stuff is here, but he's spending the night with his girlfriend, wherever that is."

"Paul?"

"Yeah?"

"Do you… I mean… do you mind if I spend the night there?" she asked.

"Nope. Come on over. I'll meet you in the lobby."

"Okay," she said, brightening. "I'll grab some clothes and see you in a few minutes."

I hung up the phone, locked my door, and headed down to the lobby to wait. When Gina arrived, I escorted her upstairs. Once in my room, we took off our clothes and climbed into bed. As she nestled against me, I wrapped my arms around her, kissed her shoulder, then closed my eyes. I think I fell asleep in record time.

✧ ✧ ✧

Monday morning, Kendall, Gina, and I joined our families for breakfast at the University Center. The building was centrally located, and served as a sort of campus community center. It held the main UT bookstore, a restaurant, a magazine and snack shop, meeting rooms, conference rooms, and an auditorium. It even had a recreation center in the basement, with bowling, pool tables, ping-pong, and a TV lounge.

The restaurant, Smokey's, was crowded, but we found two tables together and squeezed around them. Breakfast was okay. They had a wide variety of food, from eggs and bacon to cereal and Danish pastries, but it was basically cafeteria food. I simply had a bowl of cereal; I didn't want to start gaining the dreaded "Freshman Fifteen."

"After breakfast," Mom said, "let's go down to a bank on Cumberland"—the main road near campus, nicknamed The Strip—"and open checking accounts."

My parents and the Coulters had brought along traveler's checks to open local checking accounts for Gina and me. We'd need them to pay our tuition and fees, buy books, and pay for anything else we needed for school. I had a checking account in Atlanta, but I didn't use it much. Besides, during the school year, we'd need checks drawn on a local bank. (We didn't need them for paying fees or buying books, however, since the university understood that many students were coming from out of state.)

"I've got to go to the Financial Aid office," Kendall said.

"Why financial aid?" I asked. "I thought you were on a full scholarship."

"That's what my scholarship is," she said patiently, "financial aid."

"Oh."

"I'm supposed to meet Abby at the apartment and we're going to go over there together. She's

got a couple of scholarships, too."

"Why does she have a couple and you have just one?" I asked.

"Because mine's from the university," she explained, "and it's a four-year merit scholarship. It covers everything: my tuition, fees, and books. Abby's got scholarships from different sources. She's got an English Department scholarship, another one from an educational foundation in Washington, D.C., and a couple of smaller ones from other foundations and grants. Altogether, they pay for her tuition and most everything else."

"Does she have to re-apply for the scholarships every year?" Mom asked.

"Yes," Kendall said. "I just have to keep my grades up. She's got to write essays and fill out applications. She's gotten pretty good at it, though. She's usually awarded more than she needs, so she can always decline a couple. I don't think she's really been worried about being able to pay for tuition since she was a freshman." Then she looked at me. "Why didn't *you* apply for any scholarships?"

"I dunno," I said. "I guess I didn't think I could get one. I mean, I'm not as smart as you."

"Nonsense," Mom said.

Kendall nodded in agreement. "With your SAT scores and grades," she said, "you could've gotten scholarships." Then she turned to Gina. "You too. Your SATs were better than Paul's, right?"

Gina nodded. "I guess I didn't think of it," she said. "Besides, I really wanted… oh, never mind. Sorry."

Kendall glanced at me and lifted an eyebrow.

I merely shrugged in reply. Gina had been sullen all morning, and I couldn't figure out why.

"She's right, you know," Mom said to me, breaking my train of thought. "You should try for a scholarship next year."

"It'd be easy," Kendall added. "Abby and I can help you. We can help you too, Gina. Goodness, it's free money."

"Yeah, whatever," Gina said. When her mother looked at her sharply, she changed her attitude. "I mean, thanks," she said. "That'd be cool."

What's wrong *with her?* I wondered. Then it hit me. *UCLA.* I shook my head sadly. I wanted Gina to be happy, but I didn't want to reopen old wounds, so I kept my mouth shut.

"Mom?" Erin asked. "Can Leah and I just hang out with Drew today? He said he'd show us around campus. We don't really have to go with you all, do we?"

Mom looked at Elizabeth. Then they turned to Melissa. I don't know how they do it, but mothers seem to be able to communicate with ESP or something. As one, they all nodded.

"You'd probably be bored with us anyway," Mom said.

"I can give Drew my apartment key," Kendall said. "Since I'll be with Abby all day, I won't need it."

"Cool," Leah said.

Once again, our mothers shared a knowing look. For all her supposed ignorance, I think Melissa knew *exactly* what was going on.

Kendall and I shared a look of our own, and I knew that she understood what I was thinking. Since coming to UT, two years before, Kendall and her mother had actually grown a lot closer. And I think Kendall understood that on *some* issues, her mother feigned ignorance. I guess

Melissa thought that if she didn't openly acknowledge something, it didn't exist. She knew the truth—she wasn't *completely* clueless—but if she didn't bring up certain things, she wouldn't have to deal with the consequences.

"Okay," Mom said, "we'd better get down to the bank before it gets too crowded."

"And *we* need to meet Abby," Melissa said. "Drew, you and the girls can come back to the apartment with us. Then we'll give you the key and go to the Financial Aid office. Okay?"

"Sure, Mom," he said.

"Why don't we meet back at Kendall's apartment this afternoon," Mom suggested. Then she turned to Melissa and Kendall. "Do you think we can open checking accounts, pick up schedules, pay fees, and buy books before four o'clock?"

"You should be able to," Melissa said. Then she looked at her watch. "It's almost eight thirty now, though, so you'd better get going."

"Okay," Elizabeth said. "Let's go."

With that, we stood. I kissed Kendall goodbye and then we all went our separate ways.

Down on the Strip, we found a bank that we liked. (Although I don't know how much science can be involved when we simply picked the bank with the state's name in it: First Tennessee.) Gina and I filled out the forms for our checking accounts. Then we got our temporary checks.

Mom and Elizabeth signed over thousands of dollars in traveler's checks so Gina and I could make our first deposits. For a brief moment, I was excited to have that much money at my disposal. Then I realized that it would all be gone once I paid my tuition and fees.

Easy come, easy go, I thought with a sigh.

Once we finished our business at the bank, we walked back to campus.

If I thought the campus had been crowded during the past two days, I was wrong. Of the thousands of students who attended UT, only a third of them actually lived in the dorms. *All* of them had to pick up their schedules and pay their fees. And even with two days set aside for doing just that, the campus was still a madhouse of people, cars, and more people.

First, we went to the Registrar's office and stood in line. Gina and I had actually registered for classes with our advising centers, during Freshman Orientation. So we already knew what our classes would be, but we still had to pick up the official printed schedule and confirm our attendance (and our permanent addresses, of course). Surprisingly, the wait wasn't as long as we thought it would be. We left the Registrar's office a little after ten thirty.

Then we headed to the Bursar's office to pay our fees. *That* took a while. The process was actually simple, but the lines were long. Even with a dozen cashiers, things still moved slowly. Finally, we reached the window and paid for our tuition, room and board, activity fees, parking permits, and more things than I cared to pay attention to. Then I wrote the biggest check I'd ever written in my life. I couldn't believe how much it cost to go to UT as an out-of-state student. When I looked at Mom, she read my mind.

"Mmm hmm," she said. "It *is* expensive."

I think I thanked her about a dozen times. And I made her promise to thank Dad too.

When we were done, we decided to get some lunch before going to the bookstore. Unfortunately, Smokey's was *packed*. Instead, we decided to walk back to the Strip and see which restaurant appealed to us. We ended up eating sandwiches in a really cool deli named Sam & Andy's.

At the bookstore, I marveled at the endless shelves and stacks of books. Mom and I headed in one direction while Gina and Elizabeth headed in another. The bookstore was laid out with different sections for different subjects, but there were a *lot* of different subjects. Fortunately, the shelves and stacks were clearly labeled with the *classes* that required the books. So it was simply a matter of finding the book for Architecture 101, Architecture 121, and so on.

After thirty minutes of searching, I found all of my required textbooks. My calculus book could've been used as a large doorstop, but my American literature book was thick enough to use as a stepstool. Worse, the books were expensive. Let me say that again. The books were *expensive*.

I had no idea what material my *Design in Architecture* book covered, but for *eighty dollars*, I knew I'd soon find out. And at that price, I'd revere every single page.

When we finally got to the cash register, half an hour later, I wrote the *second*-largest check I'd ever written in my life. Then we waited for Gina and her mother, who were in another line.

After Gina paid for her textbooks, we headed upstairs to the main part of the bookstore. In the lobby, we ran into Kendall, Abby, and Melissa.

"Hi," Kendall said. Then she looked at my two bags of books. "They loaded you down, huh?"

"Good grief," I said.

"How'd it go at Financial Aid?" Mom asked.

"The lines were long," Melissa said. "As usual."

"But we got everything taken care of," Kendall added.

"Hey," I asked, "do you want us to wait around until you get your books? Then we can all head back to your apartment together." When I looked around for support, everyone else nodded.

"It's nice and cool in here," Elizabeth said. "Better than outside." Then she turned to Mom. "Let's see if the restaurant is crowded. We can sit down and have a cold drink."

"That sounds *wonderful*," Mom said.

"Do you want me to go with you?" I asked Kendall. "To help carry books?"

"Sure," she said.

Then I turned to Gina.

"I think I'm just gonna go get something to drink with Mom," she said. "Okay?"

"Sure," I said.

"Here," my mom said to me, "let me carry your books."

I handed her the first bag.

"Oh, jeez, these *are* heavy," she said.

"I'll get the other bag," Elizabeth said.

"Thanks," I told her as I handed it over.

"You can go have a glass of iced tea with them if you want, Mom," Kendall said to Melissa. "I can handle shopping for books."

"Are you sure?" Melissa asked.

"Mmm hmm. Go sit down and relax."

"Thanks," Melissa said.

With that, Kendall, Abby, and I turned and headed back down the stairs to the bookstore.

"What's up with Gina?" Kendall asked as soon as Abby headed off to find her books.

"I think she's a little depressed about being *here*, instead of UCLA."

"That again?"

I nodded.

"I think she's a little more than depressed," Kendall said. "She's kind of angry about it."

"Yeah, well, I was beginning to get that impression."

"Do you think she'll get over it?" she asked.

"I hope so, but I don't know."

"I think she's probably also feeling the shock of moving to a new city, going to a new school, and things like that. She's been displaced from her comfort zone."

"Comfort zone?" I asked. "Huh?"

"Sorry," Kendall said. "I guess I'm talking like a psychology major."

"No kidding."

"Gina's just having to deal with a lot of new things. Things outside her zone of comfortable familiarity: her 'comfort zone,'" Kendall said. "And since she often acts impulsively, she relies on prior experience to guide her."

"You're doing it again," I said.

"Sorry. Okay, how do I explain this…?"

"Oh, I understood all the *words*," I said. "I just didn't understand what you *meant*."

For a moment, Kendall stopped and thought. Then she said, "Gina's flying blind, and it scares her. When she's scared, she gets angry as a defense mechanism."

"You got *that* right," I said.

"Whereas you," she continued, "think about things and analyze your surroundings. So even though you're flying blind too, you know how to read your instruments." Then she smiled hopefully. "Did I get that analogy right?"

"You got it right," I said. Then I impulsively kissed her. "You're going to make a great doctor."

"Thank you," she said, blushing.

"Now come on," I said with a grin. "Let's get all those psychology books you need to be so… erudite."

"Good word," she said, grinning in reply.

"Thank you." Then I made a funny face. "I learnt good readin' an' writin' in that there high school."

"Come on," she said with a bright laugh.

✧ ✧ ✧

Forty-five minutes later, we rejoined Abby at the top of the stairs. Then we found our mothers and headed back to Kendall's apartment. When we got there, Drew, Erin, and Leah were waiting for us. Kendall's roommates were out.

I studied Drew and the girls, looking for any signs of what I suspected they'd been up to. Fortunately, I didn't see anything out of the ordinary. Maybe Leah was smiling a little too broadly, but other than that, they looked fairly innocent.

When I glanced at Drew, however, he flashed me a grin and shrugged unrepentantly. I couldn't help but shake my head in wonder. A few minutes later, I pulled him aside.

"Dude," I whispered, "I don't wanna pry into your business, but did you…?"

He looked at me sharply for a moment, but then decided that I wasn't simply giving him a

hard time for fooling around with Leah and my sister. So he nodded.

"With Leah?" I asked.

"Yes," he said slowly.

"All the way?"

Once again, he looked at me intently, but nodded just the same.

"You know she's not on the pill?" I asked quietly.

"She told me," he said. Then, "Don't worry. I used protection. I'm not stupid."

"I didn't say you were—"

"I know," he said before I could work up a good stammer. "Remember? I said I like to keep my options open."

I nodded.

"Babies eliminate a lot of options. You know?"

"I know better than I want to," I said.

"Yeah," he said, "I kinda figured you might."

In spite of myself, I chuckled at him. "You know," I said, "you're just like Kendall in some ways."

"Oh?"

"She's got this *serious* insight into other people."

"We get it from our Dad," he said. "I don't know how he does it, but he can read me like a book." Then he leaned close. "And he can read Kendall better than me. He plays a good ol' boy when he needs to, but he's scary smart when it comes to people. Just remember that. Okay? He knows a *lot* more than he lets on."

For a moment, I panicked. If Adam knew about Kendall and me, he'd… Then I took a deep breath. "I'll remember that," I said as calmly as I could. "Thanks."

"Don't mention it." Then he grinned at me. "Your sister is *seriously* hung up on that Sean guy," he said. "I hope he's good enough for her."

"If he's not, we'll set him straight," I said.

"You got *that* right."

With a look of complete understanding, we rejoined our families.

"What were you two up to?" Kendall asked us quietly.

"Just talking about football," I said.

"Football?" she asked, suspicious.

"Yeah," Drew said smoothly. "I was telling Paul about talking to Coach Majors."

"It sounded pretty cool," I said.

"Pretty cool, huh?" she asked skeptically. "Uh-*huh*."

"Who wants tea?" Melissa asked as she emerged from the kitchen with a tray of glasses.

I was glad for the interruption, since it got me off the hook with Kendall. Then I groaned inwardly. Despite being a good Southern gentleman, I've always *hated* iced tea. But it would be rude to refuse, especially after Melissa had gone to the trouble of making it.

"And who wants lemonade?" Mom asked as she stepped out of the kitchen.

With a sigh of relief, I reached for a sweat-beaded glass of fresh lemonade.

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Later, we got cleaned up and decided to go someplace nice for dinner. We ended up at this

cool restaurant that used to be a train station. During dinner, we had several bottles of wine, and I think even Gina enjoyed herself.

I sat between Kendall and Gina, with my arm around Kendall and Gina holding my hand in her lap. Drew sat with his arm comfortably around Leah, and she looked like she was on top of the world.

We lingered over dessert—which I skipped—and talked until it was obvious that the restaurant was closing.

"Hey, Drew," I said as we walked out to the parking lot. "Do you wanna crash in my room tonight? You can sleep on the floor."

With the choices being to stay with his mother in a hotel room or to crash in the dorm, Drew made the only logical choice that a normal seventeen-year-old guy could make.

"Sure, man," he said. "Sounds great. Mom?"

"Are you sure, honey?" Melissa asked. "Wouldn't a bed be more comfortable than the floor?"

"Paul's got a rug, Mom. Besides, we can throw down a blanket or something. I'll be fine."

"I don't know…"

"I'll be fine, Mom," he repeated.

"Okay," she said at last.

Then I almost burst out laughing as I watched Leah. Her face was a mask of concentration, and I'm sure she was trying to figure out an excuse for *her* to stay in my dorm room too.

When I glanced at Gina, I had a panicky thought. What if she wanted to spend the night with me? Since my roommate was probably there, I didn't think we could, but I still didn't know what she was thinking. And then I remembered the visitation rules. Since it was Monday, there wasn't any visitation anyway. So I would've had to sneak her in. Fortunately, I think she'd already resigned herself to spending the night in her own room.

Since we were so close to campus, Kendall, Gina, Abby, and Drew rode in the Jeep with me. Abby had to sit on Drew's lap in the front seat, but she held on tight. I still had the soft top and doors on, though, which made things a *little* safer. I didn't like cramming five people into the Jeep (and neither did our mothers), but everything was fine.

From the garage—where I got to display my new non-commuter parking permit—we walked back up Andy Holt Avenue. I kissed Kendall goodnight at the door to the apartment building and then Gina, Drew, and I headed toward the Presidential Complex.

In the breezeway between the North and South Carrick lobbies, I held Gina for a moment. Drew discreetly hung back and pretended to be interested in the people in the courtyard.

"Are you okay?" I asked her.

"I guess," she said with a shrug.

"You just seem kinda bummed out today."

"I'm just tired."

"Okay," I said, although I didn't entirely believe her. For a moment, I looked into her eyes.

She smiled wanly.

"Call me when you get to your room," I said.

"Okay."

"I love you."

"I love you too," she said with a sigh.

After I kissed her goodnight, I watched as she walked into the lobby.

"I hope you don't mind me saying so," Drew said, "but she didn't seem real happy."

"She's not."

"Is she upset about Kendall?"

For a long moment, I simply gazed at him.

He returned my gaze with calm composure.

"You know," I said, "I've never really asked you how much you know about the situation with Kendall, Gina, and me." I paused for a moment as we walked inside. "So now I'm asking," I said. "What exactly *do* you know?"

"I think I pretty much figured out what was going on a couple of years ago," he said coolly.

"And it doesn't bug you?"

"It used to, I guess," he said. "But then I realized you weren't just trying to get your kicks with my sister."

"No."

"So I got over it." Then it was his turn to stare at me for a moment. "I also know what Kendall and Gina are up to," he added.

"Oh?"

"Dude, I've seen Leah and Erin together. I mean, it doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out that Gina's… you know, *interested* in Kendall."

I nodded.

"Kendall probably likes it too," he said with a shrug. "But she's *seriously* hung up on you. So if she's happy, I'm happy."

"You know, Drew," I said as we waited for the elevator, "you're not the guy I got in a fight with a couple of years ago."

"I guess I've grown up," he said, his deep voice unruffled. "And I may not be as smart as Kendall, but I'm not stupid either."

"No, you're not."

"I watch what's going on around me."

I nodded.

"So I guess you're right," he said. "I'm not the same guy you got in a fight with. That guy was kind of an asshole. I'm not him anymore."

"No, you're not," I said as we got off the elevator on the fourth floor.

"And I'm definitely not like Todd Zachary."

Todd Zachary was one of the California people who came to camp. He and his family actually lived in Atlanta, but they were typical Californians (at least in my mind): blonde, tanned, and smugly self-important. Todd had also taken Leah's virginity, an experience she hadn't enjoyed. It hadn't *quite* been against her will, but it was close. I still bristled when I thought about it.

"What do you mean?" I asked Drew warily.

"I know what happened," he said.

I looked at him as blankly as I could. I thought he was fishing for information, and I was determined not to break Leah's confidence.

"Don't worry, I figured it out on my own."

"How?" I asked.

"I saw how Leah acted afterward. And how Todd acted. I don't know *exactly* what happened, but I think I've got a pretty good idea. I figured she or Gina probably told you."

I nodded.

"But if he touches her again, I'm gonna crack that asshole's skull," Drew said. He was *serious*—he didn't swear lightly. I could only think of one time I'd ever heard him curse, but he was drunk at the time (and angry about me and his sister).

"I'll back you up," I said.

"I thought you might."

When I opened the door to my suite, we were greeted by a large Confederate flag hanging on my suitemates' door. Drew and I looked at each other and then shrugged. Since it was so late, I decided to forego meeting my new suitemates.

Before I'd taken two steps into the foyer, however, the phone rang.

"Hello?" I said.

"I'm home," Gina said.

"Is your roommate there?"

"Yeah," she said. "But I guess she's asleep. No, wait. Yeah, she's up now. I guess I'd better go meet her."

"Okay, sweetie," I said. "I hope she's cool."

"Me too."

"I'll see you at breakfast," I said.

"Okay."

"I love you," I said, glancing at Drew as I did.

He didn't even flinch.

"I love you too," Gina said.

"Night."

"Night."

After I hung up, I put the key in my lock and hoped my roommate wasn't asleep. To my surprise, he wasn't even there. Once again, I found a note taped to the mirror.

Hi roomie. Missed you again. I'm at my girlfriend's. Catch you tomorrow. Signed, "T."

"You know," I said, holding the note, "this is getting kinda ridiculous."

"What?" Drew asked.

"My roommate's been living here for two days, and I haven't seen him once. He's left me two notes, but that's it. I mean, I haven't really been here much either, but I've spent the night here twice." Then I paused and chuckled. "I haven't met my suitemates, either."

"Well, they've got the Southern Cross proudly displayed," he said with a wry grin, nodding toward the flag in the foyer.

"I guess," I said.

"Hey," Drew said all of a sudden.

"What?"

"If your roommate's not here, I get to sleep in his bed."

"Yep."

Robert—or Terrence, as he seemed to go by—had put away most of his things. He still didn't have sheets on his bed, though.

"Here," I said. "I've got an extra set of sheets."

"Don't worry about it, man," Drew said. "I don't want you to have to wash the sheets. Just gimme a blanket and I'm cool."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah, man. No problem."

"Okay. Thanks."

After we each climbed into bed, neither of us went to sleep immediately. Instead we talked for a while. Over the years, I'd gotten to know Drew better, but this was the longest we'd ever spent in each other's company.

In my mind, I guess I still thought of him as an angry, frustrated jerk who'd tried to push me around. I knew he'd grown up, of course, but I hadn't realized how *much* he'd matured.

I also saw a lot of his father's even temper in his personality. Despite Adam's obvious size and strength, I don't think I'd ever seen him get angry. I guess that's what made him a good cop. It had certainly turned Drew into a pretty good guy.

I decided that I really liked Drew. After all, we had a lot in common.

We talked for a little longer, but around twelve thirty, our conversation petered out and we went to sleep.

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On Tuesday, Drew and I got up, showered, then headed down to meet Gina. When she didn't show up after fifteen minutes, I called her room.

"Sorry," she said irritably. "I'm running late."

"Okay. No problem. We'll see you when you get here."

Ten minutes later, she arrived in a semi-huff.

"What's the matter?" I asked.

"My roommate woke me up at six o'clock," she said. "God, she's loud. I turned my alarm off and went back to sleep. And then I overslept, of course."

"What's your roommate like?" I asked, changing the subject as we headed outside.

"She's okay, I guess," Gina said with a shrug.

"What's her name?" Drew asked.

"Faith. Faith Bennett."

"What's her major?" I asked.

"Early Childhood Education. She wants to teach kindergarten or something. I don't know."

Over her head, Drew and I looked at each other.

She's in a fine mood this morning, I silently grumbled.

"Where are we eating breakfast?" Gina asked.

"The Radisson," I said.

"Good," she said. "As long as it's not Smokey's. That food was horrible."

"I didn't think it was great," I said, "but it wasn't *horrible*."

"If you wanna talk about 'horrible,'" Drew said, "lemme tell you about the food at my school's cafeteria…"

With a look, I thanked him for changing the subject. While we walked down the hill, he injected some lighthearted humor into our conversation by telling us about carbonized hamburgers, creamed peas, and something the students called "turd bars," which they *thought*

were made with oatmeal and peanut butter.

By the time we reached Kendall's apartment building, even Gina was smiling, if only a little. We called Kendall from the lobby and she met us a few minutes later. As we walked toward the garage, we talked about everyday stuff, just passing the time. At the Radisson, we met Mom and the other women in the lobby.

"Did you sleep okay, Drew?" Leah asked.

"I didn't sleep all that bad," he said. "Paul's roommate wasn't there," he continued, "so I got to sleep in the other bed."

"You *still* haven't met your roommate?" Mom asked.

I shook my head. "He's left me two notes, but I haven't seen him at all."

At breakfast, Elizabeth asked Gina about her roommate. Gina was still a little grumpy about being woken up so early, but from what she said, Faith seemed like a nice enough girl.

Then we talked about Kendall's roommates. We knew about Abby, so Kendall filled us in on Vivian and Phoebe. Vivian Fourier, the tall blonde, was on a full scholarship as a flute player in the UT "Pride of the Southland" marching band. She'd also been one of the scholarship students at Kendall's prep school in Chattanooga. And while they *had* known each other in high school, they hadn't been close friends. When they met up again in Knoxville, however, their friendship blossomed.

Phoebe Randolph, whom we hadn't met, was a nursing student from Murfreesboro, in middle Tennessee. Vivian introduced Phoebe to Kendall, but the two girls discovered that they also shared a Biology class. So when Vivian and Phoebe's original roommates decided to room with two different girls, Kendall and Abby had been the logical choice to replace them.

"So that's how Abby and I ended up in Andy Holt," Kendall finished. "I'm glad too. The apartments are much nicer than the rooms in Morrill."

After breakfast, we decided to make a trip to K-Mart, for any last minute school supplies, cleaning supplies, or other odds and ends we might need. Before we left, the women checked out of the hotel and we loaded Mom's station wagon.

We didn't get much at K-Mart, only a few things like air fresheners, flip-flops (I'd forgotten mine), and a couple of posters. We all had lunch together before Mom and the others had to leave.

"Do you want us to follow you back to campus?" Melissa asked as we stood in the parking lot of the restaurant.

"I think we'll be fine," I said. "I know how to get back."

"He's right, Mom," Kendall added, "there's no need for you all to drive back with us, just so you can turn around and head this way again. We'll be fine."

"Are you sure?" Mom asked.

I nodded.

As if by some unspoken agreement, each of our mothers came up to us. Drew read the situation perfectly, and hung back with Erin and Leah. While Gina and Elizabeth said goodbye to each other, Kendall and Melissa did the same. I gazed down at Mom and tried to look as confident as I could.

"I'm so proud of you," she said.

"Thanks, Mom."

She stood on tiptoe and kissed my cheek. Then she looked at me and sighed. “I can’t believe you’re in college,” she said.

“Yep.”

“Do you need anything before we go?”

I shook my head.

“Okay,” she said. “Call us if you need anything.”

“Dad and I already had this talk, Mom,” I said, looking down to hide my embarrassment.

“I know, but I just wanted you to know that you can call anytime.”

“I know, Mom.”

“Oh, I’m just so proud of you.”

I felt my face heating as she gave me another hug. Nearby, Kendall and Gina were in similar situations, so I guess I couldn’t be *too* embarrassed.

“You’ll do fine,” Mom said.

“I know, Mom. I’ll call when I can.”

“I love you,” she said.

“I love you too, Mom.”

She gave me another kiss on the cheek and then stepped back, wiping the corners of her eyes as she did. Then she turned to Erin and gestured.

“I guess I’ll see you around,” Erin said when she drew near.

Impulsively, I pulled her to me and hugged her, lifting her feet off the ground as I did.

“Don’t tell anyone,” I whispered, “but I’ll miss you.”

“I’ll miss you too,” she said with a sniffle. After a moment’s pause, she said, “I love you, Paul.”

“I love you too, Erin.”

Then I kissed her cheek and set her down. She wiped her eyes and smiled bravely.

When Erin stepped back, I gave Elizabeth a hug and then turned to Leah. As I’d done with Erin, I hugged her and then lifted her off her feet.

“Bye,” she whispered.

“Bye, Leah,” I said. “You’re a great girl.”

She kissed my cheek as I set her down.

Next, I shook Drew’s hand.

“Take it easy, Drew,” I said.

“You too, man.” Then he grinned at me. “Thanks for letting me crash in your room, dude.”

“No problem.”

“Take care of my sister,” he said quietly.

“I will, Drew.”

“I know you will, but I still gotta say it.”

I nodded.

Then Drew and I stepped apart and Melissa gave me a hug, although I didn’t pick her up.

After we said our last goodbyes, they all got into the station wagon. Mom, Melissa, and Elizabeth sat up front, while Drew sat in between Erin and Leah in the back. Then Mom started the car and put it into gear. Kendall, Gina, and I waved as they drove off.

“God,” Gina said as we headed for the Jeep, “I thought my mom was gonna say goodbye fifty

times."

"Yeah," I said, "I know what you mean."

"Well, you all are moving away from home for the first time," Kendall said.

"Still," Gina grumbled.

"Oh, it's just 'cause they love us," I said.

Kendall nodded. Then she arched an eyebrow at me. "You and Drew seemed to be getting along like two peas in a pod," she said.

"He's a lot like me," I said as I started the Jeep.

"Uh-*huh*."

"He *is*," I said defensively.

As we drove back to campus, Kendall talked about life in Knoxville and things to do around campus. She also told us about some of the UT clubs and activities. I tried to include Gina in the conversation, but she seemed to be in a funk. I shrugged it off as her being out of her "comfort zone," as Kendall put it, but it still bothered me.

When we got back to campus, I parked in the garage (there were other non-commuter lots on campus, but the garage just seemed to be the most convenient option). Kendall and I tried to talk Gina into joining us at the apartment, but Gina just wanted to go back to her dorm. When I offered to go with her, she told me she just wanted to be alone. So I kissed her and then watched as she headed up the hill toward Carrick.

"*She's* in a great mood," I said once she was safely out of earshot.

"Bless her heart," Kendall said. "She'll get over it, though." At my skeptical look, she continued. "I was pretty depressed when I first came to school. I'd just moved away from home, I'd just left the love of my life," she said with a sideways glance and a smile, "and I didn't know a soul at UT."

I nodded.

"When Abby and I became friends, and then when Bridget and Toni basically adopted me, it got better. But for a while, I was terribly lonely."

"But why's Gina lonely? She's got you and me," I said.

"I think part of it is me," Kendall said.

"Huh?"

"She's used to having you to herself."

"Oh. Yeah."

"Now she's got to share," she said. Then she sighed thoughtfully.

"What?"

"I was just thinking…"

"Yeah?"

"Two years ago, I would've been mortified at the prospect of coming between you and Gina. But now, I'm not just going to skulk away because she's around."

"Even though she might be unhappy?"

"She'll get over it," she said. "I hope. In some ways, she's like me, but in others… she's *very* different."

I nodded.

"I don't want you to have to choose between us, but…" Her expression spoke volumes.

"So you're not ready to leave me?" I asked as I put my arm around her.

"Not now, not ever," she said.

"Good!"

Later, Kendall, Abby, and I ate dinner together at the Morrill dining hall (like me, they both had meal plans, even though they lived in an apartment with a kitchen). After dinner, Kendall and I agreed that we should probably get a good night's sleep before the first day of classes. We were eager to spend some private time together, but we were patient. We knew we'd have time later.

We both had eight o'clock classes in the morning, so we planned to have breakfast together. Given the mood that Gina was in, I really didn't feel like calling her to see if she wanted to join us. Besides, I knew her first class wasn't until ten o'clock, so she probably wouldn't want to get up and come have breakfast with us at seven. After Kendall and I finalized our plans, I kissed her goodnight and then headed back to Carrick.

Since I'd returned to dorm while the sun was still up, I hoped to meet my suitemates. When I opened the door to the foyer, their flag-draped door was ajar. Before I knocked, I tried to remember their names: Tracy and G-something. In my mind, I tried to picture the sign on their door. When I had an image of it, I re-read the other guy's name: Glen.

"Knock, knock," I said.

"Yeah?"

"Hey, I'm Paul," I said as I gently pushed the door open. "I live next door."

"Oh, hey, man," one of the guys said. He was smaller than me, and wiry, with light brown hair. "How's it going?"

"Good," I said. "You?"

"We're cool," he said. Then, "I'm T.J."

"Not Tracy?" I asked.

"*T.J.*," he said deliberately, glaring at me as if I'd just told him he fucked goats.

Jeez, sorry!

"This here's Glen," he continued, pointing to another guy.

I shook T.J.'s hand and then shook Glen's as well. Glen was *big*—a little bigger than Drew—with dark hair and a muscular build. Together, they made an odd pair: the little guy who did all the talking and the silent big guy.

"Where y'all from?" T.J. asked.

"Atlanta," I said. "You?"

"We're from Collierville," he said, pointing to Glen with his thumb.

"Oh, cool. Where's that?" I asked.

"You don't know where Collierville is?" he asked incredulously.

"No, sorry. I don't know much about Tennessee yet."

"God damn, Glen," T.J. said. "They don't make 'em too smart in Atlanta."

I couldn't tell if he was baiting me, or just trying to be funny.

"I'm just kiddin' ya," he said. "Collierville's outside of Memphis."

"Oh. Cool," I said. Then, "Hey, have you all met my roommate yet?"

T.J. nodded. "He ain't too bright either, is he?"

"I don't know," I hedged. "I haven't met him yet."

"Well, you'll see when you meet him." Then he made an ape-like face, his jaw slack. Before I could reply, he said, "I'm just kiddin'. He don't seem so bad."

"Oh. Okay. Cool. Well, I'd better let y'all get back to… whatever," I said.

"Stop by any time," T.J. said.

"You do the same," I said. In reality, I didn't know what to make of T.J. I shook my head in puzzlement and walked across the foyer.

I guess I should've expected the note from my roommate.

Hi roomie. Are you actually here? I'll see you soon. Signed, "Terry."

"Well," I said to no one in particular, "at least I know his *name* now."

He'd managed to put sheets and a bedspread on his bed, but there were few other signs that he'd been there.

As I glanced around my room, looking for something to occupy my time, my eyes came to rest on my computer. I stared at it for a few minutes and tried to decide if I wanted to figure it out or not. Since I'd gotten it for my birthday—a present from Susan—I hadn't turned it on more than a half-dozen times. Finally, I decided that I'd play with it some other time.

Eventually, I took out my little cassette player (the one I'd bought in France), put on my headphones, and loaded my curling bar with a hundred and twenty pounds. It was a light load, since it had been more than a week since I'd done a serious workout.

I spent twenty minutes doing curls and then triceps presses, watching myself in the mirror to make sure my form was good. I wanted to try to stay in shape while I was in school. After all, I didn't want my muscle to turn to fat. I'd already been pudgy once in my life, I didn't want it to happen again.

Afterward, I took a quick shower and then lay on my bed for a while. I'd brought several new books with me, and I eagerly opened the first one, Frank Herbert's *Dune*.

A couple of hours later, my roommate still hadn't returned. So I set my alarm, turned out the light, and tried to go to sleep. Unfortunately, I was nervous about my first day of classes.

What would my professors be like? Would it be like high school? Would I have to take a lot of notes? Would I have to study a lot? What would my classmates be like? Would they all be smarter than me?

"Jeez," I said to the empty room. "I've got to get a grip."

With that, I rolled over, pulled up the sheets, and tried to relax. Eventually, it worked, and I fell asleep.

CHAPTER THREE

The next morning, my alarm went off at six. I lay there and stared at the ceiling as pre-dawn light filtered in through the blinds. For a while, I thought about Gina. I could understand why she was a little depressed, but I didn't know what to do about it. And I could see why Kendall thought Gina might be upset about having to share me again.

Kendall, Gina, and I had only really spent time together—as a threesome—when we were at camp. And the world of Susan's camp was different from the real world, the world of college and complicated relationships. I didn't want Kendall to come between Gina and me, but by the same token, I definitely didn't want *Gina* to come between *Kendall* and me.

So I had a dilemma.

Years before, when Gina had first suggested that we include Kendall, I'd told her that I wouldn't toy with Kendall's emotions. I loved both girls, very much, and I didn't want to hurt either of them. I didn't want to choose between them, either, and I fervently hoped I wouldn't have to. If I ever *did* have to choose, it would tear the three of us apart.

I didn't know what to do.

Finally, I shook off my maudlin thoughts and rolled out of bed. I looked across the room at my roommate's empty bed and shook my head in bewilderment.

"How can two guys live in the same room and still miss each other all the time?" I asked myself out loud. Then, "Oh, great, now I'm talking to myself."

I should at least have the good sense not to have these little conversations out loud, I admonished myself with a mental chuckle.

As I looked at myself in the mirror, I struck a few bodybuilder poses. Then I realized something. When I *did* have to start actually sharing my room, I'd have to stop sleeping in the nude. I didn't have any problems if my roommate wanted to sleep in the nude—then I would too—but that wasn't a conversation either of us were likely to start. Guys just don't do that. And if neither of us brought it up, there was no *way* I was going to sleep in the nude. I didn't want my roommate to think I was gay or something.

"Sorry, boys," I said as I looked down my torso, "no more freeballing at night."

With a chuckle, I wrapped my towel around my waist, grabbed my shower basket, and headed into the foyer. While I showered, I thought about my classes, and what I'd have to take with me. I also wanted to leave a note for my roommate. For *Terry*, I reminded myself. After all, the least I could do was return his notes.

I also thought about calling Gina to see if she was in a better mood. I thought breakfast with Kendall and me might cheer her up. But it was only six thirty, and I didn't want to wake up her whole suite. In the end, I decided not to call.

Once I dried off, I slipped into my new flip-flops and flapped back to my room. Then I went through my morning routine. Finally, I got dressed.

I stuffed my books into my backpack, grabbed my class schedule card, and headed out.

Wait! There's something I'm forgetting…

I set my backpack down, turned around, and searched for some paper.

Terry, I wrote, *sorry I missed you again. I'll be in class till 2:00. Hope to see you then.* Signed "Paul."

Then I taped it to the mirror.

With that, I grabbed my backpack and headed out to meet Kendall. By the time I got to Morrill Hall, she was waiting for me.

"Sorry I'm late," I said. "I had to leave a note for my roommate."

"You *still* haven't seen him?"

I shook my head. "He didn't come home last night. I'm beginning to believe he's a figment of my imagination."

She laughed, kissed me, and then deftly slipped under my arm as we walked into the dining hall. Since it was so early, the place wasn't crowded. There were still a fair number of people, but we easily found a table near a window.

"Is that all you're going to eat?" she asked when we sat down.

I nodded. I'd decided on a bowl of corn flakes and two pieces of toast.

"Are you feeling okay?"

"Yeah," I said. "I just don't wanna start gaining weight."

"Oh. Okay. Make sure you get enough vitamins, though."

"Yes, ma'am," I said.

"I'm serious."

"I know. I just don't want to be fat again. Ever."

"You weren't fat," she said.

"Okay, pudgy. But I still don't ever wanna be like that again."

"Then watch what you eat; don't starve yourself. I'm serious, breakfast is the most important meal of the day."

"And I'm eating it," I argued.

"Not *much* of it," she said. "*I'd* be hungry if I only had a bowl of cereal and two pieces of toast."

"I'm cool. Really."

She looked at me skeptically. "Paul, I don't care what you look like. I never have. I loved you even when you were… pudgy."

"But you like me better now, don't you?"

"Well, yes, but…"

"See," I said. "I look better."

"You do, but it's not all about that. You've got to be healthy too."

"Okay," I said at last. "What else should I eat?"

"At least have a piece of fruit or something," she said.

"Okay, jeez," I said. Then I headed back to the serving area and grabbed a banana.

"That's better," she said when I sliced it into my corn flakes. "Not *much* better, but better." As I took a bite, she changed the subject. "What classes do you have this morning?"

"Calculus from eight to eight fifty," I said when I swallowed. "Introduction to Architecture from nine to nine fifty, then American Literature from ten to ten fifty. After that, I'm off till one. What about you?"

"Well," she said, "I've got classes at exactly the same times, but mine are O. Chem., ugh, Literature of the English Bible, and then Social Psychology. At one, I've got Philosophy of Feminism and then French. After three, I'm done for the day."

"'O. Chem.'?"

"Organic chemistry," she said. "I don't need it for my psychology degree, but I'm going to need it for medical school."

"And 'Literature of the English Bible'?" I asked. "What's up with that?"

"I thought it'd be interesting," she explained. "And it counts toward my English minor. Have you ever read the Bible?" she asked.

I shook my head and took another bite of cereal.

"It's actually pretty interesting."

"I guess," I said. My family hadn't gone to church when I was growing up. I wasn't an atheist or anything like that, but I hadn't found much use for God in my life. Or He hadn't found much use for me, if you want to look at it that way.

"Reading the whole thing isn't for everyone," she said, "but I think you'd like some of it."

"Oh yeah? Like what?"

"Like the Song of Solomon," she said.

"Why?"

"Because it's pretty erotic."

"In the *Bible?*" I asked, trying not to choke on my corn flakes.

"Mmm hmm." Then she leaned closer. "God created us with all these nerve endings and the ability to feel pleasure," she said. "Don't you think He had a purpose when He did?"

"I dunno. I guess I never really thought about it."

"And He gave us the ability to reason, and to fantasize. I can't imagine that He'd want us all to be nuns. Or monks," she added.

"Sounds good to me," I replied. "Like I said, I guess I never thought about it." Then I paused as she took a bite of her toast. "So that's your schedule for the day?"

"Mmm hmm."

"Since we're both out of class from eleven till one, do you wanna have lunch together?"

"Sure."

"Where's your ten o'clock class?" I asked.

"HSS 122," she said after glancing at her schedule.

The Humanities and Social Sciences building.

"Humanities?" I mused as I looked at my own schedule. "I'm in American Lit., in HSS 210. I'm just upstairs from you."

"Why don't we meet by the bull fountain," she suggested.

"Is that really what it's called?"

"It's actually *Europa and the Bull*," she said, "but most everyone just calls it the bull fountain."

The plaza in front of the HSS building and McClung Tower had a fountain with a *large* sculpture of a goddess riding a bull. The first time I saw it, I did a double-take, since the bull was anatomically correct. That's right, big bull balls.

"I'll meet you there after my Social Psych. class," Kendall continued.

"Cool." Then I looked at my watch. "We'd better get going."

She nodded.

"Where's your first class?" I asked. "O. Chem., right?"

"Buehler. On the back side of the Hill."

"Oh, cool," I said. "My Calc. class is in Ayres."

Ayres was on the very top of the Hill, which rose above the rest of campus. Because Kendall and I were heading in the same direction, we could walk to class together.

"Every year, I forget how much I *hate* this hill," Kendall said when we reached the top of the last set of stairs going up the Hill.

We were both breathing a little heavy.

"At least it makes your legs look good," I said.

She smiled and then impulsively kissed me.

"Thanks," I said.

Then we headed toward Ayres. I kissed her goodbye and told her I'd meet her at the fountain after my American Literature class.

For a moment, I simply admired the architecture of the red brick building. The bell tower rose above the quad, standing at least sixty feet high. With a deep breath, I headed inside. Upstairs, I found my classroom and quickly took a seat. Then I looked around at the handful of other students who'd arrived early. Most of them were guys, but there were two girls there as well. I studied the other people for a moment and then decided to leaf through my textbook. As I flipped through the pages, other people came in and found seats.

Finally, the professor came in. He was a compact man, with glasses, blonde-turning-to-grey hair, and clothes that were several years out of style (complete with a white leather belt).

"Hello, everyone," he said as soon as he arrived. Then he set his things on the desk, turned, and began writing on the chalkboard. "I am Professor Tow. That's *Tow*," he said, pronouncing his name again, "like the Greek letter *tau*, not like my big *toe*."

We all chuckled at his lame joke.

"Welcome to Calculus 125, Basic Calculus," he said as he wrote the name and section number on the board. Then he turned to us and picked up his roll book. "First, let's see who's here and who's not," he said.

And that was the beginning of my college career.

✧ ✧ ✧

Near the bull fountain, I snuck up behind Kendall and then covered her eyes with my hands.

"Guess who," I said.

"The love of my life?"

"Yep!" With that, I took my hands off her eyes and turned her around. "Hi," I said.

Her face lit up with a smile and then she kissed me. "Hi yourself," she said. "Where do you want to eat?"

I shrugged. "Morrill or Presidential."

"The food's usually better at Morrill," she said.

"Okay, Morrill it is."

"How were your classes?" she asked as we walked.

"Pretty good. My Calculus professor's kinda goofy; he kept telling corny jokes. He's okay, I guess, but he's definitely a math nerd."

She nodded.

"My Intro to Architecture professor is this guy named Spielman. He talks like a New Yorker,

but he's easy enough to understand. I'm really gonna like the class. When he passed out the syllabus, I scanned through it and kept thinking, 'cool!'"

She chuckled at my enthusiasm.

"My American Literature class is gonna be a *lot* of writing, though," I said. "I think I'll enjoy it, but my professor is some kind of leftover hippie."

"Feller?" Kendall asked in surprise.

"Yeah. How'd you know?"

"I had her class last year," she said.

"English 231?"

"Mmm hmm, American Literature. She's seriously flaky, but she doesn't grade real hard. She's one of those people who doesn't want to make anyone feel bad. The guy who sat beside me spent the entire time flirting with me, and I don't think he read a *single* one of the stories. He *still* made a C."

"People like that bug me," I said.

"The guy? Or Professor Feller?"

"Both. But mostly Professor Feller. I mean, if you don't do the work, you shouldn't get the grade."

"I agree, but I was taking French, Western Civ., a Psychology class, and two Women's Studies classes, so I was happy to have the easy A."

"Yeah," I said. "I'll be happy to have an easy grade too, but still."

"I know what you mean," she said.

By then, we'd reached Morrill. Since it was still a little early for lunch, we sat on one of the benches outside.

"Did you talk to Gina last night?" Kendall asked.

I shook my head. "I guess I didn't feel like tempting fate."

She nodded.

"I met my suitemates, though."

"Oh? What are they like?"

"I dunno… they're hard to describe, I guess." Then I told her about meeting T.J. and Glen. "I don't think Glen, the big guy, said a word the entire time I was there. T.J. did all the talking. And I couldn't really tell if he was just sarcastic or just an asshole."

"Hopefully, he's just sarcastic."

I nodded.

Then she looked at me sidelong. "I've really missed you," she said.

"I've missed you too," I said as I took her hand.

"I've missed *that* too," she said with a guilty smile, "but I've really missed just talking to you."

I nodded.

"There's something serious we've got to talk about, though."

"Oh?"

"Yeah," she said. She sounded resigned.

"What?" I asked.

"What do I call you?"

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Are you my boyfriend? Are you just my friend? Are you just a guy I know?"

"I'm your boyfriend," I said immediately.

"I know, but what do I tell people when I introduce you?"

"Tell them I'm your boyfriend," I said.

"What if Gina's with you?"

"Tell them I'm your— Oh. Yeah, I guess I see what you mean. People will ask a lot of questions if they figure out I've got two girlfriends."

She nodded. "For some people, though, it's a moot point. Abby… Viv and Phoebe… Bridget and Toni… they all know you as my boyfriend. But what do I tell other people?"

"I hadn't thought of that," I said.

"When we're at camp," she said, "everyone pretty much knows who we are, so we don't have to introduce ourselves. But here…"

"Yeah."

"So," she asked quietly, "do I go back to being your *second* girlfriend?"

"*No*," I said. "You're my girlfriend."

"But that still doesn't change the fact that you've got another girlfriend."

"No, I guess it doesn't."

"She was your girlfriend first," Kendall said, "but…"

"I know, and I don't want you to play second fiddle," I said, finishing her thought.

For a moment, I pondered the problem. I wanted to treat the two girls the same, but that would actually cause problems. I was pretty sure Gina would get upset if *Kendall* became my girlfriend-in-name, but Kendall seemed a little upset too. At least Kendall had the level-headedness to actually talk to me and look at things from both sides. Gina, on the other hand… well… Gina was Gina.

"We can say you're my best friend," I finally suggested. "I mean, you *are*…"

"But that's not the same as your girlfriend."

I shook my head. Then I look up hopefully. "Well, how many people are you and Gina likely to both meet?"

"How about your roommate?" she asked.

"*I* haven't even met my roommate."

"You know what I mean."

"Yeah," I said. "Sorry."

"And I'm sure he won't be the only one. So, what should we do?"

"I really don't know," I said. "I mean, I *want* to tell people you're my girlfriend. But by the same token, I want to tell people Gina's my girlfriend."

She nodded.

"But I'm not going to play favorites," I said earnestly. "That's something I promised you I'd never do, and I'm not going to start now." Then I shook my head in frustration. "I mean, why *can't* I tell people I have two girlfriends?"

"Because you can't," she said.

"But why?"

"Because it breaks society's norms."

"So? *I* don't care."

"Yes, you do," she said evenly. "And so do I. We do other things outside of the norms of society—nudism for one—but we don't tell 'outsiders' about it. This is the same."

"I know," I said sullenly. "I guess I just don't have a solution and I want the problem to go away."

"It won't."

I shook my head. Then I put my arm around her. "In my heart, you're my girlfriend," I said. "That's all that really matters between the two of us."

She nodded.

"And when we meet new people, I guess we'll just have to wing it." When I looked at her, she didn't look surprised, but she didn't look pleased either. "What's the matter?" I asked.

"Oh, nothing. I don't have a better answer either." Then she looked at her hands. "You're trying to keep two women happy, and I guess it's not easy."

I shook my head. "It's *worth* it, but you're right, it's not easy."

"And before," she said, "I would've been happy to be in the background. But now…"

I nodded.

"I guess maybe I'm not the same person you fell in love with."

In spite of myself, I chuckled.

"What?" she asked, her eyes welling with tears.

"I'm sorry," I said. "It's just that you *are* the same person I fell in love with, only better."

She wiped her cheeks but didn't say anything.

"You're more confident now," I said. "I can't explain it, but you are. You're not the scared, insecure girl I first admired from afar."

"I'm definitely not her anymore," she said with a sniffle.

"You're still just as smart, just as beautiful, and just as sexy, but now you're also… self-assured."

"Thank you," she said softly.

"And if I have to deal with Gina, I'll deal with her," I said. "She's really a considerate person. She can be kind of childish at times, but I guess I can too. And she's not a bad person."

Kendall nodded in agreement.

"So some people will know you as my girlfriend and Gina as my best friend. She'll just have to live with that."

"She didn't seem upset when I slipped and introduced you that way to Vivian."

"She didn't say anything about it to me," I said. Then I looked at Kendall and smiled. "But if some people know *you* as my girlfriend, others will know Gina as my girlfriend and you as my best friend. Can you live with that?"

"I guess I'll have to," she said.

"I wish I had a better solution," I said, "but I don't."

"I know. I don't either."

"It'll be fine. Trust me."

"I hope," she said with a feeble smile.

"It will." Then I hugged her tight. When I looked at my watch, it was almost twelve. "Did you still want to get something to eat?" I asked.

She shook her head. “I guess I’m just not hungry anymore.”

“Me either,” I said. Then, “Where’s your next class?”

“Humanities.”

“Mine’s in the A&A building.”

She nodded.

“We’ve got time to go back to your apartment for a little while,” I said.

She looked up and raised her eyebrows.

“I don’t think we have time for *that*,” I said. “I want to take my time when we do.”

She nodded.

“But we can hang out for a little while.”

Another nod.

“I don’t think I’ve even felt you up since Sunday,” I said in an effort to lighten the mood.

“No,” she said with a soft laugh.

“Let’s hope Abby’s in class, so we can shack up in your room. Would you like that?”

“Yes.”

“And I can convince you that you’re the most important girl in the world.”

“More important than Gina?” Then she immediately shook her head. “Sorry, that wasn’t a fair question.”

“You and Gina are important to me for lots of reasons,” I said. “Sometimes, the reasons are the same—I love you both—but sometimes, they’re very different. Gina’s… well… she’s Gina. But she also knows me better than most anyone else in the world, including you. You can read me like a book, but sometimes I think she knows what I’m going to do before I do it.” At that, I paused to gauge Kendall’s reaction.

Unfortunately, her face was an inscrutable mask.

“My life is a lot better because of Gina,” I continued after a moment. “My grades, for instance. To be honest, I wasn’t the greatest student before she moved to Atlanta. I wasn’t a *bad* student, but I wasn’t anything above average. She saw something in me that even I didn’t see, I guess.”

“I saw it,” Kendall said softly.

“I know you did, but Gina was in class with me, and doing homework with me. She was never pushy about it, though. She just *expected* me to do better, because she knew that I could. And I did,” I said. “She gave me a lot of help, too. I mean, Spanish is a good example.”

Kendall cocked her head to the side, so I explained.

“I had a hard time in Spanish class,” I said. “But since Gina had taken so much Latin, she could figure out Spanish and help me. She didn’t criticize me or even complain about helping me with my homework on top of her own. She just *did* it. She just taught herself Spanish. And as she learned it, so did I.”

“Wow. I had no idea.”

“You wouldn’t, unless I told you. That’s the thing about Gina. She doesn’t brag. I mean, I’m pretty sure she speaks Spanish better than I do. And I took *two years* of that *chingada* language, while she never had a single class.”

“Then how do you know she speaks Spanish?” Kendall asked.

“It took me a while to realize it,” I said. “I finally figured it out when we were in Europe. She

and Tomás—that Spanish guy we met on Ibiza—they spoke Spanish most of the time they were alone together. Annika and I were out on the balcony one night, and all the doors were open, so we could hear Gina and Tomás talking. They were having some serious discussion in Spanish, and I could barely understand what they were saying. But Gina was careful never to speak Spanish in front of me. At first, I was a little jealous, because I thought she was hiding something from me. But then I realized that she did it because she didn't want to make me feel stupid."

"That's because she loves you."

"She does. I know she does. I see it in the way she looks at me. I see it in the way she treats me. Sure, she sometimes takes me for granted, but she's not jealous. And she's not really possessive. I mean, how many girls do you know who would share their boyfriend with another girl?"

"Not many," she said.

"*Exactly*. And in that regard, I'm pretty lucky too. Heck, she's seduced more girls than *I* ever have. That's every guy's wet dream."

"So why do you need me?" Kendall asked softly.

"Why do I need you? I can think of a million reasons, but the most important one is that I love you."

"But I'm not adventurous or always horny."

"Actually, you *are*. You're just more reserved about it. Some of your fantasies are pretty wild. They're exciting, too. I'm sure Gina has fantasies, but she doesn't really share them with me. Not like you do."

"She doesn't?"

I shook my head. "But here's the thing," I explained. "With Gina, I guess I get worn out sometimes. So while you might not be as horny as she is—I don't know if *anyone* is—sex with you is really, *really* good. It's definitely a quality versus quantity thing." Then I gazed at her earnestly. "With you, I can relax and be myself. With Gina, I always have to be on my toes. Sometimes, my relationship with her is like a wrestling match: a whirlwind of motion and emotion, but if I let my guard down for *one second*, I'll end up flat on my back with the wind knocked out of me."

She nodded.

"And like I said, sex with you is… well… it's *fantastic*. Why? Because I don't have to worry about what you're gonna do next. I mean, I know we can take our time and enjoy ourselves, because you won't get upset if I don't do *this* or *that*. Gina and I make love, but most of the time, it's straight fucking. With you, it's almost always making love, and I enjoy that."

She quickly looked around to see if anyone had overheard me. Fortunately, no one was nearby.

"So I love you both," I continued, "for a lot of the same reasons. But you're very different. Do you see what I mean?"

"I guess I hadn't thought of it that way."

"In many ways, you're so different that I can't really compare you."

"Even though that's what you just did?" she asked. Then she flashed me a teary grin.

"I guess," I said with a bark of laughter.

"Do you mind if we don't go back to my apartment?" she asked.

"Sure. Why?"

"I just want to sit here with you," she said. Then she lowered her eyes. "Will you just hold me?"

"I'd be happy to," I said as I hugged her. When I buried my face in her hair, I kissed her. "See what I mean?" I asked, my voice muffled. "With you, I can relax and be myself."

"Good," she said. "Because I want you to be happy. And I love you."

"I love you too. Very, *very* much."

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My one o'clock class was Architectural Design, and I'd been looking forward to it all day. The class was mostly guys, but there were a few girls scattered here and there. I found a seat toward the middle of the class: not up front with the brownnosers and not in the back with the slackers. Then I studied the people around me. Their expressions ran the gamut from nervous to bored to excited to clueless. While we waited for the professor, I daydreamed about accepting the award for Architect of the Year.

My pleasant—and completely unrealistic—reverie was interrupted when the professor practically burst into the room. With an almost palpable sense of energy, he strode to the front of the class. Then he turned, clasped his hands behind his back, and simply stood there. He was tall, with iron-grey hair and a stern face, and as he surveyed the class, we grew quiet. When the susurrations finally died down and he had our complete attention, he scanned the classroom, his eyes briefly coming to rest on many of us.

"My name is Laszlo Joska," he said with simple finality.

He had an odd accent, and pronounced his name "*yosh*-ka."

"This class is Architecture 171, Design," he continued. "If you're not supposed to be here, please be kind enough to leave quietly." When no one did, he continued. "Good, most of you think you should be here. I doubt you're all correct in that assumption, but that remains to be seen." Then his lip quirked up in a half-smile. "For the next twelve weeks, most of you will hate me. Let me tell you right now that I… don't… care. That's right, I don't care."

Several people looked around nervously.

"I am not here to make you like me," he continued. "Architecture is a serious business for serious people. And I will tell you right now that many of you will never become architects. That's right, you will change your major or you will quit school altogether. I don't care about that, either." In the shocked silence, he surveyed the class again. "But those few of you who *do* have the talent and determination to survive the next five years will become the builders of civilization."

When he paused, several people nodded. I was one of them.

Then Professor Joska spent the next twenty minutes telling us how difficult the class was going to be. He spent the last half-hour talking about our projects and what he expected. He sounded like a ruthless perfectionist. And judging by the jam-packed syllabus and the number of projects we'd have to complete, the class was going to be a *lot* of work. Oddly enough, I couldn't wait to get started.

After class, I headed back to the dorm. Kendall was in class for another hour, and Gina wouldn't get out of class until almost four. So I had a couple of hours to kill.

As soon as I stepped off the elevator on the fourth floor, Cary, my Resident Assistant, looked

up. He was holding a clipboard, and it seemed like he was actually waiting for me.

"Ah," he said, "you're 415D, right?" Then he scanned his list. "Oh yes, Paul."

"Um… yeah?"

"I thought I'd missed you."

"Missed me?" I asked.

He nodded. "I just did your roommate's room inspection."

"You mean you've actually *met* my roommate?" I asked in surprise.

"Of course," Cary said. "He just got on the elevator. That's why I was standing here." Then he cocked his head to the side. "You mean you *haven't* met him yet?"

"Nope. We've left each other several notes, but…" I indicated the other elevator with a toss of my chin and a shrug. "I guess we've always managed to miss each other."

"Oh dear. Well, you'll meet him soon enough." Then he gestured with his clipboard. "Are you ready to do your room inspection?"

"Sure, I guess," I said.

On the way down the hall, I wondered what a room inspection consisted of. Would he go through my things? Would I have to prove I didn't have pot or booze? Would I have to turn my head and cough? At that, I chuckled softly.

In the end, the room inspection was surprisingly easy. Cary looked at the walls, desk, cabinets, and other room fixtures. Then he made a note of each major scrape or scuff (the minor ones weren't worth noting). The room was in pretty good shape, so he only had to make a few notes. Then he gave me the clipboard and I signed the form.

"Is that it?" I asked.

"That's it. Easy, huh? Any questions?"

"Not really."

"Okay," he said. "Remember, there's a mandatory floor meeting on Friday at five. In the floor's lounge."

I nodded.

"Okay. Have a nice day."

With that, he was gone.

When I looked around the room, I saw signs that Terry had been there. His bed was unmade and he'd hung a bath towel on the bar over his side of the vanity. He'd even left me a note on the mirror.

Hey roomie, sorry I missed you again. I've got class until five. You want to have dinner together? Signed, "T."

I stuck the note back on the mirror and shook my head in wonder. Then I sat down at my desk, moved my dormant computer out of the way, and started looking at my class materials.

A while later, the phone rang.

"Hello?"

"Paul? It's Kendall."

"Hi, gorgeous," I said.

"How was your architecture class?"

"Cool," I said. "I'm gonna work my *butt* off, but I think it'll be fun. The professor seems real tough, though, and he's got a funny accent. His name is spelled J-O-S-K-A, but he pronounces it

'*yosh*-ka.' I don't know where he's from, but it's definitely not the U.S."

"I don't know either," she said. "But the name doesn't sound French."

"Nope," I agreed. Then, "How were your classes?"

"The philosophy class should be fun, since I've already read a lot of the books on our reading list. French was… *comme si, comme ça*… so-so. I don't really like it, but I need the language credits." Then she paused.

I could almost hear her gathering her courage.

"I'm sorry about earlier," she said.

"About what?"

"About putting all that pressure on you. I guess I was just being insecure."

"About the girlfriend thing?" I asked, a little surprised.

"Uh-huh."

"Don't worry about it, it was a legitimate question. And I guess we were going to have to talk about it sooner or later."

"Well," she said, "I didn't want you to think I was trying to get you to choose between us."

"I know. You're not like that."

"Thanks for being understanding."

"That's okay," I said. Then I changed the subject. "So, what're you up to later?"

"Do you want to have dinner together?" she asked. "You can call Gina and the three of us can eat over here. We've got all that food our parents bought."

"Yes, I want to. But no, I can't."

"Huh?"

I explained about the note from my roommate and his dinner offer. "So I guess I'd like to finally meet him," I said.

"Okay. That's cool. Oh, wait, hold on a second. Abby's yelling at me. I'll be right back." Then she covered the mouthpiece with her hand and talked to Abby for about a minute. "Um… when's your last class tomorrow?" she asked.

"I should be done by one thirty," I said. "Why?"

"Because Abby's got class all afternoon tomorrow. She wanted to see what my schedule was so maybe we could have lunch."

"Oh, cool. So why'd you want to know when *my* last class was?"

"Because," she said, her voice pitched low, "Vivian and Phoebe will *also* be gone tomorrow afternoon. Viv's got band practice and Phoebe's in class all afternoon."

"Are you thinking what I'm thinking?" I asked, a grin in my voice.

"Mmm hmm."

"Gina's in class until four thirty," I said.

"We could have dinner together here," Kendall suggested. "I could make us spaghetti."

"But before then?"

"I was thinking…," she said. "Maybe you could come over and…?"

My dick stiffened just *thinking* about it. I quickly agreed.

"Okay," she said. "It's a date. Just come to my apartment after your last class. I'll be waiting for you."

Cool!

After that, we made plans to talk later in the evening and then to have breakfast in the morning. She had an eight o'clock class, and while my first was at nine o'clock, I didn't mind having breakfast early.

"Okay," I said. "I'll call you after dinner. I love you."

"I love you too, Paul." Then she let out a happy sigh. "I'm really looking forward to tomorrow," she said.

"Good. I'm looking forward to it too."

"I can't *wait*. I love you *so* much," she said.

"I love you too."

"I'll talk to you later."

"Bye," I said.

She blew me a kiss and then said goodbye.

I hung up and then called Gina's room.

"May I please speak to Gina?" I asked.

"She's not in right now," the girl said. She had a soft, pleasant drawl.

"Is this Faith?" I asked.

"Yes. Who's speaking?"

"This is Paul," I said. "Gina's boyfriend." We made small talk for a few minutes and then I left a message for Gina. "Thanks, Faith," I said at last. "It was nice talking to you."

"It was nice talking to you, too," she said.

After a few more pleasantries, we hung up.

About an hour later, Gina returned my call.

"Hi," she said.

"Hi. How was your day?"

"Okay, I guess." She didn't sound all that happy.

"What's the matter?"

"I didn't sleep well and I've been in class all day," she said. "I'm tired."

"I thought you had a break from one to two?"

"I did, but I wasn't sure where my Biology lab was, so I skipped lunch."

"Well, I'm supposed to have dinner with my roommate; I still haven't met him."

"Whatever."

"Kendall wanted to know if we wanted to have dinner at her apartment tomorrow night. She's fixing spaghetti."

"I guess."

"Okay, I'll tell her. Just come over to her apartment after your last class. You're in Biology until four thirty, right?"

"Four thirty-*five*," she corrected.

"Oh, okay. Anyway, just come over to her apartment when you're done." For some reason, I didn't want to tell Gina that Kendall and I were getting together before then. I don't know why. I felt bad about not telling her, though. I guess I didn't want Gina to invite herself, or worse, get angry. To assuage my guilty conscience, I invited her to breakfast with Kendall and me.

"I don't think so," she said without hesitation. "My first class isn't until noon, and it's a three-hour Chemistry lab. So I want to sleep in."

"Okay," I said. "I'll call you after dinner, then."

"Whatever."

"I love you."

"I love you too," she said half-heartedly.

Then we said goodbye and hung up.

Beautiful, I thought with dripping sarcasm. *Fucking beautiful.*

✧ ✧ ✧

I waited until almost seven o'clock before I decided that Terry wasn't coming back to the room. Since I had skipped lunch, I was starving. Finally, I called Kendall and told her that my roommate had stood me up for dinner. She said she'd already eaten, but she'd be happy to fix me something at her apartment.

I still felt guilty about not telling Gina about my plans with Kendall. But when I called Gina's room, no one answered. I thought I must have dialed the wrong number, so I called again. When I still didn't get an answer, I hung up the phone.

Then I left Terry a note—in case he came back to the room after I left—and headed downstairs. Kendall fixed me a sandwich and a bowl of soup. While I ate, she talked about her classes.

After dinner, I called Gina again, but she didn't want to come join us. When I asked her where she'd been earlier, she snapped at me. At that point, I decided that I was done talking. I told her I loved her and then hung up.

"What was that about?" Kendall asked quietly.

"What do you mean?" I asked as innocently as I could.

"Your face," she said, indicating my expression. "What did Gina say when you asked where she was?"

"She about took my head off. She said she didn't need me keeping tabs on her."

"Wow."

"No kidding," I said.

"I don't understand why she's angry with you," she said. "Well, I *understand* it, but it's not rational."

I shook my head. "Let's change the subject."

"Okay. Sorry."

"It's not your fault," I said with a shrug.

"I still don't like to see you upset, though."

"I'll survive. She'll get over it. She always does."

Kendall nodded and then glided into my arms. As I hugged her, she laid her head on my shoulder.

"Thanks for being you," I whispered.

"Thanks for loving me."

"I can't help it," I said with a soft chuckle.

"Good."

✧ ✧ ✧

When I returned to my room, shortly after eleven, my note to Terry was still on the mirror and

he was nowhere to be found.

"This is just bizarre," I said to myself.

Then I stared at my weights for a few minutes. I'd eaten too much at dinner and I wanted to work some of it off. In the end, I decided not to; I just wasn't in the mood to lift. I needed to start a regular workout schedule, but I also needed to figure out when it fit into my class schedule. Finally, I decided to just go to bed.

I lay awake for a long time, thinking about Kendall, Gina, and my life in general. Intellectually, I understood why Gina was sullen—she was in a new situation that she couldn't control—but it still bugged me. And while Kendall hadn't *meant* to put pressure on me, I felt it nonetheless. I really *didn't* have a good answer for which of them to introduce as my girlfriend.

I was in a no-win situation, and I didn't like it.

When I still couldn't get to sleep, I decided to get up and work out after all. For forty-five minutes, I worked hard, doing presses, curls, and lifts. Then I did push-ups and sit-ups until I felt like puking. Finally, I rinsed off in the shower. By the time I staggered back to my room, I could barely keep my eyes open. I think I fell asleep in record time.

✧ ✧ ✧

Thursday, when my alarm went off, I nearly knocked it off the desk. After lying there for several minutes, I peeled my eyes open and grabbed the clock.

When I looked at the time—6:14AM—I sighed. I'd gotten less than four hours of sleep.

I met Kendall for breakfast and she commented on my haggard appearance. I told her about not getting any sleep and she nodded in understanding.

After we finished eating, I walked with her to her class. Then I kissed her goodbye and headed to the A&A building for my own class.

It was Architecture 121, Drawing, and I basically planned to wait around until class began at nine. I'd brought *Dune* with me, but I couldn't concentrate on it. I think I read the same page six or seven times. Finally, students started trickling into the classroom. When the professor arrived, I stuffed my book back into my backpack and took out my notebook.

The professor was a soft-spoken older man named Donald Ledbetter. He seemed nice enough, especially compared to Professor Joska from the day before. For the next fifty minutes, I patiently listened as he went over things I already knew (from high school art class). Finally, the bell rang and I headed back to my dorm.

Terry's side of the room was unchanged from the night before. In the other side of the suite, T.J. and Glen were listening to Country music. I like most all kinds of music, but Country usually drives me crazy. All in all, it was shaping up to be a spectacular day.

Without even taking my clothes off, I climbed into bed, set my alarm for eleven, and went back to sleep.

✧ ✧ ✧

When my alarm went off, I stared at the ceiling for a few minutes. I was still a little depressed about Gina and her attitude, but I couldn't really do anything about it. Besides, after my Art History class, I had an afternoon with Kendall to look forward to. That alone made getting out of bed worthwhile.

I decided to take a quick shower and get cleaned up for her. While I let the water sluice over

me, I thought about her luscious body. In my mind, I pictured her breasts. Then I imagined them bouncing as I thrust into her.

When my dick reached full erection in the real world, I reached down to stroke it. But then I decided against jerking off. I wanted to save my energy for Kendall.

Since I wasn't going to masturbate, I picked up my razor. I shaved the base of my dick and then trimmed the sides of my pubic hair. Then I took my time and gently shaved my balls. I wanted to be as smooth as possible for Kendall (and I hoped she'd do the same for me). Fortunately, my erection made things easier.

After I shut off the water and dried myself, I rushed across the foyer and into my room. T.J. and Glen's door was shut, but I didn't want either of them to see me with a large lump under my towel.

As I shaved my face—with a different razor—I looked at myself in the mirror. Then I turned to the side, sucked in my stomach, and stared at my profile for a moment. I didn't *think* I was gaining weight, but I wanted to be sure. Finally, I brushed my teeth and combed my hair.

Then I tucked my dwindling erection into my underwear and decided to skip lunch (I wasn't really hungry and I didn't have time). When I finished getting dressed, I grabbed my backpack and headed out.

I was a little late getting to class, so I had to sit in the back of the small auditorium. Fortunately, I wasn't the only one: two girls came in after me. The professor was just starting to speak, so the girls quickly took seats next to me.

While the professor—a woman named Dubois—droned on about the importance of art to society and culture, I covertly studied the two girls next to me.

The brunette had taken the seat beside me. She was petite and very attractive, with high cheekbones, pouty lips, and hazel eyes. She wore a light blue halter top and white shorts over tanned legs. Her breasts were perky, and I could see enough cleavage to make it worthwhile to actually sneak a peek. I didn't want to stare, so I tore my eyes away with an effort of will. When I glanced at her again—at her face, thank God—she was looking at me. She smiled, so I smiled in return and then we turned back to the lecturing professor.

When the brunette leaned forward, I caught a glimpse of her friend. The other girl was also petite, but blonde, with wavy hair, bright blue eyes, and a nice tan. Her breasts were slightly smaller than the brunette's, but she wore a tight red t-shirt that showed them off. She was also chewing on the end of her pencil. For a moment, I let my mind wander as I imagined her lips…

I was busted!

We made eye contact and I smiled to cover my embarrassment. She smiled in reply, her eyes sparkling mischievously. To my relief, the brunette sat back and blocked me from the blonde's sight. Then the two girls started whispering to each other.

I surreptitiously tried to straighten my shorts and relieve some of the pressure on my erection. Then I looked at my watch. One thirty couldn't arrive soon enough. Needless to say, I was suddenly very eager to see Kendall.

When class was over, my erection had mostly subsided, so I stood up to leave. The brunette stopped me with a look.

"Did we miss anything before we got here?" she asked. Then she took a deep breath and held it.

It took an incredible act of self-control not to let my eyes wander to her breasts. Fortunately, I mustered my willpower and simply shook my head.

As she held my eyes with her own, she arched an eyebrow.

"I got here right before you," I said. "But the professor wasn't lecturing when I sat down."

"Okay," the brunette said. "Thanks."

As the two girls walked off, I followed them with my eyes. They were both short—a couple of inches over five feet—but they both had tanned, well-toned legs and cute asses. At the door to the auditorium, the blonde turned and busted me again!

I felt my face heating.

She grinned at my embarrassment and then the brunette gave me an appraising look. The blonde saw what her friend was doing, rolled her eyes, and practically dragged the brunette from the room.

Maybe this day isn't so bad after all, I thought.

With a spring in my step, I bounded up the few stairs to the top of the auditorium. In the hallway, I caught a glimpse of the two girls as they walked toward the building's atrium. They were sharing a bag of carrot sticks and talking animatedly. As I watched them, the brunette said something to the blonde, who then looked over her shoulder.

Busted! Again! Jeez!

The blonde's eyes met mine and she smiled. Then she turned back to her friend, nodded, and they resumed talking. I shook my head in wonder. I didn't know who was flirting more: the brunette, the blonde, or *me*. And *I* had a girlfriend. *Two* of them!

Speaking of which, I thought.

With that, I headed to Andy Holt Apartments.

Normally, men were supposed to be escorted on the women's floors and vice versa. But it was almost impossible for the staff to monitor who got off the elevator on which floor, so I simply walked past the front desk as if I were a resident. At Kendall's door, I knocked and then waited impatiently.

When the door opened, she peered around it.

"Sorry," she said, "I'm running late. Come on in."

As I stepped inside, I had to stifle a chuckle. Her hair was still in rollers, she had half her makeup on, and she was still wearing a white terrycloth bathrobe. Fortunately, the robe was short, and showed off her legs.

"Hi," I said.

"Hi yourself," she said as she stepped forward and gave me a quick kiss.

Instead of letting her step away, I pulled her against me. Then I let my backpack slip to the floor as I crushed my lips against hers. My dick threatened to burst the seams of my shorts, so I cupped her ass and ground my hips against her. Then I lifted the hem of her robe. To my delight, I felt her bare skin underneath. When we finally broke the kiss, we were both smiling.

"Mmmmm," she breathed. "I've missed you."

Instead of answering, I kissed her again. Then I cupped her bare ass with both hands. Her breathing quickened as I pulled her hips against me. We kissed for several long moments, until she finally pushed me away.

"Not yet," she said. "I'm not ready."

"I am," I insisted.

"No. *I'm* not. My hair's not done, I—"

"I don't care about your hair," I said. Then I kissed her again.

Her resistance crumbled as I pressed my lips against hers. Then, surprisingly, she pushed me away again.

"I've got to finish getting ready," she said, panting slightly. Before I could protest, she stepped back. Then she put a finger against my lips to silence me. "Give me five minutes," she said, "and I'll make it worth your while."

I didn't know what she was up to, but I nodded anyway.

"Thanks," she said with another kiss. "I think you'll enjoy it… my lord."

Before I could ask what she meant, she turned and practically danced down the hallway to the bathroom. I walked over to the couch, adjusted my erection, and sat down.

After waiting almost ten minutes, I was just about horny enough to start without her.

"Are you ready?" she called down the hallway.

"Oh *yeah*," I said as I stood.

Then she walked around the corner, stopped, and struck a model pose.

My jaw dropped.

She'd taken out her curlers and then brushed her hair, so it fell in soft, dark waves over her shoulders. Her makeup was subtle, and her lips shone with lip-gloss. But that wasn't what *really* caught my attention.

Instead of her robe, she'd changed into a sheer toga. The diaphanous material was gathered at her right shoulder with a gold cord. It covered her right breast, but the left one remained exposed. That didn't really matter, since the material was so thin that I could easily make out her sun-darkened right nipple.

She had belted the material around her waist with another length of gold cord, but the garment didn't cover her completely—the sides were open. Her silver waist chain was a darker line beneath the fabric, but glinted where it snaked over her bare hips.

The toga ended at the tops of her thighs, just below her sex. If I looked hard enough, I could barely make out the line of her shaved slit. Like Gina, Kendall knew that I preferred a smooth pussy. Unlike Gina, Kendall actually enjoyed shaving for me.

Reluctantly, I drew my eyes upward. I wanted to say something, but she looked so much like a goddess that I simply stood there, completely spellbound.

"Is my appearance pleasing to you, my lord?" she asked.

I worked my mouth, but couldn't speak. Ultimately, I gave up and simply nodded.

Then she walked toward me—the model walk—her breasts swaying gently as she did.

"Wow," I said when I finally found my voice. "You look fantastic."

"Thank you, master."

"Master?" I asked.

"Of course," she said. "You took me as your prize when you conquered my homeland."

"Conquered your homeland?"

"My father's armies were defeated by you and the legions under your command." Then she lowered her eyes. "It was only fitting that you—a Roman lord—should take the vanquished king's daughter as your concubine."

"Concubine?" I must've sounded like a broken record.

"Yes, master. I am your concubine, to do with as you wish," she said. Then she looked up anxiously. "Do you not remember, master?"

For a moment, I was completely baffled. Then it hit me. This must've been a fantasy of hers: the Roman nobleman and the Greek slave princess. *Far be it from me to deny a girl her fantasies,* I thought with a mental grin.

"What should I call you?" I asked aloud. I didn't think the name "Kendall" exactly fit her idea of a Greek princess.

"I am Ariadne, my lord." Then, from under dark, long lashes, she looked up tentatively. "Would you like me to give you a massage, master? I have heated oil ready, of course."

"Yeah," I said. "I mean… um… that would be fine."

With that, she lowered her eyes, bowed slightly, then turned. I followed her down the hallway, my eyes never leaving her tanned legs and gorgeous ass. At her door, she stood aside and gestured for me to enter first.

Inside, I got my second shock of the afternoon. Not only were her blinds shut, but she had a blanket over the window, completely blocking the sunlight. Instead of being dim, however, the room was lit by more than a dozen candles. Clusters of them surrounded a blanket spread on the floor. Their flames flickered in the breeze from the air conditioner.

As she shut the door, I turned. Without lifting her eyes, she began unbuttoning my shirt. Silently, she slid it off my shoulders. Then she sank to her knees. I was acutely aware of the bulge in my shorts, and I caught myself holding my breath as I looked down at her.

"You must be tired from drilling with your soldiers," she said as she began to untie my shoes. I lifted my feet to let her remove them one by one. She pulled off my socks and then set them aside. "I'll knead the kinks from your muscles and help you relax," she added. Then she looked up, her beautiful face full of promise.

I had to stifle a groan as I watched her reach for my shorts. When she unzipped them, my hard-on tented my underwear. She lowered my shorts first, and I stepped out of them. Then I licked my lips as she reached for the waistband of my briefs. Gently, she pulled them out until they cleared my jutting erection. Finally, she tugged them down my thighs. My cock bobbed gently as I stepped out of them.

"Would you like to lie down, my lord?" she asked, gesturing to the blanket.

"Of course," I said.

"Would you like me to start with your shoulders and back?"

No, I thought. *I want you to start with my dick.* Instead of saying anything aloud, though, I nodded. After all, this was *her* fantasy, not mine.

Then she glanced at my unflagging erection. "Will lying on your stomach cause you discomfort? I could…" With a shrug, she left the offer unspoken, but managed to look appropriately nervous and eager at the same time.

"I'll manage," I said with a grin. As I lowered myself to the blanket, I made sure my hard-on wasn't bent awkwardly. Finally, I settled on my stomach and rested my head on my arms.

Then Kendall—I mean Ariadne—knelt next to me. From a steaming bowl near my head, she withdrew a stoppered bottle. She dried it with a small towel as she turned toward me.

When she poured a line of warm oil down my back, I groaned softly. The warmth spread

through my skin as the spicy, floral scent reached my nose. Then she straddled my hips, her smooth skin gliding along my own. I groaned again as she began kneading the thick cords of my shoulders.

For a moment, I forgot my erection. I forgot my horniness. I think I even forgot my name. As she moved her hands over my traps and delts, I groaned again. She put her weight on her arms and her palms dug into my muscles. The combination of the warm oil and gentle pressure made me relax even further.

Then she moved down my back—massaging the flare of my lats—and then inward toward my spine. As she kneaded my muscles, I closed my eyes and let out a deep sigh.

"Do you like this, master?" she asked quietly.

"God, yes," I murmured.

"I like doing it for you."

I nodded.

"When I was in my father's house," she said, "I never dreamed I would enjoy being a man's concubine. Especially a Roman man."

For a moment, I was confused. Then I realized that she was telling me—in a story—about her fantasy.

"Forgive me for being so bold," she continued, "but my father and uncles always said the Romans were crass and uncouth, skilled at war but uncivilized."

I don't know if she was making her story up on the spot, or if she had rehearsed it, but I was fascinated.

"When you first brought me to your bedchamber," she said, "I was so scared. Do you remember how I trembled, my lord?"

I played my part and nodded.

"Huddling in the corner, I waited for you to violate me. Imagine my surprise when you only wanted to talk. And in *Greek*. I'd never heard of a Roman who spoke my language," she said. "We talked late into the night, but I was confused when you sent me back to my chamber without taking what was rightfully yours. I thought I might not be appealing to you."

I shook my head as she moved lower and poured more oil on my buttocks and upper thighs.

"When I received your summons the next night," she continued, "I tried to make myself prettier for you. Did you notice?"

"Of course," I said languidly. Between the story and her hands, I was having trouble concentrating.

"I knew you did," she said. "But you only wanted to talk. Never in my wildest dreams did I think I would find myself in a Roman lord's bedchamber, much less discussing Odysseus and Penelope."

She moved her hands lower, massaging my calves.

"And then for the next week, each night was the same: I would be summoned to your bedchamber. Each night, I would weave a garland of flowers for my hair, and select the prettiest, finest garments from the clothes you had given me." She moved back up my body, massaging as she did.

I slowly rocked my head from side to side as she straddled my hips and kneaded the muscles of my neck.

"Each night, I went to your chambers expecting you to ravish me. And each morning, when I returned to my own chambers still a maiden, I felt more excited than ever."

I almost groaned when she took her hands from my neck and swung her leg to the side.

"I could see the desire in your eyes," she continued. "And your virility was manifest in every move you made."

At her touch, I rolled onto my back. My erection flopped against my stomach as I did.

"I even noticed the swelling in your loins," she said, her voice dropping to a whisper. "Yet still you did not touch me; you did not give me what I was starting to long for."

With hooded eyes, I watched as she removed the bottle of oil from the hot water bath and then poured a line down my chest. As she began massaging the oil into my skin, I let my eyes drift over her body. The sheer toga revealed the side of her right breast. Beyond it, her unencumbered left breast swayed gently as she moved. With her legs tucked under her, I couldn't see anything more than her hips and lovely legs, but I was still enraptured by her figure.

"Sometimes I would imagine what it would be like when you took me," she said as she concentrated on massaging my pectoral muscles. "I imagined what it would be like to be under you, to be possessed by you." Then she moved her hands to my shoulders.

For a moment, I watched her face as she continued her tale. She was concentrating on me, but she seemed to be enjoying her story as much as I was.

"Would you take my maidenhead in a rush of strength, like a soldier?" she mused. "Or would you be gentle and considerate, like a philosopher? I knew not which, for you are both soldier and philosopher at the same time."

My dick twitched in anticipation when she moved lower. She poured oil on my stomach and then began spreading it over my skin.

"I thought about it each day while you were away," she said. "And each night, I would bathe myself for you. I would make my garland and choose the sheerest of outfits, hoping to entice you into using my body for your pleasure."

Then, to my silent agony, she skipped over my erection and began massaging my legs.

"When you first took me from my father's house," she said with a soft laugh, "I was afraid of you. Within a week of coming to your house, I found myself longing for your touch." Then her eyes flicked to my erection. "And yearning for the sight of your engorged manhood," she whispered.

As she moved down my legs to my shins, I flexed my buttocks and made my dick twitch. To my consternation, she ignored the implicit offer and continued massaging my legs.

"What would it be like?" she wondered. "I'd seen my brothers and uncles when they were *gymnos*, of course—"

I had no *idea* what the word meant, but it sure sounded provocative.

"—but none of them had your… enthusiasm," she continued.

Then, to my imminent relief, she straddled my legs and poured warm oil on my cock and balls. I almost groaned aloud when she wrapped her fingers around my shaft and gently squeezed.

"When you first bathed with me," she said, "I thought *that* would be the moment. You were so hard, so ready. I wanted to touch you, to give you pleasure. As you tenderly dried me, my heart sang with joy. But when I returned to my chambers still a maiden, I felt an ache deep

within my loins."

I made a monumental effort to refrain from mentioning what ached for *me* at the moment. But even as her hands worked their magic on my cock, I was fascinated by her story.

"The next night, I could barely contain myself as I waited for your summons. When it came, I felt a heat grow within my belly. At first, I thought I was sick. But at the thought of not seeing you, I grew faint."

I lifted my head to watch as she intently stroked my cock.

Her breasts swung gently as she pumped her fists. Then her eyes lit up, and she unconsciously moistened her lips.

When I looked down, I realized why; a bead of pre-come had just appeared at the tip of my cock.

"Do you remember how I rushed headlong into your chambers, my lord? I was frantic," she said. "Frantic for you to take me, to make me yours." She looked at me, her eyes smoldering. "I was no longer a virtuous *Hellene* princess. My desires burned within me. I wanted to see your manhood, to rub it on my skin, to feel it sink into me and fill me with your heat and essence."

Speaking of heat and essence, I thought with wry urgency.

When she sensed I was close, she sped her pace, her hands gliding over my slippery member.

I closed my eyes and groaned.

"When you undressed me, my lord," she said softly, "it was with the care of a philosopher. But then you took me like a soldier, with passion and power. I felt every ridge of your manhood as you moved within me. And when you plunged into me the final time, I knew you would soon loose a torrent."

The pressure in my balls built, and she stopped talking as she concentrated on getting me off. With one hand, she cupped my balls and pressed that spot behind them. With the other, she continued stroking me, squeezing gently as she did.

"You're so hard, my lord," she breathed.

With that, my buttocks and legs tensed up. When I arched my back, I almost bucked Kendall (or Ariadne—I was too far gone to care) off me. The pressure built until I almost couldn't stand it. My dick swelled and then seemed to swell again.

Finally, the dam burst. I felt the first splatter of semen across my chest. Then I clamped my eyes shut and saw stars. As she continued to pump my spurting cock, I drifted through a fog of pleasure.

"Oh, master," she said when I regained some semblance of consciousness, "I love you."

"I love you too," I said, panting.

She continued to massage my dick, squeezing the last drops of semen onto my abdomen.

"God, that was good," I gasped.

For a few moments, neither of us spoke. She continued stroking my dick, taking care to avoid the sensitive head.

Then I lifted my head and looked down at her. "Wow."

"Did you enjoy your massage, my lord?" she asked.

"God, yes."

"Let me get the towel to clean you." A moment later, she dipped the small white towel into the bowl of water and began wiping up my semen. Droplets were *everywhere*. When she

finished, she smiled down at me. “Are you happy with me, master?”

“*Very* happy,” I said. Then I waggled my eyebrows at her and propped myself on my elbows.

She sat quietly as I eyed her body.

Then I reached for the gathered fabric at her right shoulder. She didn’t move as I pulled it down her arm. My hand caressed her breast, gently testing its heft. Then I tweaked her already hard nipple with my thumb.

“Oh, master,” she breathed, her eyes closed, “your touch sends shivers through me.”

I gently pulled her so she straddled my chest. Then I lifted my head and suckled her right nipple, causing her to whimper. When I switched to her left breast, she gasped. With my lips clamped around the hard little bud of her nipple, I lay back, gently pulling her with me. She supported herself with outstretched arms, her breasts dangling in my face.

I luxuriated in the feel of her soft, pendulous flesh. Then I pushed her breasts together and inhaled the scent of her skin. Finally, I began licking and sucking her nipples, gently at first, but with increasing enthusiasm. She gasped in pleasure as I did. I knew how much she liked having them sucked, and I certainly didn’t want to disappoint her.

As I continued sucking her nipples, I reached behind her and spread her cheeks. She groaned when my fingers found her drenched slit. I parted her labia with my middle finger and then gently slid it into her. As the pad of my finger glided over her, I felt the inner ridges of her pussy. She quivered when I gently massaged them.

“Turn around,” I said at last.

Without comment, she obeyed.

Then I guided her so she straddled my face.

“Would you like me to pleasure you with my mouth, my lord?” she asked.

Instead of answering, I lifted my resurgent erection and aimed it in her general direction. She bent forward and captured it with her supple lips. I closed my eyes for a moment and enjoyed the heat of her mouth.

Then, to my surprise, she slowly engulfed most of my length. When she finally closed her lips, I felt the muscles at the back of her throat as she swallowed.

“Oh, God,” I groaned. “That feels incredible.”

She tightened her lips and slowly drew back, caressing me with her tongue as she did. At the tip of my dick, she gently sucked on the glans. Then she opened her mouth and moved back down. Once again, I felt my cock enter the back of her throat. When she clamped her lips around my girth, I felt her breath on my balls.

For the next few minutes, I lost myself in the blissful sensations she created with her mouth. As she slowly fellated me, she played with my balls, adding to my pleasure.

Finally, I shook my head to clear my thoughts. I had a beautiful, shaved, and *very* wet pussy mere inches from my face. Her aroma surrounded me, infusing my senses with her arousal and fueling my own.

She groaned around my cock when I began licking her slit. Then I reached around her hips so I could hold her pussy open and tongue the sensitive tissues inside. After several long licks, I locked my lips around her swollen clit and sucked gently. When I did, she let my cock slip from her mouth.

Once the distraction of her lips was gone, I began licking her in earnest. Instead of sucking

me, she wrapped her hand around my saliva-slick length and simply stroked.

With her soft thighs bracing my face, I returned my attention to her pussy. For a moment, I simply marveled at her beauty. Her outer labia were swollen and pink. Her inner lips were plump with arousal, and I could almost watch the dewdrops of moisture forming on them. Then I inhaled her scent again. At last, I flattened my tongue and ran it along her slit. She moaned in ecstasy and laid her head on my left hip.

With my fingers, I held her pussy open so I could lick the sensitive folds between her inner and outer lips. Then I thrust the tip of my tongue inside her, eliciting another moan.

After a moment, I returned my lips to her hooded but swollen clit. I locked them around the hard little pearl and pressed it with my tongue, teasing it from side to side. As I did, I savored the fresh, tangy, metallic flavor of her juices.

Then I pursed my lips and sucked. While I did, I gently speared her with my middle finger, once again caressing her inner ridges. As I moved it in and out, I started licking her again. Then I wagged my tongue side-to-side over her clit, causing her to shudder.

With her breasts pressing into my stomach, I could feel her breathing growing heavy and erratic. She had stopped moving her hand on my erection, choosing to simply hold it. I smiled to myself and buried my face in her warm, slippery pussy. After several minutes of my lips and tongue, she finally pushed herself upright.

“Please take me, my lord,” she begged. “I need to feel your manhood inside me.”

For a moment, I furrowed my brow in confusion. Then I realized—with a bit of amazement—that she was still playing the part of a slave princess. Instead of replying, I tapped her inner thigh.

She immediately swung her leg over my head and sat back.

I rolled upright. When she began untying the knot holding the cord around her waist, I stopped her with a gesture. She gave me a curious look as I lifted her to her knees and then shuffled closer.

My erection brushed the bottom of the toga as I worked the knot loose. She wrapped her fingers around my shaft and stroked gently. In a moment, I pulled the gold cord from around her waist and let the gauzy toga fall to the floor.

When I looked up, I gazed into her bright blue eyes. Then I pulled her close and kissed her, her breasts crushing against my chest as we embraced. My tongue explored her mouth as I held her close, delighting in the feel of her body against mine.

Without breaking our kiss, I turned us both and lowered her to the blanket. Her knees parted as I moved between them, and I felt the heat of her pussy bathe my skin.

I lowered my lips to hers and she eagerly responded. As we kissed, I ground my shaft against her smooth, slick pussy, causing her to moan into my mouth. After several minutes of mounting passion and desire, I pulled back and smiled roguishly.

Then I began kissing her neck and earlobes. She gasped and held me close. When I trailed kisses down her neck and chest, she ran her fingers through my hair. I paused to circle her left nipple with my tongue. Then I moved to the right. I switched between them several times, sucking them to erection.

Finally, I straightened and then gazed down at her. I put my hands on her up-thrust knees and simply admired her. Her breasts were flattened to the sides, and in the candlelight, they shone where my saliva coated her nipples. Her soft, smooth stomach fluttered with her irregular

breathing.

Then I sat back on my haunches and admired her clean-shaven pussy. Her skin was smooth and flawless, her labia darkened with arousal. With her legs spread to accommodate my hips, her pussy lips parted to reveal her inner folds. They glistened with her moisture.

With a grin, I scooted forward, gripped my jutting shaft, and rubbed it along her length. In the candlelight, her waist chain sparkled against her tanned skin. I tore my eyes away from it—and the beautiful flare of her hips—to concentrate on teasing her pussy with my dick.

"My lord," she pleaded in a whisper.

"What do you want?" I asked. It was a little game we sometimes played, and I knew her well. I would tease her and make her explicitly tell me what she wanted. I could almost feel the temperature in her pussy climb a few degrees at the prospect.

"Please."

"Tell me what you want… um…" *What was her make-believe name again?* I wondered. *Jeez, one look at her beautiful pussy and I'd forget my own name sometimes! Arlene? Ariel? Ariadne!* "Tell me what you want, Ariadne," I repeated.

"You know what I want, my lord."

"Tell me anyway," I said as I dragged my glans through the slippery folds of her spread pussy.

"Please, don't make me."

"Do you want my manhood?" I asked. "Do you want me to fill you with my seed?"

"Please, my lord," she begged. When I arched an eyebrow, she nodded, her eyes beseeching me.

"Then tell me," I said. "Tell me what you want. Say it."

For a moment, she hesitated. I could tell that she was excited (her pussy was practically gushing), but it excited her to "give in" to my demands.

"Tell me what you want, Ariadne," I said. Then I teased her with my cock, rubbing it over her swollen clit.

She shuddered and then gazed into my eyes. "Take me, my lord," she said.

I set the tip of my dick at her opening.

"Fill my temple of Aphrodite with your rampant manhood."

Instead of plunging into her, I laughed. (I couldn't help myself!)

For a moment, she looked betrayed. But then she thought about what she'd said. Reluctantly, she started giggling too.

"Fill your temple of Aphrodite with my rampant manhood?" I asked between fits of laughter.

"Was it a bit much?" she asked when we both calmed down.

I wiped tears from the corners of my eyes and nodded. "Sorry."

"I guess it *was* kind of silly," she said.

"Kind of?"

"Okay, maybe it was a *lot* silly."

Still chuckling, I nodded.

"Well, you don't have to keep laughing," she said.

"I'm sorry. I really am," I said. "Did you just make that up?"

She shook her head. "I probably read it somewhere."

"You've been reading the wrong books."

"I can't help it if I have a secret addiction to cheap romance novels."

"Yeah, but you don't have to quote them," I said.

Before she could answer, I held up my hand to forestall her. Then, I looked down at where our bodies were almost joined. With a sly grin, I eased my hips forward. When my cock encountered her tight pussy, it momentarily bent. She gasped in ecstasy as I exerted a little more pressure and her folds parted to admit my glans. Then I held her hips as I concentrated on sliding my cock into her vise-like pussy.

"There," I said at last. "Now we can finish our conversation."

"I'm sorry," she asked distractedly, "what were we talking about?"

"Your reading list," I said. Then I adjusted my hips and seated myself more firmly in her pussy.

"Oh my goodness," she gasped.

"You know," I said with a grimace of pleasure, "when I'm away from you for a while, I forget how tight you are."

"And I forget how *big* you are."

"I'm not *that* big," I said.

"You're pretty big," she said breathlessly.

"But we fit perfectly."

"Perfectly," she echoed.

"Now, I believe we were talking about your reading list."

"*Fuck* my reading list," she said. Then she realized what she'd said (which was completely out of character). Her eyes popped open and she started giggling again.

It was funny, but I was too consumed by pleasure to laugh with her. As her stomach heaved with laughter, her inner muscles rippled and gripped me. The feeling was almost indescribable.

"You're a bad influence on me," she said when her laughter died down.

"Would my bad influence have anything to do with *this?*" I asked as I rocked my hips.

Her eyes snapped shut and she whimpered in pleasure.

I lowered my chest to hers and supported myself on my elbows. She gasped as my cock moved within her. Then she wrapped her arms around me and held me close.

"I love you," she whispered. "I love you *so* much."

"I love you too." Then I pressed my lips to hers.

As we kissed, I began rocking my hips. My dick didn't move much, but she was so tight that every inch felt like a foot. After a minute or two, we broke our kiss, both panting.

"I love this part," she whispered.

I raised my head and looked a question at her.

"When you first enter me," she said, "before I'm really used to your thickness. It feels like you're splitting me in half," she continued. "I can feel every vein and every ridge of your dick. And when you move, it's… wow."

"'Wow,' huh?"

She nodded. "Sometimes, I think my body was made for you."

"Oh, God, me too," I groaned as I began thrusting slowly.

Instead of replying, she ran her hands over my flanks. Then she tilted her hips, closed her eyes in pleasure, and locked her ankles behind my back. Her nostrils flared as she took a deep breath,

her eyelids flushed with desire.

I smiled when she opened her eyes and gazed up at me.

"Fuck me, my lord," she said, back in the character of Ariadne. "Fuck me, fuck me, fuck me."

In answer, I drew my hips back. At the end of my stroke, I kissed her. She moaned into my mouth as I hesitated for a moment. My cock bent when I tried to slide it back into her. But then it quickly overcame her resistance and sank into the steamy, tight confines of her pussy. When my hips ground against her pelvis, she moaned again.

With that, I began fucking her in earnest. At first, I took long, deliberate strokes, watching as my cock spread her open. In the dancing light from the candles, her clean-shaven outer labia glistened with moisture. Each time I pulled back, her inner lips grabbed at the sides of my dick and tried to hold me inside her. And each time I slid back into her, they disappeared with the friction of my passing.

As I slowly increased my pace, she closed her eyes and savored the feeling of my cock moving within her. Her tan breasts bounced each time I thrust into her, her nipples crinkled and erect with desire.

"Play with your nipples," I said.

Without opening her eyes, she began twisting and tugging them. They were usually super-sensitive, and this time was no exception. Almost as soon as she began playing with them, she started whimpering.

"You like playing with your tits, don't you?" I asked.

Her lips compressed into a thin white line as she nodded.

"You like it when I *make* you play with them."

Again, she nodded.

"You're a good girl, aren't you?"

"Yes," she hissed.

"A good little Greek princess."

Another nod.

"You'd never be so… wanton, would you?"

"No, never," she breathed. "Never."

"You like it when I make you spread your legs for me."

Instead of answering, her eyes popped open and she searched my face.

"You like feeling my cock inside you, don't you."

She didn't answer.

"Say it," I demanded as I continued thrusting into her. "Tell me you like my cock."

"No," she whispered.

"Tell me."

She shook her head.

In spite of her denial, I could feel her getting more excited. Her pussy had steadily grown hotter and wetter. Her face and chest were flushed as well.

"My lord," she gasped.

"Tell me how much you like my cock," I said. "Say it."

Her pussy started fluttering around my invading manhood.

I increased my pace and began slamming into her. My own orgasm welled up, but I wanted to

come when she did.

"Oh, master," she pleaded, "don't make me say it."

"Say it."

She shook her head.

"Say it… concubine."

"Yes, master. I—"

Before she could utter another word, her pussy clenched me tightly. As I jackhammered into her, she climaxed, her body going rigid. Her internal muscles gripped me so hard that I didn't think I'd be able to thrust into her again. When they parted and I slammed into her, she groaned in ecstasy.

As her pussy convulsed around my cock, I kept pounding into her, forcing my way inside her. She cried out and gripped my upper arms, holding on as the sensations of her orgasm assaulted her.

Finally, I buried myself deep within her and felt my cock swell. She moaned when the first jet coated her insides. I arched my back and tried to bury myself deeper inside her, but the next spurt erupted and I clamped my eyes shut in bliss. As I emptied my balls into her, she moaned softly.

When I opened my eyes, after several long moments, she smiled up at me and caressed my face. I swallowed to moisten my mouth and then smiled in reply.

"Yes, my lord," she said softly. "I want your dick."

"Well, you've got it," I panted. "And *then* some."

"I know," she said, her smile full of warmth.

For a long, drawn-out moment, we gazed into each other's eyes. As we did, I felt a connection deeper than I ever thought possible.

"I love you, Paul," she said softly.

"I love you too."

With that, I lowered my lips to hers and we kissed for a long time, my dwindling erection still buried in her depths.

✧ ✧ ✧

Later, Kendall and I showered together and then cleaned up the evidence of our afternoon tryst. I felt like I was hiding things from Gina, but I also didn't want to deal with her sullen attitude or I-wanted-to-watch pouting.

I spent time alone with Gina, and I wanted the same with Kendall. I enjoyed when all three of us got together, but for Kendall's and my reunion, I wanted some privacy. Still, it felt like a betrayal to not mention it to Gina.

"Are you okay?" Kendall asked as we relaxed on the couch in the living room.

I nodded.

"You look… pensive."

"I guess I am," I said. Then I tried to explain what I'd been thinking.

"So you're worried about not telling her?"

I nodded.

Instead of replying, she grew quiet.

"I guess I feel guilty," I said. When Kendall stiffened, I hastily explained. "I don't feel guilty about being with you, but I feel bad about not wanting to tell her."

"I understand."

"I mean, I guess I just don't want the hassle. She'll either be sullen or upset."

"*I* have to share," Kendall said quietly. "Why can't she?"

"Maybe this whole two-girlfriend thing isn't as easy as I first thought it'd be."

She shook her head and wiped the corners of her eyes.

"I'm sorry, Kendall," I said as I put my arm around her. "I didn't mean it like that. Having you in my life has been one of the best things to ever happen to me. There are thousands of guys who'd kill to be in my shoes."

"With two girls who want too much of your time?"

"With two girls who are smart, beautiful, and sexy. Heck, most guys'd be lucky to have *one* girl like that. I've got two."

"And it's already causing you problems," she said with a sniffle.

"No, *I'm* causing me problems. I just need to get over feeling guilty. If Gina doesn't like me spending private time with you, she'll just have to deal with it. I don't want to lie to her, so I just won't tell her. Besides, if I don't tell her, she won't get angry."

"But isn't that lying by omission?"

"No, it's not lying. It's… I mean… well…"

"It's not as simple as that, is it?" she asked. "The world isn't black and white, lying or not lying."

Reluctantly, I shook my head in agreement.

"I'm sorry I brought it up," she said.

I turned toward her and gazed at her earnestly. "Kendall, it's not your fault. I guess it's mine. Having two girlfriends was fine when I only spent time with one of you at a time, or when we were at camp and no one got jealous—"

"I'm not jealous," she said. Then, "Much."

"I know, but like you said, Gina's out of her comfort spot—"

"Zone."

"Zone," I amended. "I don't think she's really jealous… Maybe 'lonely' is the right word."

"I guess."

"But that doesn't make it any easier. For her or for us," I said. Then I lifted her chin with my finger. "You know I love you, right?"

She nodded.

"And you're more important to me than almost anything else in the world."

"I know, but what if someone else important doesn't want me around?"

"Then *I'll* deal with it. I'm not going to dump you because Gina's upset. She's been upset before, and I survived. I'll survive again."

"I know, but—"

At that point, we heard the apartment door open and then close. A moment later, Abby walked into the living room. She set her books on the table, waved to us, then blithely stepped into the kitchen.

"Listen," I said to Kendall, keeping my voice low, "I love you more than life itself. I'm not going to let anything—or any*one*—come between us. If Gina wants me to break up with you, then she's not the girl I fell in love with in the first place. She's not like that, though. So the only

thing that you and I need to worry about is *us*, the two of us. Okay?"

"I guess."

"Trust me. We'll be fine," I said. *I hope,* I added silently.

Then Kendall wiped her eyes and put on a brave face.

"I love you," I whispered to her.

"I love you too."

A moment later, Abby emerged from the kitchen with a glass of tea. Kendall stood and smoothed her shorts.

"How was class?" she asked the blonde girl.

As they talked, I frantically replayed the past half-hour in my mind. I didn't want Kendall to feel like my *second* girlfriend, but I didn't know what to do about Gina, either. She wasn't happy, and I couldn't fix things. I didn't like not telling her about getting together with Kendall, but I knew what would happen if I did. I hated lying, even by omission, but it was better than the alternative.

Wasn't it?

CHAPTER FOUR

"Look around you, ladies and gentlemen," Professor Joska said as soon as he walked into the classroom. "Two of your peers—or should I say *former* peers?—have had the good sense to drop this class." Then he gazed at us, his strong-jawed face stern and uncompromising. "There's no shame in admitting defeat. If you don't think you're up to the task, then get up and leave now," he said as he took a pen from his jacket pocket. "I'll sign any drop slips now. Anyone? No?"

I think most of us were too scared to move, even if we *had* wanted to drop the class.

"So the rest of you think you're ready for this class?" Then, surprisingly, he looked at the guy next to me. "Do *you* think you have what it takes to be an architect?"

"Yes, sir," the guy said without hesitation.

"Don't you think that's fairly arrogant?" Joska asked the class at large.

We were too cowed to do more than stare back at him.

"What about *you?*" Joska asked, looking in my direction.

I blinked and felt my throat tighten. Was he talking to *me?*

"Don't look like a deer in the headlights, young man," he said.

He *was* talking to me.

"Yes, *you*. Answer me. Don't you think that's fairly arrogant?"

I looked at the guy next to me. He met my gaze evenly.

"Well?" Joska prompted.

"N-no, sir," I said.

"N-n-n-no, sir?" he mocked. "Do *you* think you have what it takes to be an architect?"

The *last* thing I wanted was for Joska to pick on me, but I felt a sudden surge of defiance, so I nodded.

"Speak up!" he said. "Do you think you have what it takes to be an architect?"

I didn't want him to pick on me for being arrogant, so I waffled. "Maybe," I said.

"Maybe?" He looked at the rest of the class and made a mocking face. "Maybe?"

"All right, yes," I said, my face heating with a mixture of anger and embarrassment. "I've got what it takes to be an architect."

"What's your name?" Joska asked.

"Hughes, sir," I said. "Paul Hughes."

"Well Hughes-sir-Paul-Hughes, you've got to be more confident than that if you're going to succeed as an architect. The young man next to you is confident, isn't he?"

I looked at the guy to my right and then nodded.

"Good," Joska said. "At least you realize that much. I was beginning to despair for your future, Mr. Hughes-sir-Paul-Hughes." With that, he seemed to be done picking on me. He reached for a slim folio, opened it, and addressed the class. "For the duration of this quarter, you will be divided into project teams. Who wants to be a team leader?"

The guy next to me immediately raised his hand.

"Come on, gentlemen, and ladies," Joska said, "don't be shy."

I was surprised at the number of people who raised their hands. After a moment's hesitation, I followed suit.

"Not you, Mr. Hughes," Joska said immediately. "Put your hand down."

Like a whipped dog, I dropped my hand. *What does this guy* want *from me?* I wondered resentfully.

"What's your name, Mr. Arrogant?" Professor Joska asked the guy next to me.

"Whitman," the guy answered simply, having learned from my mistake.

"Mr. Whitman," Professor Joska repeated as he made a note. When he turned to the next person with a hand up, he used his pen like a baton and waved derisively at the guy. "Not you, either. Put your hand down."

The guy tensed up and scowled, but lowered his hand.

Then Joska turned to a girl in the front row. She was the only girl with her hand up.

"Do you know how few women architects there are?" Joska asked. "Miss…?"

"Fisher," she said.

I waited for him to lambaste her for being a woman or something equally irrelevant. I felt a momentary pang of guilt because I was glad he was picking on her instead of me. But it was only momentary. I already didn't like him, and I didn't want to say something in the heat of anger—something that might get me kicked out of class, or worse.

"Do you, Miss Fisher?" he asked again.

"No, sir," she said without hesitation. "But I'm going to be one of them."

I'm ashamed to admit that I semi-gleefully waited for the axe to fall. To my utter amazement, Joska laughed.

"Plucky," he said. "Probably deluded, but plucky nonetheless." Then he actually wrote down her name.

I sullenly wondered why *she* was made a team leader but I had been dismissed out of hand.

The next few minutes were agonizing to watch. Professor Joska considered and scathingly dismissed two other people with their hands up. He even had critical remarks about the people he selected. In the end, he wrote down six names: the guy next to me, Whitman; the girl up front, Fisher; and four guys, Giles, Spaulding, Ivey, and Vang.

"With the unlamented loss of your two classmates," Joska said, "there are twenty-four of you in this class. Hopefully, most of you can do simple math, and you've already realized that I'm going to create six teams of four." Then he speared Whitman with his merciless gaze. "Since you've got enough confidence for two people, Mr. Whitman," he said, "I'm going to put Mr. Hughes on your project team. I don't think you need more of a handicap than that, though, so I won't burden you with any dead-weight team members."

Handicap?! I mentally raged. Then I gripped the sides of my desk in barely suppressed anger.

"Can you *handle* that, Mr. Whitman?" Joska asked, blithely ignoring my sputtering reaction.

"Absolutely, sir," Whitman said.

"Arrogant *and* reckless, I see," said Joska. "I wonder how long you'll survive in the architecture program, Mr. Whitman."

"Until I graduate," Whitman said. "Sir," he added after a calculated pause.

I waited for Joska to explode in anger.

When he merely barked a laugh, Whitman relaxed a little.

"Now," Joska said to the class, "when I call your name, raise your hand so your team leader knows who you are. Mr. Whitman's team, Team 1. Mr. Hughes we know about, no need to raise your hand. Miss Poole…?"

A thin brunette raised her hand.

"Mr. Cardenas…?"

An Asian guy raised his hand.

An Asian *guy with a name like Cardenas,* I wondered. *You don't see* that *every day.*

"Miss Fisher's team, Team 2," Joska said. "Mr. Haverty…?" With that, he quickly assigned the rest of the class to one of the six leaders. "Now," he said, "everyone stand up. Team leaders, gather your teams and find seats together."

We looked at each other like sheep. In my case, like a surly sheep.

"*Do it,*" Joska commanded when we hesitated.

Whitman smiled thinly at me as he motioned over Poole and Cardenas. When they joined us, we started to introduce ourselves. Most of the other teams were doing the same thing.

"Get to know each other on your own time," Joska interrupted, "not on mine. Take your seats"

We looked at each other in flustered disbelief and then sat down.

"Now, look at the people on your team," Joska said. "You will love them or you will hate them. I don't care which. All I care about are your projects and your designs. If you can't get along with each other, tough. I'm not your mother and I'm not your priest, so don't come crying to me."

I looked at the people around me, wondering what they were like. Whitman looked self-possessed, but I thought I detected a hint of nervousness. Poole also looked serenely confident. The other guy, Cardenas, simply smiled at me when I glanced his direction. I hoped I didn't look as worried—or angry—as I felt.

Then Joska got our attention, turned to the blackboard, and picked up a piece of chalk.

"Now," he said, "we'll begin your education on the fundamental principles of architectural design with a vocabulary lesson. First…"

I hastily pulled out my notebook and started writing, my anger suppressed but not forgotten.

✧ ✧ ✧

"What a colossal *prick,*" I said as soon as class was over and I was safely in the hallway.

Our team had stayed together as we left the room. The others nodded at my assessment of Joska.

"Not much we can do about it, though," Whitman said with a shrug.

For a moment, I studied the guy. He was taller than me by four or five inches, and while he wasn't skinny, he wasn't as solidly built as me. He had dark hair and blue eyes, and he was actually a pretty good-looking guy. As I stared at him, I tried to decide whether I liked him or not. I was leaning toward not.

"Hi, I'm Trip," he said, ignoring my glare as he held out his hand. "Paul, right?"

Semi-reluctantly, I shook his hand.

"Samantha Poole," the girl said. She was about 5'7" and thin, with dark brunette hair and hazel eyes. She wasn't exactly my type, but she was pretty.

"Antonio Cardenas," the other guy said with a thick Southern twang. He was taller than me, with an Asian's typical black hair and dark eyes. "Nice t' meet y'all," he added.

"Nice to meet you, Antonio," Trip said.

Then we shook hands all around.

"Look," Trip said, "I know we don't have a project to work on yet, but maybe we should at

least get to know each other. That way, we can figure out who's good at what and get ready for whatever Joska drops on us first."

"It's a basic design methods project," Samantha said, fishing out the syllabus. "I've been doing some reading, and I don't think the project will be that hard. It's mostly a lot of drawing. We shouldn't have to construct models or anything."

"Hey, y'all," Antonio said, "I'd love to stay and chew the fat, but I've got a two o'clock English class. I'm gonna have to haul ass if I wanna get there on time."

"Okay, Antonio," Trip said. "We'll see you Monday. Have a nice weekend."

"Y'all have a good one too," he said. "Bye."

I figured we'd talk about Antonio as soon as he left—an *Asian* guy, with a *Hispanic* name, and a twangy *hillbilly* accent?—but no one said anything, so I didn't either.

"What about you?" Trip asked Samantha. "Can you hang out for a few minutes?"

"Sure," she said.

"So," he asked her, "where're you from?"

"Cleveland," she said.

"Ohio?" I asked, a little surprised.

"Tennessee," she said. "It's near Chattanooga."

"Oh, cool," I said. "My girlfriend's from Chattanooga." Then it hit me: *this* is what Kendall was talking about. What if Trip and Samantha met Gina? How would I introduce her? To them, Kendall had just become my one and only girlfriend. With a mental sigh, I pondered how incredibly complex my life had become.

"Paul?" Trip asked a few moments later. "Are you still with us?"

"Yeah, sorry," I said, shaking my head to clear it.

"That's cool," he said. "Where're you from?"

"Atlanta," I said.

"Oh, cool."

"Where are you from?" I asked.

He and Samantha looked at each other and playfully rolled their eyes.

"I think this guy's gonna be the thinker on the team," he said to her. Then he grinned at me to take the sting out of his words. "I'm from Franklin," he said. "It's a suburb of Nashville."

As we walked toward the dorms, we continued talking. Samantha lived in Humes—which was part of the Presidential Complex—and Trip lived in North Carrick. They did most of the talking, since I was still worried about Kendall, Gina, whom to call my girlfriend, and a million other things.

"It was nice talking to you all," Samantha said as we neared her dorm. "I'll see you Monday."

"Seeya, Samantha," Trip said.

I merely waved.

"So what's your story?" Trip asked as we turned to North Carrick.

"Huh?"

"How'd you end up at UT? I mean, you're from Atlanta, right? Georgia Tech's got a good architecture program. Why not go there?"

"My girlfriend goes here. She's a junior. Besides," I said, "Tech's a great school, but UT's got a better design school."

He nodded.

"Why are you at UT?" I asked. "Instead of Vanderbilt, I mean."

"My dad wanted me to go to Vanderbilt, but…," he said. Then a shadow crossed his face. It was fleeting, but I caught it. "I guess I just wanted to come to UT," he said at last.

"That's cool," I said, wondering what he *hadn't* told me. I hit the button to call the elevator and then we waited. "What floor are you on?" I asked when it arrived.

"Four," he said.

"Really? Me too. Cool."

"Hey," he said, "you wanna hang out for a while? We've got the floor meeting at five, but I'm done with classes for the day."

"Sure," I said, warming to his outgoing personality. "My room or yours?"

"Mine. I'm supposed to meet my roommate after class. We were talking about shooting some hoops at HPER, but I don't think I'm in the mood. Do you play basketball?"

"No way, man," I said. "I'm short and white."

"Pistol Pete's white. So is Larry Bird."

"But they're tall," I said.

"True enough."

When we got out of the elevator, we turned right. As we walked down the hall to Trip's room, I kept waiting for him to stop at one of the doors. My room was at the end of the hall, and the closer we got to it, the weirder I felt.

"What room are you in?" I asked at last.

"414," he said. "Why?"

"You're kidding me."

He shook his head.

"Dude, I'm in 415."

"No shit?"

"No shit."

"Cool," he said. Then he held out his hand. "Howdy, neighbor."

I shook it as we grinned at each other like idiots. At that point, I decided that I liked him after all; it was hard not to.

"Hey," I said. "I'm gonna drop my pack in my room. I'll be over in a second. Which room is yours?"

"The one on the left."

"Cool. Seeya in a sec."

In my room, I found another note: *Sorry about the other night. Maybe I'll catch you at that floor meeting. Terry.* I knew he hadn't spent the night, but his bed had been slept in since I'd left for my eight o'clock class. I shook my head in bewilderment and locked the door as I headed out. When I entered the suite across the hall, the door on the left was open.

"Paul," Trip said. "C'mon in. I want you to meet my roommate. Paul Hughes, this is Luke Devereaux. Luke, this is Paul."

Luke and I shook hands. He was broad-shouldered and a little taller than me, with curly blonde hair and an engaging smile.

"Luke's not from these parts," Trip said.

"Oh?" I asked. "Where're you from?"

"Houma, Louisiana," he said with a sing-song accent.

"Where's that?"

"*Mais*, I jus' tol' you," he said in the same heavy accent. Then he said something else, in another language entirely.

"What'd he say?" I asked Trip. "Is that… French?"

"He's just messing with you," Trip said. "It's Cajun." Then he turned to Luke. "Paul's cool, man. He lives across the hall. He's an architecture major too. He's in my Design class. You know that madman Joska I told you about? *That* class."

"I feel for you, man," Luke said to me in a normal accent. Then he grinned.

I couldn't help but grin in reply.

"Houma's in Terrebonne Parish, right on the oil patch," he said, picking up the thread of our earlier conversation. "About an hour southwest of New Orleans."

"Paul's from Atlanta," Trip said.

"Sandy Springs, actually," I said. "But it's a suburb of Atlanta."

"Ah, cool," Luke said. "A couple of suburban big-city boys here in little ol' Knoxville."

"Yep," Trip said. Then he pulled out a chair and gestured to it. "Have a seat, Paul."

When I did, he flopped onto his bed. Beneath it, I caught a glimpse of several long, low crates containing LPs. The top shelf above his desk was also lined with records. And where I had a computer on my desk, Trip had several expensive-looking stereo components.

"Pretty cool, huh?" he said when he saw me staring at the wealth of knobs and meters.

"His father told him he could have a car or a stereo for graduation," Luke said in disbelief. "Do you know what this *couillon* picked?"

"The stereo?" I guessed facetiously.

"It's a McIntosh," Trip said defensively. Then he made his case to me. "I can buy a clunker car for two hundred bucks. But *dude!*" he said, pointing to his stereo. "It's a *McIntosh*."

"*Couillon*," Luke repeated.

"What's that mean?" I asked him.

"*Couillon?* It means he's crazy," Luke said.

"What about you?" Trip asked Luke without heat. "You've got every movie poster ever printed."

Luke's side of the room—by the window—was covered with posters for *The Empire Strikes Back*, *The Deep*, *Jaws*, *Caddyshack*, *Blues Brothers*, and more.

"What can I say?" Luke asked with a grin and a shrug. "The movie theater is *air conditioned*. D'you know how *hot* it gets in South Louisiana? So we don't stay outside unless we *have* to."

"Whatever," Trip said with a laugh.

"How'd you end up at UT?" I asked Luke.

"My dad's a UT grad," he said. "I grew up hearing about how great UT is. So here I am."

"What's your dad do?" I asked.

"He's a research chemist."

"So you're a chemistry major?"

He shook his head. "Close, though. Chemical Engineering."

"How about you?" I asked Trip. "What's your dad do?"

"He's a record producer."

"Cool," I said. "I guess that explains your record collection. And the stereo."

"McIntosh," Trip corrected.

"*Couillon*," Luke said again. Then he grinned at me sidelong.

"What's your dad do, Paul?" Trip asked, ignoring Luke's barb.

"He's an airline pilot," I said. "He flies 727s."

"Oh, that reminds me of this great joke," Luke said.

Trip rolled his eyes, but grinned nonetheless.

"Okay," Luke said, slipping into a thick Cajun accent, "Boudreaux and Thibodeaux, they buy t'is airplane and start they own airline."

Trip and I nodded.

"On they first flight to Jamaica," Luke said, "one engine up an' dies. Well, ol' Boudreaux, he try t' keep de plane in the air, but then de other engine up an' dies too. So Thibodeaux gets on de intercom and says, 'Bad news, folks. We gonna make an emergency landing.'"

Once I got into the rhythm of it, Luke's Cajun patois was actually pretty easy to understand; it was lyrical.

"'Since we over de ocean,' Thibodeaux says, 'all you folks who can swim please move to de left side of de plane. You folks who can't swim, please move to de right.'"

Trip and I rolled our eyes at Luke's dramatic pause, but we were hanging on every word.

"Well, them folks sort themselves out and Thibodeaux, he come back on de intercom. 'Thank you folks. When we hit de water, we want all you on de left to swim for shore. For all you folks on de right… on behalf of Captain Boudreaux and me, we'd like to thank y'all for flyin' Cajun airlines…"

Trip and I groaned as Luke howled with laughter.

"What the fuck's going on in here, you guys?" a new guy asked as he stuck his head through the open doorway. He was about my height, but skinny, with shoulder-length limp brown hair and glasses.

"Hey, Jeff," Trip said. "C'mon in. Luke was just telling a Boudreaux and Thibodeaux joke."

"The one about the talking parrot?" Jeff asked.

"*Mais, non*," Luke said. "I tol' that one yesterday."

"Jeff," Trip said, "this is Paul Hughes, from across the hall. Paul, this is Jeff Hamill. He lives in the other room."

I stood and shook Jeff's hand.

"Jeff's an EE major," Trip said.

"EE?"

"*Mais*, don't he know nothin'?" Luke asked with a grin.

"Electrical Engineering," Jeff said.

I couldn't tell where he was from, but his accent was definitely from *north* of the Mason-Dixon line.

"Paul's an architecture major too," Trip explained. "He's in my Design class."

"The one with the Nazi professor?" Jeff asked.

"Joska," Trip and I said at the same time. Then we grinned at each other.

"How long have you all known each other?" I asked. "I mean, you seem to know all about

each other."

"A couple of days," Trip said. Then his eyes widened in surprise. "You don't know anything about your roommate and suitemates?"

I shook my head. "I haven't even *met* my roommate."

"You're kidding," Jeff said as he sat down on the corner of Trip's bed.

"Uh-uh. It's completely weird," I said. Then I told them about the notes and constantly missing Terry.

"What about your suitemates?" Trip asked.

"Do they have real hick accents?" Jeff asked. "One guy's kind of weasely looking and the other guy's big and quiet?"

I nodded.

"Yeah," he said. "I met those guys."

"What'd you think?" Trip asked.

Jeff merely shook his head in disapproval.

"Yeah," I said, "I didn't know if they were dicks, or just being funny."

"Yeah, well," Jeff said, "where I'm from, 'Hey, fuckin' four-eyes… just kidding,' isn't funny."

"Where *are* you from?" I asked, changing the subject.

"Philadelphia," he said. "But my family moved to Knoxville two years ago." Then he shrugged. "It's okay, I guess."

"But I bet it's not Philly," Trip said. "Or Nashville, Atlanta, or New Orleans, for that matter."

"*Mais, non*," Luke said. "This ain't no Big Easy."

"Knoxville's okay," I said. "I mean, no, it's not a big city, but it's not so bad."

"It's a good place for hiking and stuff," Trip said.

"And it's cooler than New Orleans," Luke added. "Not *much*, but it is."

When the suite door opened in the foyer, we all looked up.

"Floor meeting in ten minutes," Cary, the RA, said.

"Okay, Cary," Trip said. "Thanks."

"Is that guy a little… funny?" Luke asked when the foyer door closed after Cary left.

"Funny how?" I asked.

"Do you think he indulges in the love that dare not speak its name?" Luke asked with a semi-serious air.

"Who cares?" Trip said with a laugh. Then, "Nah, Cary's cool. He's just not as manly as you are."

"I *am* a manly man," Luke said. "I have hair on my chest to prove it." With that, he pulled down the neck of his shirt to reveal a thick patch of curly blonde hair.

"Yeah, you've probably got hair on your palms, too," Jeff said. "You hairy fuck."

"He's right," Luke said to Trip in an aside. "I *am* a chronic masturbator."

My jaw almost hit the floor.

Then Luke looked at Jeff. "But you still haven't explained those *thick* glasses, Jeff. And is that the delicate odor of shaving cream I smell on your palms?" With that, he and Trip grinned at each other and then the two of them lunged across the room.

Jeff had been expecting them, and darted out the door.

Yelling and laughing, Trip and Luke ran after him.

I shook my head in amazement and followed. I took my time to shut their room door, so they were halfway down the hall by the time I stepped into it. Surprisingly, Jeff was safely in the lead.

I laughed in wonder and then jogged to catch up.

✧ ✧ ✧

"Hey, Cary?" I said after the floor meeting.

"Yes, um…?"

"Paul," I supplied.

"What can I do for you, Paul?" he asked.

I leaned closer to him so no one would overhear me. "Can you tell me which guy's my roommate? I don't want to miss him."

For a moment, Cary looked perplexed. Then he shook his head in irritation.

"What?" I asked.

"You know, I don't think I saw him here," he said at last.

"You're kidding me."

Cary shook his head.

"This guy exists, right?" I asked. Then I frowned at the biting sarcasm in my tone.

"Oh, he exists." Then Cary Got It. "You mean you *still* haven't met him?"

I shook my head.

"Oh, dear."

"I guess we've just got different schedules. But I still wonder where he's spending the night."

"And why he wasn't at the meeting," Cary added. Then he smiled at me. He was trying to look reassuring, but it didn't work. "I'll talk to Wade, the hall director, and see if he knows anything."

"Thanks, I guess," I said.

"Anytime," Cary said with a smile.

With that, I headed back to my room. Sure enough, it was empty. As I walked back into the foyer, my suitemates' door was open a crack. When I heard T.J. and Glen talking, I stopped to eavesdrop. I know I shouldn't have, but I couldn't help myself.

"So I guess there's only three of 'em on the floor," T.J. was saying.

Glen didn't reply.

"They're all in the other wing, though," T.J. added.

I cocked my head to the side and wondered what they were talking about. I was about to knock on their door—and pretend I hadn't heard their conversation, of course—when T.J. spoke again.

"As long as I don't have to listen to their jigaboo music," he said, "I don't care where they live."

Glen merely grunted.

"UT should keep 'em all on their own floor, though," T.J. continued. "That way, we wouldn't have to smell 'em either."

Great! I thought to myself. *I've got a missing roommate and two racist suitemates. Isn't my life shaping up to be just* peachy*?*

"And what about Cary the Fairy?" T.J. asked, laughing at his own rhyme. "That guy's a

faggot if ever I saw one."

At that point, I disgustedly locked my room door and then quietly opened the door to the hall. I held it so it didn't make a noise when it shut. Then I walked across the hall.

"Come in," Trip said when I knocked on the door.

He was sitting on his bed, strumming an acoustic guitar. The strains of "Behind Blue Eyes" died as he looked up.

"Hey, Paul. What's going on?"

"I just wanted to see what you all were up to," I said.

"Trip was serenading me," Luke said from his bed. Then he winked. "I think he's in love with me."

"I think you're in love with your right hand," Trip said.

"Don't listen to the bad man, sweetheart," Luke said to his raised palm.

At that point, Trip and I lost it. Shamelessly, Luke continued whispering sweet nothings to his hand, which only fueled our howls of laughter.

"What the fuck are you guys laughing about now?" Jeff called from across the foyer. A moment later, he stepped into the room. Behind him, another guy appeared.

"Hey, Paul," Trip said, "this is Hector Vega, Jeff's roommate."

Unlike Antonio Cardenas, Hector actually *looked* Hispanic.

"Nice to meet you," I said as I shook his hand.

"Nice to meet you too," he said.

Well, I thought, *he might* look *Hispanic, but he sounds like pure Tennessee.*

"Hey," he said, "I'm starving. Do y'all wanna get something to eat?"

"Sure," Trip said. "Luke?"

"What do you think, sweetheart?" he asked, holding up his hand.

Trip and I snickered.

"What the fuck is *he* doing?" Jeff asked. Then he looked at Trip. "Is he talking to his hand again?" When Trip snickered instead of answering, Jeff shook his head. "You're sick, Luke," he said. "And don't ever touch me with that hand again."

Still laughing, we all headed to the Presidential dining hall.

✧ ✧ ✧

On Sunday, I got up, worked out, took a shower, then met Kendall and Gina for breakfast. Over the past couple of days, Gina had come out of her shell and was acting more like the girl I loved. She still wasn't *thrilled* with the idea of being at UT, but she didn't seem to blame me anymore.

"Still no sign of my roommate," I said as we sat down at a table by a window.

"Really?" Gina asked.

"He's still MIA. I don't even think my RA's seen him in a couple of days."

Then I looked up and almost choked on my toast. The petite brunette and her cute blonde friend—from my Art History class—were sitting two tables away. They were looking right at me, and smiled when they caught my eye. I smiled in return, and they resumed their conversation. Then I hastily looked to see if Kendall or Gina had seen the exchange. I felt my face heat when Kendall arched an eyebrow.

"They're in my Art History class," I said.

"Who?" Gina asked.

Kendall merely smiled sardonically.

"No one," I said, trying to sound disinterested. "Just two girls. Anyway, I still haven't seen my roommate," I repeated.

"So you said," Kendall replied, her eyes sparkling mischievously.

"That's weird," Gina said, completely missing the exchange between Kendall and me.

"It sure is," Kendall said. Then, while Gina took a bite of her breakfast, Kendall nonchalantly turned to look at the two girls from my class. Fortunately, neither of them saw her look. When she turned back to me, she arched an eyebrow again.

I felt my face heat further.

"It sure is a *pretty* day, isn't it," Kendall commented.

"It is," Gina said. Then she gazed out the window, oblivious to Kendall's double entendre.

I cleared my throat meaningfully and took another bite of toast.

"Is that all you're eating? Toast?" Gina asked, momentarily saving me from Kendall's teasing.

"Um… yeah," I said. "Why?"

"I dunno," Gina said. "Usually, you eat a big breakfast. Do you want me to get us some oranges or something?"

"No thanks," I said. "I don't wanna start gaining weight, so I'm trying to watch what I eat."

"Yes," Kendall practically purred, "it's important to watch what you… eat."

I rolled my eyes at her, but she grinned unrepentantly.

"For instance," she continued, "if you ate too much… oh, I don't know… pie… you'd probably get sick."

"Exactly," Gina said, still oblivious.

"I don't *plan* on eating too much pie," I said, my gaze fixed on Kendall.

"It's not healthy," Gina said.

"Oh, I don't know," Kendall demurred. "It depends on the pie. And sometimes, it's nice to look at a pretty pie and imagine what it'd be like to eat it."

"Yeah," Gina said. "Like those two Marie Callender's pies Paul's dad brought home for our going-away party."

"Oh?" Kendall asked, the soul of innocence. "What kind of pies were they?"

I rolled my eyes at her audacity.

"Banana crème and chocolate," Gina said.

My heart sank when she did. I knew *exactly* what Kendall was going to say. She didn't disappoint.

"Really?" she said. "A blonde pie and a brunette pie."

"Something like that," I said evenly. Then I scowled at her.

"Exactly," Gina added. "Those pies were pretty good, too."

Once again, Kendall turned to glance at the girls from my class. When she looked back at me, she smiled.

"They're *very* pretty pies," she said.

"Did Paul tell you about them?" Gina asked as she took a sip of orange juice. She still had no clue that Kendall was even teasing me.

"Not yet," Kendall said. Then she grinned shamelessly and turned to Gina. "You'll have to

remind me to ask him."

"Okay," Gina said.

I rolled my eyes at Kendall, but then had to grudgingly shake my head at her creativity.

"What do you all wanna do after breakfast?" I asked, hoping to change the subject.

"I didn't really have any plans, but I'm sure something will… um… come up," Kendall said.

Then to my surprise, I felt her foot rub along the length of my calf. It was my turn to arch an eyebrow at her. I wasn't used to seeing a confident—almost aggressive—Kendall. I don't know why, but it really turned me on.

Fortunately, our conversation turned to less titillating subjects and I breathed a sigh of relief. But all through the rest of the meal, Kendall gave me smoldering looks. And her bare foot never left my leg. I had to shift a couple of times and try to discreetly rearrange my hard-on.

When the blonde and brunette got up to leave, they looked in my direction, but I pretended not to notice them. I *wanted* to look, but I knew Kendall would catch me. And she already had enough ammunition to tease me with. I thanked my lucky stars that she wasn't the jealous type.

Finally, we finished eating. My erection had subsided enough that I didn't have a lump in my shorts when I stood up, but I was far from soft.

"What do you all want to do?" I asked the girls as we walked outside

"I've got a *bunch* of reading to do," Gina said, "for Western Civ. and Classics. And I've got Calculus homework for Tuesday. Ugh! I wanna actually relax tomorrow, so I'd better get it done today."

"Oh," Kendall said, "that reminds me. Do you all remember Bridget Jameson? My suitemate from when I was a freshman?" When Gina and I nodded, she continued. "She and her fiancé are having a Labor Day barbeque tomorrow, and she said we're invited. Her family's got a big house on the lake. It's really nice. So, do you wanna go?"

"Sure," Gina and I said together.

"Do you want us to call you for lunch later today?" Kendall asked Gina.

"Nah, I'd better skip lunch and just read," she said. "I've got a whole chapter of Western Civ. to finish. Do you wanna have dinner together, though?"

Kendall nodded.

(All three of us had full meal plans, but the plan only provided twenty meals a week: three a day, except Sunday. On Sundays, the dining halls closed after lunch, and students were responsible for their own dinner.)

"Maybe pizza?" I suggested.

"That'd be cool," Gina said. "Call me when you're ready to go. I'll just meet you wherever."

"Okay," Kendall and I said simultaneously.

Then I kissed Gina goodbye and we watched as she walked up the hill.

"She sure seems happy," Kendall said. "Well, happi*er*."

I nodded. "No thanks to *you*, though. *Pie?!*"

"I thought it was rather clever," she said with a grin.

"It *was*, but I kept wondering when Gina would catch on."

"I didn't," Kendall said simply. "She didn't see you glance at those two girls." Then she arched her eyebrow again. "Are they *really* in your Art History class?"

"Yeah," I said. "They're cute, but I don't even know their names."

"Oh, so you think they're cute?" she teased.

I rolled my eyes at her.

"So you *do*, Mr. Big Man on Campus."

Instead of answering, I pulled her close.

Her bright blue eyes practically danced with mirth.

"I'll show you *big*," I said. Then I kissed her. Since we were in public, it was a relatively chaste kiss, but our breathing still grew a little quicker. "Do you want to go back to my room?" I asked when we separated.

"It's not visitation yet," she said.

"Your apartment?"

She shook her head. "My roommates are there."

"Maybe they left."

"Maybe, but I doubt it."

"Let's go see," I insisted.

Unfortunately, Abby, Vivian, and Phoebe *were* at Kendall's apartment. Worse, we ended up hanging out with them for the next hour. While we made small talk, Kendall kept me in an agonizing state of horniness. She made sure to touch me as often as she could, and when no one else was looking, she'd flash me a smoldering look and lick her lips.

"You've been taking lessons from Susan," I whispered in her ear when the other girls were talking to each other.

"Can you tell?" she whispered in reply.

"Uh-huh. Let's *go*. I don't care if it's visitation or not. We'll use the stairs."

Instead of answering, she merely put her hand on my leg and caressed it.

"Let's *go*," I insisted.

Her hand drifted toward my crotch.

Since the other girls were still paying attention to each other, I wasn't worried about being caught. But I was getting close to simply ripping off Kendall's clothes and fucking her in front of her roommates.

She must have sensed my urgency. Instead of acting on it, however, she caressed my barely concealed hard-on. I was afraid it was going to either poke out the bottom of my shorts or worse, tear a hole in them.

"Come *on*," I hissed in Kendall's ear.

In reply, she simply squeezed my cock.

"Well," I said out loud, "we'd better get going."

As the three girls turn to look at us, Kendall jerked her hand away from my crotch.

"Oh?" Vivian asked.

"Yeah," I fibbed, "we've got to study for one of our classes."

"I didn't know you two had a class together," Vivian said.

"We don't," I explained hastily. "I mean, we do. Well, we don't actually, but… well… I mean…"

"It's for his American Lit. class," Kendall said smoothly. "I had the same professor last year. He needs to go over my notes."

"Right," I agreed. As Kendall and I stood, I tried to stand behind her, to hide the tent in my

shorts. “Sorry,” I said, “but we gotta go.”

Then I practically dragged her toward the front door.

“But what about your notes, Kendall?” Vivian called after us.

Peals of laughter sounded behind us as we stepped into the hallway. Once the apartment door latched, I turned and backed Kendall against it. Then I pressed my body against hers. As I kissed her, my tongue forced her lips open. When I put my hand on her breast, I felt her nipple harden through her shirt and bra.

“God,” I said when we broke the kiss, “you make me so hard. And you’re *such* a tease.”

“Mmm hmm.”

Before she could say more, I kissed her again.

Her hands twined through my hair and her breathing grew quicker.

I took one of her hands and put it on my cloth-covered erection. As she began kneading my cock, I kissed her again.

Suddenly, we heard a door open nearby. We stepped apart and then guiltily looked down the hall. Two girls walked out of their apartment, glanced at us, then locked their door.

I grabbed Kendall’s hand and pulled her after me. Her laughter rang out as we dashed down the hallway toward the fire stairs.

We practically ran up the hill to North Carrick, arriving winded, but grinning.

“I’ll meet you at the basement fire exit,” I said. (The door didn’t have a knob on the outside, so it had to be opened from the inside.)

When she nodded, I kissed her and then raced inside. I passed the elevators in a rush and sprinted down the first-floor hallway. My footsteps echoed in the stairwell as I pounded down the stairs. With my chest heaving, I opened the door. Kendall practically tumbled inside, giggling breathlessly.

When she smiled, I backed her into the heavy fire door and ground my hips against her. Our lips sought each other and we hungrily kissed. As we did, I lifted her shirt. Her bra-encased breasts shook free of the ribbed cotton t-shirt. I cupped her breast and the satiny fabric of her bra tented as her nipple hardened under my palm.

Our breathing grew heavy and erratic as we kissed in the empty stairwell. I continued teasing her nipple with my fingers, and held my trapped erection against her crotch. Finally, after a minute or two, we broke the kiss. I reached for the snap on her shorts, but she put her hand on mine.

“Not here,” she panted. “Let’s go upstairs.”

“C’mon,” I said as I tugged her after me.

Running up stairs with a hard-on is *not* fun. But at the time, I didn’t care. When I glanced back, Kendall looked just as excited as me.

At the fourth floor, I bolted out of the stairwell and checked to make sure the hallway was clear. Then I dug into my pocket, found my keys, and motioned for Kendall to join me. Since my room was right next to the fire stairs, we only had a short dash.

Once the foyer door closed behind us, we panted for a moment, catching our breath. Then I unlocked my door, silently praying that my long-lost roommate hadn’t decided to show up.

Inside, I pulled up short.

Not only was Terry not there, his stuff was gone as well. *All* of his stuff. His bed didn’t have

sheets on it, his closet was empty, his desk was clean, and his drawers were empty and open.

"What the fuck?" I said aloud.

Kendall paused to look around and then glanced at me in concern.

"His stuff was here this morning," I said.

"What do you think happened?"

"I have *no* idea. Wait here," I said. "I'm gonna go see if my RA is around."

Our lust momentarily forgotten, Kendall nodded.

A minute later, I knocked on Cary's door, but didn't get an answer. Back in my room, I looked for a note from Terry. I didn't find one.

"Should we call the police?" Kendall asked.

I shook my head. "Not yet. Let me go downstairs and ask at the front desk. I'll be right back."

She nodded and then kissed me.

"I love you," I said. "I'm… sorry. I know we didn't come up here for me to go hunting for my missing roommate, but…"

"I understand," she said softly. "Go on. I'll be here when you get back. Just don't bring an RA with you," she said. "It's only ten thirty."

I nodded, kissed her again, and then reluctantly pulled away.

Downstairs, the RA at the desk looked up as I approached.

"This is gonna sound crazy," I said, "but my roommate is missing."

"Missing?"

"Look, his stuff was there this morning. Now, he's gone and all of his stuff is gone too."

"Are you in room 415?" the RA asked.

"Yeah. How'd you know?"

"Your roommate moved out this morning."

"Huh? Why?"

"I have no idea," he said with a shrug.

"I never even *met* the guy," I said.

"So? What do you want *me* to do about it?"

"Nothing, I guess," I said. Then, "What should I do now?"

"Enjoy the peace and quiet. The hall director will assign you a new roommate in a couple of days."

"Any chance I could skip the roommate and just have the room to myself?" I asked, already thinking about the possibilities (in my current state, an orgy was the first possibility that leapt to mind).

"Not likely," the RA said with a frown.

"I didn't think so, but still…" I looked at him hopefully.

His eyes narrowed. "Was there anything else you needed?"

"No, I guess not," I said. "Thanks."

Upstairs, I explained to Kendall.

"So you don't know what happened to him?" she asked.

"Nope," I said with a shrug. "The RA only told me 'he moved out this morning.' I mean, I never even *met* the guy. I wonder what he was like."

"Are you okay?" she asked.

"Yeah. It's not like he and I were lifelong friends or something. But it just feels weird. You know?"

She nodded and then stepped close.

"Sorry," I said as I pulled her into my arms. "I didn't mean to get all weird on you."

"You're not weird," she said. "You're just worried about a guy you never even knew. That's very compassionate."

I kissed the side of her head and then hugged her tight.

"I love you so much," she whispered.

"I love you too." For a moment, we simply held each other. Then I remembered why we'd come up to my room in the first place. "Do you still wanna fool around?" I asked.

"Do you?"

"Kinda, but not hot and heavy. I guess I'm still a little weirded out."

When she nodded in agreement, I kicked off my shoes and scooted onto the bed. She slid out of her sandals and joined me. I sat with my back to the wall and my arm around Kendall. She pressed herself to my side and simply hugged me.

For a few minutes, we sat in contemplative silence. I wondered what could've made my roommate just disappear without a note or anything. My imagination ran wild. I thought of every possibility from the ludicrous (alien abduction) to the more reasonable (he dropped out of school and went home).

"You're still so tense," Kendall said softly.

"Sorry."

"That's okay," she said. Then she idly ran her fingers over my leg. "I just wanted to know if I should be quiet and let you think, or…?"

"Or what?" I asked, my interest piqued.

"Or maybe I could take your mind off your roommate."

"What did you have in mind?" I asked. When she exhaled in embarrassment, I pressed her. "Seriously. What're you thinking?"

"Well," she said at last, "I'm still a little worked up from earlier."

"Oh you *are?*"

"Maybe a little, yes."

Instead of answering her, I tilted her head up with a finger under her chin. Then I kissed her. She eagerly responded by pressing her luscious body against mine. We kissed for a few minutes, our kisses heating up as our hands roamed.

When I pulled up her shirt and cupped her breast, she broke the kiss. Then she sat up, crossed her arms, grabbed the hem of her shirt, and lifted it over her head. She smiled as she brushed her dark hair out of her eyes.

I pulled her close, my hands caressing her warm skin. As our lips brushed and then pressed together, I found the catch of her bra. Over the past years, I'd grown adept at opening Gina's bra, so with a practiced pinch-twist, I popped the catch on Kendall's. Without breaking our kiss, she pulled the straps off her shoulders and then tossed the flimsy garment to the side.

Neither of us seemed to be in a rush, so we took our time and enjoyed our kiss. My hands roamed over the bare skin of her back as she caressed my face.

Finally, I reached between us and popped the snap on her shorts. Her zipper hissed as I

lowered it. She lifted up to give me better access as I reached inside. Unfortunately, the angle was too awkward, so I couldn't get my fingertips on her pussy.

When I withdrew my hand, she pulled back and licked her shiny lips. With a smoldering look, she rose on her knees, hooked her thumbs in her waistband, and lowered her shorts and panties. Then she sat back and unfolded her long, tan legs.

"God, you're beautiful," I said as she kicked off the remainder of her clothing.

"Thank you."

Then I pulled her onto my lap and ran my hands along her flanks. My thumbs rested on her waist chain. As our lips met again, she lifted my shirt. Her hands roamed over my stomach and chest, caressing me softly.

"You've got too many clothes on," she said when we broke our kiss.

"Do you want to help me take some of them off?"

She kissed me again and then nodded.

As I removed my shirt and tossed it aside, she slid to the floor between my legs. I slouched down so my groin was closer to her. Then she grabbed the waistband of my shorts. When I lifted my hips, she tugged the shorts and my briefs down my legs. After she tossed them aside, she took off my socks as well.

Then she rose on her knees, her generous breasts resting on my thighs. When she grabbed my erection, her eyes shone with desire.

"I love looking at you," she said softly. "And your dick is so *hard*."

I nodded. Then I groaned as she gave the glans a soft, wet kiss. With a toss of her head, she swung her hair out of her face and concentrated on my cock. When she wrapped her lips around the crown, I groaned again.

For a few minutes, she simply tongued me and caressed the soft skin of my shaft with her hands. When the first drop of pre-come beaded at the tip of my dick, she wrapped her lips around my shaft and slowly dragged them upward.

"Oh, God," I gasped. "That feels *so* good."

"I'm glad you like it," she said as she prepared to swallow me again.

As she lowered her lips over my organ, her hair fell forward, brushing my thighs and blocking my view. I was too lost in bliss to care. Then she wrapped her lips around my shaft, more than halfway down, and gently sucked. As she drew back, she worked her tongue over the sensitive underside ridge.

On the down-stroke, she swallowed as much of me as she could. When she did, I felt my cock enter her throat. With a soft moan, she wrapped her lips around me, about two inches above the base. Then she pulled back, her soft, supple lips tight around my shaft.

She spent several minutes simply taking long, slow, luxurious strokes. As she lovingly sucked me, I ran my hands through her hair and caressed her face. I wanted to do more, but I was adrift in a fellatio-induced haze. I was also too worked up from earlier, and I could already feel the pressure building in my balls.

Finally, I couldn't hold back. She sensed my impending orgasm and locked her lips around my cock, just below the crown. With her right hand, she stroked me. With her left, she cupped my balls. When they pulled tight against my body, she pressed that spot just behind them. I closed my eyes in ecstasy and groaned as I erupted.

The first spurt felt like a freight train surging up my shaft. When it hit the back of her throat, she moaned softly in surprise. The next spurt jetted from my dick and I could feel her swallow. After another spurt or two and several strong gushes, my orgasm subsided.

I swallowed hard and slowly relaxed, my hips sinking to the bed as I did. Her eyes were closed as she slowly licked my saliva-slick shaft. For a moment or two, I simply watched her. When she finally pulled back, a tendril of semen-thickened saliva connected her lips to my cock. With a grin, she licked it up.

"Wow," she said softly. "That was a lot."

"You got me pretty worked up."

"Me too," she said. Then she gazed at my erection. "You're still so hard."

"You're still so beautiful," I said, nodding at her. "You're still so naked, and you're still between my legs," I added with a soft chuckle. "Now, I don't know about you, but in my book, that's a recipe for a world-class hard-on."

She blushed and looked down. "Thank you," she whispered.

I brushed her hair out of her face and tucked it behind her ear.

"I think you're the most beautiful girl in the world," I said.

"More beautiful than—" Then she shook her head in irritation. "Never mind."

"More beautiful than Gina, you mean?"

Her guilty silence was answer enough.

"Yes," I said softly. "She's beautiful, but—" Before I could finish, Kendall practically leapt off the floor and landed on top of me. Her generous breasts crushed into my chest and her belly trapped my still-slippery erection between us.

"Oh, Paul," she gushed, "I love you *so* much." Then she proceeded to kiss every square inch of my face and neck, all while telling me how much she loved me.

In a rush, she scooted up my body. Then she planted her hands on my shoulders and pushed herself upright. As her breasts dangled in my face, she reached between us and gripped my erection. With a moan, she set the tip of my cock at her opening. Then she hissed in pleasure as she lowered herself onto my shaft.

At first, my cock felt like it was being rammed into my groin. Then her labia parted and the head slipped inside. She continued impaling herself, her face a mask of concentration. A moment later, her hips came to rest against mine. Her clean-shaven labia spread around the base of my shaft and I marveled at the incredible heat and moisture surrounding my dick.

Her lips crushed against mine as she began moving, her super-tight pussy sliding over my dick as she rocked her hips. Her breath whistled through her nose as her passion rapidly mounted. Then, to my surprise, her internal muscles contracted. I thought my dick was going to be crushed. She shuddered as she buried her face in the hollow of my neck and mewled softly. Her thighs trembled for a moment and then she cried out in ecstasy.

I held her close as she shuddered with the force of her unexpected climax. Her pussy spasmed and she clutched me tight as the sensations overwhelmed her. Then, inexplicably, she started crying. It didn't *sound* like she was upset, but I could only hold her as she sobbed. For more than a minute, her body heaved with emotion. At the same time, however, her pussy quivered and gushed around my erection.

Needless to say, I was thoroughly confused. Was she upset? Was she happy? Had I done

something wrong? Had I done something *right?*

"Are you okay?" I whispered when her sobs died down.

Instead of replying, she simply nodded and then planted several light kisses on my shoulder. Then she gasped as an aftershock washed over her. For a few moments, she simply nuzzled my neck.

Unfortunately, my confusion only grew. Worse, my dick was still *very* hard, and it was still buried inside her. I wanted to come, but I was also worried that she was upset. In a state of limbo, I simply held her.

I didn't know what else to do.

After several minutes, my dick began to ache with the need for release. I tried to will my erection to subside, but it had a mind of its own. Who could blame it? It was buried in a warm, wet, tight pussy. And it didn't have to second-guess itself about its girlfriend's happiness.

Treacherous organ.

"Are you all right?" I asked at last.

"Yes," she whispered. When I stroked the warm skin of her back, she snuggled closer.

"Why were you crying?"

"I don't know, really," she said. "I guess I just had so much emotion pent up. It just came out all at once."

"Are you upset?"

"No," she whispered as she sat up and wiped her drying tears. Then she smiled warmly. "When I felt you inside me—and after what you said—I just couldn't help myself. When I came, it was like all my emotion poured forth at once."

"No kidding."

Then she looked at me seriously. "I don't think I've ever loved you more than I do now," she said.

"And I love you. But I'm still a little confused. You're not upset?"

She shook her head.

"Not at *all?*"

Another headshake. "Actually, I'm really happy." She wiped her eyes again and smiled ironically. "I know I don't look like it, but I really *am*." Then she gave me a sultry look. "And you're still hard."

"Mmm hmm."

"And you didn't come when I did," she said.

"No."

"Do you want me to…?"

"I'm fine," I lied.

Then she closed her eyes and shuddered. Her internal muscles rippled as the aftershock passed through her.

Once again, my cock throbbed with the need for release.

"Do you want me to suck you?" she asked. "I'd like that."

"Oh?"

"Mmm hmm," she said. Then she smiled. "Actually, I'm so happy right now that you could pretty much do anything you want to me."

"*Any*thing?"

"Anything," she said softly. "Do you want me to suck you off? I *love* the feeling of your dick in my mouth. And I know I can't deep throat you—yet—but I'm getting better."

"You're fine," I said. "Actually, I was pretty surprised at how deep you took me."

"You were?"

"Mmm hmm."

"So you want me to go down on you?"

"No," I mused. "I think I just want to do things the old-fashioned way."

With that, I held her close. Without pulling out of her, I carefully rolled her to her back and positioned myself between her legs. She ran her hands along my sides and then caressed my face.

"Paul?"

"Mmm hmm."

"Do you really think I'm beautiful?"

"More beautiful than I'll ever be able to say," I assured her. "You know you're beautiful."

"Thank you," she said softly. Then she looked up, her bright blue eyes full of love and devotion. "But I don't think I'll ever get tired of hearing you say it," she said. Then she gasped as I began moving within her. "And I don't think I'll *ever* get tired of you making love to me."

✧ ✧ ✧

Kendall and I skipped lunch. Instead, we lounged in bed and talked about everyday stuff. We didn't have to worry about getting dressed, and we didn't have to worry about being interrupted. (It was kind of nice not having a roommate, although I knew the reprieve would be short-lived.)

"Do you mind if I spend the night?" she asked a little later.

"I'd *love* it," I said.

"We could invite Gina, too."

"Mmm hmm."

"I know this is gonna sound weird," she said, "but I kind of miss her. You know, *miss* her."

"Really?" I asked.

She propped herself on my chest and gazed down at me. "Believe it or not, I do. I don't think I like girls as much as she does, but… it's still kind of fun."

I arched an eyebrow at her.

"It *is*," she said with a defensive laugh. "Although I wish she'd shave all the way, like Susan—"

"Don't *even* get me started about Gina and shaving," I said.

"Sorry."

"Don't worry about it."

"I actually enjoy shaving, as much for you as for me. I think I look better."

"I think so too," I said. "And with the pendant on your waist chain, it's like there's an arrow pointing right to your pussy." Then I grinned roguishly. "Speaking of which…"

With that, I flipped back the sheet and bared her beautiful body. But before I could do more than that, someone knocked on the door.

"Let's just ignore them," I said, my voice pitched low.

"What if it's about your roommate?"

"I hadn't thought of that."

While I slipped on a pair of loose-fitting workout shorts, Kendall cast about for something to cover herself with. I tossed her my shirt, which she put on. Then she found her shorts and put them on as well (minus her panties). Neither of us was exactly presentable, but at least we weren't naked.

I ran my fingers through my hair and hoped I didn't smell *too* much like sex. At the door, I pulled it open but blocked the opening—and the view of the room—with my body.

Trip smiled and tossed his head in greeting.

"Hey," I said. "What's going on?"

"Hey, man," he said. "What's up?" Then his eyes widened as he took in my disheveled appearance. "Oh, shit, man," he said. "Do you have… um… company?"

"Yeah, sorry."

"Then I'll catch you later."

"No, wait," I said. "What'd you need?"

"Are you sure?" he asked.

"Yeah. We were just hanging out."

He obviously didn't want to pry, so he took my white lie at face value and then nodded.

"Seriously, man," I said. "What'd you need?"

"Luke, Jeff, and I wanted to see if you wanted to get some pizza for dinner. But if you're busy," he said, "don't worry about it, man." He didn't sound upset. On the contrary, he seemed genuinely apologetic.

"No, that'd be cool," I said. "We were just talking about getting some pizza anyway."

"You and your girlfriend?" he asked.

I nodded.

"We don't wanna drag you two out with us. If you wanna be alone… I mean, you know."

"Actually, that sounds like fun. Hold on a sec," I said. Then I turned back to Kendall. "Do you wanna go get pizza with the guys from across the hall? Trip, Luke, and Jeff?"

"Sure!" she said.

"Sounds good to us," I told Trip.

"Okay," he said. Then he stepped close. He made sure to keep his eyes from wandering into the room (even though I blocked most of the view). "Sorry to interrupt," he said. "I didn't know you were… you know."

"Don't worry about it," I said. "We were just hanging out. Really, it's cool."

His face brightened.

"We'll be over in about an hour."

"Okay, man," he said. "Take your time."

"Thanks, Trip."

"No problem. Seeya."

"Seeya."

✧ ✧ ✧

A little later, Kendall and I took a shower together. It was quick and economical, but we still had fun (I didn't think I'd ever grow tired of seeing her nude).

After we finished, we dried off and returned to my room.

"Oh, shit," I said as we stood in front of the mirror after we got dressed. "I forgot to call

Gina."

"Call her now," she said as she combed her dark, lustrous hair.

For a moment, I stood behind her and simply gazed at her in the mirror. She wore her own Bermuda shorts, but she had donned one of my button-down shirts. It was a little big on her, but the sight of her wearing my clothes was exciting. I don't know why, but it was.

With a grin, I kissed the side of her neck and then headed toward the foyer. Gina answered on the third ring.

"Hey, sweetie," I said. "It's me."

"Hey," she said. "I was wondering when you'd call."

"Sorry," I said. "We've just been hanging out. I guess we lost track of time." It wasn't an outright lie, but it certainly wasn't the whole truth. What had Kendall called it? Lying by omission. *Maybe the world isn't so black and white after all,* I mentally sighed.

"That's cool," Gina said. "I finished my Western Civ. chapter about an hour ago. I've just been hanging out with Naomi and Iris, my suitemates."

"Oh, cool," I said. "What're they like?"

"They're sophomores, and really cool. They're both musicians. Naomi plays the violin and Iris plays the cello—" She was interrupted by a feminine shout. "Sorry," she said with a laugh, "*Naomi* plays the cello and *Iris* plays the violin."

"Cool," I said. Then, "Where's your roommate?"

"Oh, her?" Gina said, her tone going flat. "She's at home, I guess. I haven't seen her since she woke me up at six o'clock this morning."

"Oh, okay. Anyway, we're gonna go to dinner with the guys from across the hall. You remember? I told you about them: Trip, Luke, and Jeff."

"Sure," she said. Then, "Do you mind if I ask Naomi and Iris?"

"No problem," I said.

Gina covered the phone mouthpiece with her hand, but came back after less than a minute.

"What's the verdict?" I asked.

"They can't," she said. "They get together with a bunch of other musicians every Sunday night. They said thanks for asking, though."

"That's too bad," I said. Then, "Kendall and I were supposed to meet the guys in Trip's room. Do you want me to call you when we head downstairs?"

"I guess."

"It shouldn't be long. Okay?"

"Okay," she said. "Bye."

"Bye." Then I stepped back into my room, closed the door, and related the conversation.

"Have you told her about the girlfriend/best-friend thing?" Kendall asked.

"No," I said soberly. *And I don't* want *to,* I thought.

"You *need* to," she said, as if reading my mind.

"I know." Then I looked up hopefully. "Maybe she won't notice."

"She's not stupid," Kendall said. "She's going to figure it out. You already told Trip that I was your girlfriend. So you can't really introduce Gina as your girlfriend when we go meet her. And tomorrow, at Bridget's party, they already know *me* as your girlfriend."

"I know. You're right." Then I sighed and held her gaze in the mirror. "Polonius was a

pompous windbag," I said without heat.

"What?"

"It's something my dad said to me. Never mind."

"Well," she said, "it's probably not 'neither a borrower nor a lender be,' so I guess you're talking about 'this above all: to thine ownself be true.'"

"How'd you know?" I asked ruefully.

"I know a thing or two about your dad," she said. "He tries to hide it, but he's a pretty deep guy. And besides, I know who Polonius is. So I put two and two together."

"Has anyone ever told you that you're too smart for your own good?" I asked semi-facetiously.

"Only the love of my life," she said, turning to face me.

"Gina's not going to be happy that she's suddenly my 'best friend' and you're my girlfriend."

"Then she'll know how I feel sometimes," Kendall said evenly. Then, "Sorry, that wasn't nice."

"But it's how you feel," I said.

"I don't like it," she said with a nod, "but it *is* how I feel."

I sighed in resignation. "When did my life get so complicated?" I asked.

"When you first asked me to go to the quarry with you."

"You didn't have to say *yes*," I quipped.

"Oh yes I did. You can't *imagine* how lonely I was before then. I don't ever want to feel like that again."

"I know," I said. Then I pulled her into my arms. "I'll talk to Gina. I'm sure she'll understand. Maybe I can talk to her tonight, after dinner. Or tomorrow, at the latest."

She nodded. "Do you want to spend the night with just her? I could stay at my apartment so you two could have some time alone."

"I don't want that," I said.

"Neither do I, but I'll do it if you want me to."

"I know you would," I said softly. "And once again, *no*, I don't want you to." For a moment, I simply stared off into space. Then I had a revelation. "Hey! Why don't we pretend we haven't talked about it? The girlfriend/best-friend thing, I mean. Then, tomorrow, I can bring it up. You know, like when we're talking about the party at Bridget's or something."

"That sounds like a good idea. And then all three of us can talk it through, so it doesn't seem like you and I are in collusion."

"This might just work," I said.

"But we've *got* to talk to her tomorrow," she said sternly. "You can't keep putting this off."

"I know," I said. "I won't." Then I looked at my watch. "We'd better head across the hall."

She nodded.

"I love you," I said. Then I gave her a soft kiss.

"I love you too."

"I'm glad." Then, "C'mon, we'd better get over there."

When we opened the door to Trip's suite, the door to his room was ajar. From inside, I heard Jeff's voice.

"—and then he said, 'No fucking way, asshole.'"

Kendall blushed but then grinned at me.

I thought Jeff was finished, so I pushed open the door.

"So I said, 'Go fuck yourself,'" he added, almost as an afterthought. When he looked up and saw Kendall and me standing there, his jaw worked soundlessly. "Oh, fuck," he said at last. Then he cleared his throat. "I swallowed a bug," he offered lamely.

"Hi y'all," I said. Then I turned to Kendall. "Kendall, this is Trip, Luke, and Jeff. You probably don't wanna shake Luke's hand," I added with a grin. "Everyone," I said, "this is my girlfriend, Kendall."

"Holy shit," Jeff said. "This is your *girlfriend?*"

"Jeff," Luke scolded. "Don't you have any manners? That's no way to talk in front of a lady." Then he stood and crossed the room. "And don't listen to him about shaking my hand," he said, nodding in my direction. Then he took Kendall's hand and kissed it. "*Enchanté*."

"What's that mean?" I asked.

"It means he's a gentleman," Kendall said.

Jeff nearly tripped over himself trying to emulate Luke, but he didn't have the panache to pull it off.

"I'd better call Gina," I whispered to Kendall as she tried not to giggle.

Trip and I made eye contact and he lifted an eyebrow.

"My… best friend wanted to go with us. I hope you don't mind," I said to him. "I was gonna give her a call and let her know when to meet us."

He made a be-my-guest gesture. Then he shook his head in wry amusement at Jeff's antics.

"Hi, Gina," I said when she answered the phone. "We'll meet you in the lobby in a few minutes. Is that cool?"

"Sure. I'll see you in a few minutes."

"Okay. Bye." Back in the room, I got Trip's attention. "Are you all ready to go?"

"Come on, y'all," Trip said to Luke and Jeff. "Leave Paul's girlfriend alone."

"Sorry, Paul," Jeff said. "We were just fucking around… I mean, we were just fooling around." Then he blushed and took a sudden interest in his belt buckle.

Kendall laughed musically and leaned closer to him. "It's okay," she said. "I've heard the word 'fuck' before. I even *say* it sometimes."

Jeff's blush only deepened.

"Come on," Trip said, chivvying us along. "Let's go meet Paul's friend."

"What's his name?" Luke asked.

"*Her* name is Gina," I said.

"Is she beautiful too?"

"Pretty much," I said with a sidelong glance at Kendall. When she grinned in reply, I held out my arm for her.

With that, we locked the door and headed toward the elevators.

Downstairs, I introduced Gina to the guys. Fortunately, she didn't react when I didn't introduce her as my girlfriend.

As we walked down the hill to the Strip, I hung back with her. Kendall saw what I was doing and made sure she had the guys' attention. For a moment, I marveled at how easily she did it. Then I shook my head at the awe-inspiring power of a beautiful woman.

"They seem pretty cool," Gina said, nodding to the group about twenty feet ahead of us.

"They are. Trip's the leader on my Design team. The class with the fascist professor."

"What's his name again? Yosh-something?"

"Joska," I said. Then I put my arm around her.

Since Kendall had Trip and the others thoroughly enthralled, I wasn't worried about them looking back. Gina and I walked along in comfortable silence for a few moments. Then I leaned down and whispered in her ear.

"My roommate moved out today."

"What happened?" she asked, concerned.

"I have *no* idea. He was just gone. The RA said he just moved out. I guess he dropped out of school."

"That's too bad."

"I never even met the guy," I said with a shrug. "But it does mean one thing, though, which is cool."

"What?" she asked.

"It means I don't have to worry about my roommate."

"Yeah, so?"

"No roommate…," I prompted. When she still didn't Get It, I lifted my eyebrows suggestively. "You, me, Kendall?"

"You mean…?"

"Uh-huh. Kendall said she misses you, if you know what I mean."

"Really?" Then she paused to consider the implications. "*Really?*"

I nodded.

"Oh, my God, I can't wait."

"So I take it that means you wanna spend the night?" I asked rhetorically.

"*God* yes."

When I glanced at her, her eyes smoldered with desire.

✧ ✧ ✧

At the pizza place, Luke was shocked to learn that the drinking age in Tennessee was nineteen. The year before I turned eighteen, of course, the drinking age for Georgia had changed to nineteen. According to Luke, the drinking age for Louisiana was still eighteen.

Instead of complaining about the problem, however, he started making jokes and charming our waitress. Kendall—who *was* nineteen—was having fun watching him finesse the girl (who was probably a year or two older than us). Eventually, he convinced her to bring us a pitcher of beer and six glasses.

Then the pizzas arrived and we ordered another pitcher. Since I hadn't introduced Gina as my girlfriend, Luke turned on his charm and kept her in stitches. Jeff was clearly smitten by Kendall, but he wasn't overly obnoxious about it.

Trip, however, was a mystery. He didn't flirt with Gina, and he didn't gawk at Kendall. He was polite to our waitress (who was very cute), but he didn't flirt with her. Where Luke was outgoing and funny, Trip was more reserved. And where Jeff was a little shy, Trip seemed completely at ease with the girls.

I knew he didn't lack any confidence—I'd seen that in our Design class. And even though he

hadn't mentioned a girlfriend (at home or at UT), he didn't seem gay. So while Luke monopolized Gina's attention, and Kendall talked to Jeff, Trip and I sat across from each other and mostly listened.

After the waitress cleared the remains of our dinner, we ordered another pitcher of beer. Gina glanced my way a few times, but she was having too much fun to want to leave immediately.

Over the next couple of hours, we talked about all sorts of things, from school to politics to music to food. We also drank another pitcher of beer. Trip, Luke, Jeff, and I didn't seem to be affected, but I could tell that Kendall and Gina were getting a little tipsy.

"Hey, y'all," Trip said, "I think the place is closing soon. We'd better pay up and let 'em clean up."

From the cash register, the waitress seemed to give a sigh of relief.

I looked at my watch. With a start, I realized that it was almost ten o'clock.

"Do you guys wanna go to the arcade on the Strip?" Jeff asked. "I hear they've got some cool video games."

"Sure," Trip said. Then he looked a question at me.

"I think I'd better make sure the girls get back okay," I said.

"Are you sure?" Luke asked.

"Yeah," I said. "We're cool. Thanks, though."

Without missing a beat, he nodded, gathered our proffered cash, picked up the bill, and sauntered toward the waitress.

"Fuckin' A, that guy is amazing," Jeff said to no one in particular.

For a moment, we watched as Luke talked to the waitress.

"Holy shit," Jeff said. "I think she's giving him her phone number."

Sure enough, she was writing something on a scrap of paper. Then, with a smile, she folded the paper and handed it to Luke.

A few minutes later, outside the restaurant, Kendall, Gina, and I said goodbye to the three guys. As they walked up the street to the arcade, we turned and headed up the hill toward the dorms.

"They're really cool," Gina said.

Kendall nodded.

"I shouldn't've had so much beer," Gina added.

"Me too," Kendall said. "And I should've gone to the bathroom before we left the pizza place."

"No kidding," Gina said.

"You can use the bathroom in my room," I said.

"That's not *all* I want to use in your room," she said with a sultry look. Then she glanced at Kendall for confirmation.

"Uh-*huh*," the taller girl agreed.

"Then let's hurry up," I said with a grin.

Back in my suite, the girls took turns in the bathroom.

"What's up with your suitemates?" Gina asked when she closed my room door behind her.

"What d'you mean?" I asked.

"They've got that huge Confederate flag on their door. Are they rednecks or something?"

"Yeah, I guess," I said evenly. I didn't really want to talk about them, so I changed the subject. "Did you have plans for tomorrow? Before the party at Bridget's, I mean?"

She shook her head.

"I thought maybe you, Kendall, and I could hang out here. I mean, I don't think they'll assign me a new roommate on Labor Day."

"Sure, I'd love to," she said. Then she moistened her lips and gave me an inviting look.

At that point, Kendall finished in the bathroom and came back into the room. With a grin, she turned and locked the door.

"Oh, no," I said facetiously. "I can't escape."

"Why would you want to?" Kendall asked as she and Gina teamed up to unbutton my shirt. As they slowly removed it, they planted soft kisses on my chest and stomach.

"After all," Gina said as she kissed my skin, "you've got two beautiful…"

"Sexy…," Kendall added with a kiss of her own.

"Horny…" Kiss.

"Erotic…" Kiss.

"Exotic…" Kiss.

"And insatiable women," Kendall finished with another kiss.

Then, as one, they sank to their knees and started to remove my shorts. I closed my eyes as they fished out my rapidly stiffening cock.

"And horny," Gina said. "Did we mention horny?"

"I believe you did," I groaned as one of them wrapped their lips around my dick. "I believe you did…"

CHAPTER FIVE

Sometime during the night, I awoke.

As I blinked to clear my eyes, I realized what had woken me up. I don't know what I'd been dreaming about, but judging by my erection, it must've been good. Then I felt a pair of warm, soft, wet lips around my dick.

Since we had pulled the mattresses from both beds and shoved them together on the floor, all three of us were in the same "bed." I figured Gina had probably felt my hardness and decided to suck me off. So I relaxed and reached down to run my fingers through her hair.

Then, to my surprise, she took me into her throat. When her lips clamped around my shaft, I could feel her breath on the base of my cock.

When the wave of sheer pleasure passed, I lifted my head and looked down my torso. The room was dim, but I could barely make out the shape of the girl between my legs. Kendall—her lips still wrapped around my hard-on—glanced up when she felt me move. Then she slid my dick from her mouth and put her finger to her lips in a shushing gesture. Her hair cascaded over her face as she returned her attention to my manhood.

As I spread my legs, she moved between them. I made sure not to disturb Gina, who was sleeping soundly to my left. Kendall's warm skin felt good against my own, and her lips felt heavenly.

She took her time, sucking me slowly, making love to my cock. Her lips and tongue caressed the soft skin of my shaft with each stroke. As her head slowly bobbed up and down, I had to stifle a groan. Even though I had come several times, earlier in the night, I soon felt my balls tighten with the first signs of impending climax.

Kendall felt it too, and slowed her pace. As her lips brushed over the crown of my cock, she flicked her tongue against the underside of my glans. I shivered at the sensation and then felt her lips tighten in a smile.

She let my cock slip from her mouth. Then she held it out of the way, turned her head to the side, and tongued my balls. Her soft hair fanned out on my thigh as she sucked a testicle into her steamy mouth. I felt her breath on the underside of my cock as she continued licking and sucking my balls. I wanted to come, but she was enjoying herself, so I tried to relax and hold back.

Unfortunately, it didn't work. Her mouth felt too good. When she sensed my breathing grow shallow and erratic, she returned her lips to my manhood and tried to swallow me whole. I felt the tip of my cock enter the back of her throat and had to stifle another groan. She still couldn't swallow all of me, but it wasn't for lack of trying.

Finally, she wrapped her fist around my shaft and began to stroke. At the same time, she clamped her lips around my dick, just below the head. My legs and back tensed up as my toes pointed, and I clawed at the sheets as the pressure built. Finally, I had to clench my teeth to keep from crying out.

Pure, fantastic, white-hot ecstasy erupted from my groin and spread outward. I barely felt the first rush of semen as it surged up my shaft and jetted into Kendall's mouth. I didn't feel the second spurt at all.

For several timeless moments, I tried to keep from groaning as come erupted from deep within my balls. When my cock finally stopped spurting, I relaxed and sagged to the mattress.

Then I shivered; my nerves had suddenly become super-sensitive. I could feel Kendall's soft breath on my dick. I could feel the shape of her nipple as her breast pressed against my leg. I could feel the texture of the sheets beneath me. I could even feel the gentle air currents in the room.

As I marveled at it all, Kendall gently sucked my slowly deflating member. A few minutes later, she released my flaccid penis and crawled from between my legs. As she settled next to me, her breasts pressed against my chest and side. Instead of speaking, she put her head on my shoulder as I wrapped my arm around her. Then she sighed in contentment and kissed my chest. Without speaking, we drifted off to sleep.

✧ ✧ ✧

When I awoke the second time, it was well after eight thirty. Morning sunlight filtered through the blinds. Kendall stirred beside me when I touched her. Then I reached out and put my hand on Gina's flank. When she felt my touch, she unconsciously scooted toward me. Still asleep, she rolled over and snuggled against me, draping her leg over mine as she did. I grinned to myself and pulled Kendall close as well.

My morning hard-on tented the sheet as I reveled in the feeling of two warm, nude, sexy girls. I must have dozed off for a while, because when I woke up again, I had to go to the bathroom. I tried to hold out, but my bladder was insistent. So I carefully disengaged myself from the girls and stood up. I was about to walk into the foyer—erection and all—when it occurred to me that I wasn't at home. I smacked myself in the forehead and then wrapped a towel around my waist.

A few minutes later, I quietly walked back into the room and looked down at the girls' sleeping forms. Gina was curled up on her side, which was her usual way of sleeping. Kendall, on the other hand, had sprawled across most of her side of the two-mattress bed.

I chuckled to myself as I gazed at them. Gina and I had gotten used to sleeping with each other, and I actually *slept* when we were together. I didn't get much sleep when Kendall and I were together. For all her intelligence and pure sex appeal, Kendall was *not* used to sleeping with anyone else. Sharing a bed with her was an adventure, in more ways than one.

I shook my head wryly and decided to take a shower. I *really* wanted to fool around—my erection hadn't fully subsided—but both girls were sleeping so peacefully that I simply didn't have the heart to wake them. So I grabbed my shower basket, slipped into my flip-flops, and headed back into the foyer.

In the shower, I let the hot water run down my shoulders and back. As I did, I thought back to the night before. Even though all three of us had been tired, we were also excited to be together as a threesome again.

After the girls had stripped me and taken turns giving me head, I complained that they had too many clothes on. They obliged me by doing a simultaneous striptease. When they were both nude, they tackled me, giggling the whole time. I easily turned the tables and pinned Gina beneath me. Then, to my surprise, Kendall went down on the darker girl. At that point, I was perfectly happy to kneel over Gina's chest and let her suck my cock while Kendall pleasured her.

As I replayed scenes in my mind, my dick predictably stiffened, so I reached down and stroked myself. Before I had a chance to work up a good rhythm, however, T.J. and Glen's door opened.

I froze.

Could they hear me jerking off? Was I being too loud? I didn't *think* I had made any noise, but I couldn't be sure. My heart thudded in my chest as agonizing seconds ticked by.

When their door closed, I heaved a sigh of relief.

Then, a moment later, the outer shower curtain rattled open. Panic speared my gut.

What if one of my suitemates had stumbled out of their room half asleep and decided to take a shower? Or worse, what if big Glen liked *guys*, and I was going to be his new plaything? Would I be able to stop him? Could I fight him off and then lock myself in my room?

Calm down! I mentally shouted.

When the outer shower curtain closed, I relaxed a little. T.J., or Glen—whichever it was—had realized that the shower was occupied, although how either of them had missed the sound of the water was beyond me. Fortunately, the thought of Glen turning me into his butt buddy had completely deflated my erection. So if either of them *had* decided to open the shower curtain, at least I wouldn't be standing there holding my hard-on.

Then the inner shower curtain rustled. I nearly jumped out of my skin. As the curtain moved aside, I made a fist and drew it back, ready to swing first and ask questions later.

When *Kendall* peered around the curtain, my eyes flew wide.

She laughed.

"What?!" I demanded in near apoplexy.

"You should see your face," she said. Then, without a comment about my angry tone, she unwrapped her towel, hung it on the hook, and stepped into the shower with me.

"I thought you were Glen," I hissed. "Or T.J. But mostly Glen." Then I shuddered at the thought.

"I'm sorry," she said, realizing how tense I was. "One of them came out right as I opened the door from your room. I guess he wanted to take a shower, but when he heard the water running, he went back inside. As soon as his door shut, I darted across the foyer."

"Then why didn't I hear *my* door?" I asked.

"Because I didn't want to wake Gina up, so I closed it softly."

"Oh."

"I'm sorry," she said again. "I didn't mean to scare you—"

"You didn't scare me," I said. Then I scowled. "Much."

By way of apology, she pressed her body against mine and backed us both under the shower. Then she kissed me. "I'm sorry," she whispered. "But you should've seen your face," she added with a soft giggle.

"That bad, huh?"

"That funny," she said.

"Well, what'd you expect? I thought big Glen was coming to make me his… well… you know... his *special* friend."

"He's gay?"

"How should *I* know?"

"But I thought you said…"

"He's not gay," I said. Then, "I hope." After a long pause, I had to chuckle. It *was* an absurd situation.

Treacherous imagination.

"I guess I just panicked," I admitted at last.

"I really *am* sorry. I didn't mean to startle you."

"That's okay. I'm cool."

She simply nodded and reached for the soap and washcloth. Then she glanced up and smiled bashfully. "I enjoyed this morning," she said softly.

"Me too," I said.

"You were so *hard*, and I couldn't sleep."

I nodded as she began to lather my shoulders and chest.

"I just had the sudden urge to suck you," she said with a shrug. "I don't know why."

"Well, I'm glad you did. You'll have to let me return the favor."

"I'd like that," she said. Then she started washing my cock and balls. "I like it when you do. You're always more aggressive when you go down on me. With Gina, it's…"

"It's what?"

"It's… different," she said. "Softer."

"You usually come quicker, too."

"I hoped you hadn't noticed that," she said with an apologetic look.

"It's okay. She's got the same body parts you do, and she knows what feels good. I've got to pay attention to your reactions. She's got your reactions *and* firsthand experience. I can't beat that."

"It doesn't bother you?"

"No," I said. Then, "Okay, maybe a little. But not really. I mean, I can do things *she* can't do."

"No *kidding*."

"I think every guy wants to think he's the best a girl's ever had, but I know it's not always gonna be true." Then I paused for a moment of introspection. "Well, I guess I know it *here*," I said, tapping my forehead. "But it sometimes stings here"—I touched my finger to my chest—"when I find out I'm *not* the best, biggest, longest, or whatever."

"You're the best *I've* ever had," Kendall said softly.

"Even better than my dad?" I asked. I normally didn't feel all that competitive where my father was concerned, but I had to admit that he was a pretty good lover (despite how *weird* it felt to make the admission).

"Your dad's too big for me," she said after a moment's hesitation.

"Huh? My dick's as thick as his."

"Not thick," she explained. "Big. As in 'long.'"

"Too *long?*"

"Mmm hmm," she said as she stopped washing me. "When he's inside me, he bumps into my cervix, and it kind of hurts."

"Really?"

She nodded. "Do you remember when I said I thought my body was made for you?"

"Several times," I said.

"That's because you're long, but not too long, and you're thick, but not too thick. Dennis Raeford is a little big for me too, but he's too thick. So as far as I'm concerned, my body was made for *you* and *your* dick."

"I know we haven't really talked about it," I ventured, "but what about the other guys?"

"What other guys?" she asked hoarsely.

"I mean, I know you've slept with other guys. It doesn't *bother* me or anything, but I guess I'm still curious."

For a moment, she looked at me, studying my face for any hidden meaning.

I really *wasn't* upset that she'd had sex with other guys. At the time, she was at UT and I was home in Atlanta with Gina. Now that we were all together, things were different. But before…

"I didn't think you knew about them," she said softly.

"I do."

"There were only three, and not even really *three*."

Three?! I thought there were only *two*. I tried to conceal my shock, so I simply nodded.

Kendall, however, wasn't fooled. "You didn't know there were three?" she asked.

I shook my head ruefully. "I thought there were only two."

"Are you sure you want to talk about this?" she asked.

"I'm fine. But I don't want to talk about it unless you do, I guess."

"I don't want to hide anything from you."

"I know. But this wouldn't be hiding them. I mean, I *know* about the guys. I don't need to know the details, do I?" Despite what I said, curiosity burned in my veins. I really *did* want to know about them. I don't know why, though. I guess I wanted—like any other guy on the planet—to know that I was better than those other guys, that I wouldn't lose Kendall to someone she liked more than me. Unfortunately, she saw right through me.

"Do you want me to tell you?" she asked. "I will, if you ask me to."

"I want you to, but I *don't* want you to. Does that make sense?"

She nodded.

"I mean, I'm dying to know, but I don't want you to feel like I forced you to tell me or anything."

"I understand."

"So you probably *shouldn't* tell me."

"That's not what you really want," she said.

I sighed. "No. You can read me too well," I said. Then I cupped her face and made her look at me. "If I hadn't asked, would you have told me about them?"

She shook her head. "They're not part of my life anymore. One of them never really *was* a part of my life; he was a big mistake when I was at a party and I'd had too much to drink. And the last guy… well… he *really* shouldn't have happened. But we didn't actually have sex. Not really."

"Then that's good enough for me," I lied. Once again, she saw right through me.

"Are you sure?"

"No," I said. "I'm *not* sure. But that's what love is about: doing something for someone *else's* happiness, instead of my own. Yeah, I want to know about the other guys. But I think it's more important that I *not* know. It's more important to you, at least. And *that's* what really matters to me."

"Thank you," she whispered. Then she looked up anxiously. "They really *aren't* part of my life anymore."

"I know," I said, pulling her close.

"Thank you," she said as she hugged me tight. Then she sniffled. "I love you."

"I love you too. Very much."

While I was still holding her, T.J. and Glen's door opened again. A moment later, it slammed shut.

"I think they want to use the shower," I said.

Kendall nodded and wiped her eyes. Then, to my surprise, she kissed me, deep and long.

When we broke the kiss, I merely blinked at her.

"Thank you for not asking me about… the other guys," she said.

"You're welcome."

"You know you're the only man in my life."

I nodded.

"You're the love of my life."

Once again, I nodded.

"Now," she whispered, "let's finish up and see if Gina's awake." With that, she kissed me again. "Feeling loved makes me horny," she whispered with a grin.

I raised my eyebrows in surprise.

In response, she gave me a smoldering look.

I think we finished our shower in record time.

✧ ✧ ✧

We spent most of the morning fooling around. Gina was a little upset at being woken up, but when she realized that Kendall and I were both horny, her mood improved quite a bit.

Later, we snuck downstairs to get something to eat and then snuck back up the stairs (even though it was a holiday, it was still a Monday, which meant no visitation).

"What time does Bridget's party start?" Gina asked as we relaxed in my room.

"She said we should be there around four," Kendall answered. "I told Abby we'd meet her at the apartment at three thirty."

"Abby's going too?" Gina asked.

Kendall nodded. "We've been pretty good friends with Bridget and Toni since we were freshmen. They still live with each other too. They've got an apartment together, a couple of miles from campus."

"Oh," Gina said. "Okay. Do we need to bring anything?" she asked.

"I asked," Kendall said. "Bridget said the party's being catered, so we don't need to bring a thing."

"Okay," Gina said. Then she grew sly. "So what do we wanna do in the meantime?"

I gave her a suggestive look.

"That's what *I* was thinking," she said.

"You two are *horrible*," Kendall said.

"And you're not?" Gina asked. "If I recall," she said, assuming a playfully haughty expression, "you woke *me* up earlier, wanting to fool around."

"You did," I said to Kendall with a wry grin. Then I pulled her close. "You know you want to."

Her blushing smile was answer enough.

When I looked at Gina, she winked at me. Then she stood up. The mattresses were still

together on the floor, so she walked around them.

"Do you know what I want to do?" she asked.

Kendall merely shook her head. She was trying to appear disaffected, but I knew her well enough to realize how excited she was.

"I want to suck your pussy while Paul fucks you from behind," Gina said to the taller girl. Then she started tweaking Kendall's nipples through her t-shirt.

Kendall merely sighed and closed her eyes.

At that point, Gina moved in for the kill. "Then I want to watch as he slides his big, hard, thick dick in your ass," she said.

With a whimper, Kendall sagged against me.

"I know how much you like it back there," Gina whispered as she lifted Kendall's shirt. "Just think about Paul fucking you in the ass while I lick your pussy." As she cupped Kendall's breasts, she looked at me and winked. "Why don't you unzip Paul's pants and take out his dick," she suggested to the taller girl.

Kendall licked her lips and nodded without opening her eyes. Then she fumbled at my zipper. When she got it open, she reached inside and delicately extracted my burgeoning erection.

"It's nice and hard, isn't it?" Gina whispered. Then she unfastened Kendall's bra. With a grin, she began sucking the taller girl's nipples.

At that point, I reached to Kendall's waist and unsnapped her shorts. She moaned softly when my hand slipped under the waistband of her panties. When my fingertips found her smooth labia, she was already moist with arousal. I slid one finger along her slit and then spread her lips. She gasped as I gently slid my finger inside her.

"You like Paul playing with you, don't you?" Gina asked.

Kendall took a deep, shuddering breath and then nodded.

"You like feeling his dick."

Another nod.

"And you like it when I lick your pussy, don't you?" Gina asked.

"Yes," Kendall hissed.

With my other hand, I reached out and lifted Gina's shirt.

She paused for a moment and then pulled away from Kendall's breast. With an economy of motion, she pulled off her shirt, unfastened her bra, and tossed them both aside.

I used the opportunity to pull my cock from Kendall's grasp and remove her shirt and bra as well. Then I hooked my thumbs under the waistband of her shorts and panties. A moment later, she stepped out of them and I tossed them with her other clothes.

While Gina resumed sucking Kendall's nipples, I tugged off my shirt and then shed my shorts and underwear. My dick bobbed gently as I moved behind Kendall. Then I lowered my hips and probed between her thighs with my erection.

She spread her legs to accommodate me and Gina took advantage of the opportunity to begin rubbing the taller girl's clit.

From behind, I reached around and cupped Kendall's generous breasts. Then I held them for Gina.

Kendall whimpered softly and leaned against my bare chest, her skin warm against my own. As she lolled her head back and rested it on my shoulder, Gina slowly sank to her knees, planting

kisses along Kendall's stomach as she went.

For a moment, Gina sucked the head of my cock instead of Kendall's pussy. Then she turned her attentions to the taller girl's damp, smooth sex.

Kendall simply whimpered as Gina and I tag-teamed her. For a few minutes, Gina tongued her, alternating between long licks and short, quick ones. I continued playing with the taller girl's breasts, testing their heft as I twisted her nipples between thumb and forefinger.

"Turn her around, Paul," Gina said at last. "Bend her over the counter and fuck her from behind."

As Gina moved out of the way, I obliged her. Kendall braced her hands on the counter as I pulled her ass toward me. Then I looked up and watched her in the mirror. Her eyes were closed and her hair hung down, obscuring most of her face, but my gaze soon drifted to her dangling breasts.

On the floor, Gina moved between Kendall's legs and resumed her ministrations. At the same time, I cupped Kendall's heavy, tanned breasts. She moaned as I teased her nipples. At that point, Gina reached between my legs and started fondling my balls. Then she wrapped her fingers around my shaft and stroked me.

"Fuck her, Paul," she said after several strokes.

I pulled back and gripped my cock. Then I aimed it between Kendall's spread cheeks and eased forward. Gina held Kendall's pussy open, and guided my cock as I slipped inside. Kendall gasped as my girth spread her open. Since we'd already had sex once that day, she was more than ready for me. With one continuous thrust, I buried myself inside her. Then I gripped her hips and gazed at her reflection in the mirror.

Her face was a mask of pleasure as she savored the feeling of my cock spreading her open. Then she swung her hair out of her face, opened her eyes, and returned my gaze.

"I love you," I mouthed.

Before she could reply, Gina began sucking her clit. I could feel the darker girl's chin on my balls as she tongued Kendall. With a grin, I pulled back and then slowly eased forward again, burying my cock in Kendall's tight, steamy pussy.

As I started thrusting, she moaned. Her breasts swayed each time my hips bumped into hers. To brace herself, Gina put her hands on the backs of Kendall's thighs and continued licking. At the same time, I moved my hand up and started teasing Kendall's asshole with my thumb. She bucked in pleasure as her pussy gushed around my invading member.

For the next several minutes, I drove Kendall crazy with my cock and my thumb. When her hips started trembling, I increased my pace. My hips slammed into hers, making slapping sounds each time our bodies collided.

"Do you want me to fuck you in the ass?" I whispered as I bent over her back. "Do you want to feel my cock deep inside you?"

She took a ragged breath and nodded.

"You like having Gina lick your pussy at the same time, don't you?"

Again, she nodded.

"Say it."

"I like having Gina lick my pussy," she echoed without hesitation.

"Now ask me to put my cock in your ass," I said.

To my surprise, she didn't even pause before saying, "Shove your cock in my ass. *Please*. I want to feel you inside me."

Never one to disappoint her, I pulled my shiny erection from her pussy and set the tip at her puckered asshole. Then I gently pushed. Her sphincter eased open after a moment and the bulbous head of my cock slid inside her. It had always been easier to enter her ass than her pussy, and this time was no exception.

"Oh, God," Gina gasped from beneath us. "That is *so* sexy."

Kendall merely moaned.

As I started fucking her, slowly at first, but with mounting speed, Gina resumed sucking her clit.

Quicker than I would've thought possible, Kendall shuddered, and I felt her ass contract around my cock. Then her back heaved and Gina gripped her hips to hold on. With a low moan, Kendall climaxed, her body trembling as she did.

Gina slid her fingers into the taller girl's pussy, and Kendall went wild. Her ass contracted around my cock again. The contractions weren't as strong as they would've been if I were in her pussy, but they were still fairly powerful. I merely gripped her hips and held on.

Almost a minute later, when Kendall's orgasm finally subsided, she almost collapsed forward. As I held her up, her back heaved and she gasped. Then she folded her arms and rested her head on them. Gina scooted forward and began sucking her nipples. Kendall groaned in pleasure and an aftershock rippled through her body.

For a few minutes, I remained buried in her tight ass while Gina slowly sucked her nipples. As the taller girl's breathing slowly returned to normal, two aftershocks rocked her gently.

"Wow," Kendall said when she recovered the ability to speak.

Gina stuck her head out and smiled up at me, her eyes sparkling.

To my surprise, I realized that she still had her shorts on.

"Did you come?" she mouthed.

I shook my head.

Her eyes lit up in anticipation.

"Wow," Kendall breathed again. "That was… wow."

"I told you that you'd like it," Gina said as she stood up.

"Oh my goodness, yes."

"Go ahead and pull out," Gina said to me softly. "I'll wash you in a minute. Okay?"

I nodded.

Kendall gasped as I slowly eased out of her ass.

Gina comforted the taller girl, running her hand over Kendall's back and shoulders.

When my dick slid free, Gina helped Kendall up. Then the two girls embraced.

"You're so beautiful when you come," Gina said softly. When Kendall didn't respond, Gina looked up in concern. "Are you okay?"

Kendall took a deep breath and then nodded. "I'm still a little shaky, that's all," she said.

"You had a pretty powerful orgasm," Gina replied gently. "I could feel it."

Kendall smiled shyly.

"Do you want to lie down?" Gina asked.

Unsteadily, the taller girl nodded.

As Gina tended to Kendall, I reached for a washcloth. When the water was warm enough, I lathered the washcloth and cleaned my erection. Then I hung the damp cloth on the towel rack and turned to the girls.

"Come over here," Gina said to me.

"Is it okay if I just watch?" Kendall asked. "I'm still a little shaky."

Gina nodded and then kissed her tenderly. "Sure," she said.

With that, Gina unbuttoned her shorts and quickly removed them. Then she looked at me.

"I want to suck you first," she said with a smoldering look.

I moved in front of her, my dick bobbing as I did.

She wrapped her lips around my erection and sucked gently. She couldn't swallow as much of me as Kendall could, but the feeling was just as exquisite. For several long, delirious minutes, I simply enjoyed the feeling of her mouth on my cock.

When Kendall sat up and moved behind Gina, the darker girl took her lips off my cock and turned.

"I decided that I wasn't that shaky after all," Kendall said.

My cock swelled even further as the two girls kissed.

"I can taste him on you," Kendall said when they broke the kiss.

"He tastes good, doesn't he?" Gina asked.

The taller girl nodded. "Keep sucking," she said. "I like watching you."

With a nod, Gina turned back to me. "God, I love your dick," she said softly. "I could suck you all day."

Kendall winked up at me.

"But I won't," Gina said. "Because *you*," she said to my dick, "have a date with my ass. I want you to give me *exactly* what Kendall got. Okay?"

"He says 'okay,'" I said with a grin.

With that, Gina wrapped her lips around my cock and gripped my hips to steady herself.

Needless to say, she got what she wanted… in the end.

✧ ✧ ✧

Later that afternoon, we showered together. The shower stall wasn't tiny, but it *was* cramped with three of us. We still had fun washing each other and generally goofing off.

Afterward, the girls dried their hair and went through my closet and drawers, looking for something to wear. At first, I thought they were looking for something for me, but I quickly realized that they'd decided to wear my clothes. Both of them had panties and bras (which had spent most of the day on my rug), but they wanted clean shirts and shorts.

"I thought we needed to bring swimsuits," I said.

"We do," Kendall said.

"Then why are you two so worried about which clothes you pick out? I mean, we'll be wearing our bathing suits most of the afternoon, right?"

"Paul," Gina explained with only a hint of exasperation, "we need to look good when we *get* there too."

"Once they see you in your bikinis, though," I said, "I bet they'll *forget* what you wore when you arrived."

"He's got a point," Kendall said.

"So?" Gina asked. "I want to wear his shirt."

"Me too," Kendall agreed guiltily.

With that, it was settled.

Around three o'clock, we headed downstairs (via the stairs, of course). Kendall and I waited in the South Carrick lobby while Gina went upstairs to fetch her bikini.

I used the time to check my mailbox. To my surprise, I had three pieces of mail. Judging by the size of the envelopes, they were greeting cards.

"Go ahead and open them," Kendall suggested.

"But where will I put them? I don't have time to run up to my room." Then, "Never mind. I'll just put them back in my mailbox."

She nodded as I tore into the first envelope: a card from Mom, mailed the day after she returned to Atlanta. It was a Snoopy card, with the little beagle in his flying goggles and silk scarf.

Her note on the inside of the card read, *Congratulations on "flying solo." I'm so proud of you. I love you.*

Kendall smiled when I handed it to her. Then I opened the second envelope. The card had a picture of a forlorn-looking puppy on the front.

The caption read, *I miss you already*. On the inside, I recognized Erin's girlish handwriting, *Not really. OK. Maybe I do miss you, but don't tell anyone. Love, Erin.*

"That's so cute," Kendall said when I passed the card to her. Then she read the inscription. "Awwww."

I'm sure I blushed suitably.

The third envelope was postmarked Austin, Texas.

"Who's it from?" Kendall asked as I stared at it.

"I dunno. I don't know anyone in Texas."

"Open it."

The card was a cartoon of a studious-looking guy with glasses. He was holding textbooks and had a slide rule in his pocket. The caption read, *What your parents think you're doing at college.*

Inside the card, there was a cartoon of the same guy, with a drink in one hand and a cute girl in the other. His glasses were gone, his hair was disheveled, and he sported a drunken smile. The caption read, *What you're* really *doing at college.*

"It's from Susan," I said in surprise.

"Wow. Cool. What's it say?"

"'Congratulations,'" I read. "'But I hope you're actually studying *a little*.' Then she signed it 'Love, Susan.'"

"She does, you know," Kendall said. "Love you, I mean."

I nodded.

"You're like her son, in some ways," she added. "In others, you're obviously not."

"No kidding," I said.

At that point, Gina came out of the elevators. I stuffed the cards and envelopes back in my mailbox and closed the small door.

Then we headed down to Kendall's apartment. Abby was ready to go when we got there, so Kendall simply grabbed her bikini and threw it in the tote bag with Gina's.

With that, we headed to the garage and my Jeep.

✧ ✧ ✧

"That was fun," Gina said as we walked out to the Jeep after the party.

It was late, and all of us were tired. Many of the other party guests had left shortly after the fireworks. Since most were college students—like us—they had classes in the morning. In addition, Bridget's friends didn't seem to be the hard-partying type.

The girls and I had started to leave with the others, but Bridget had asked us to stay for a while. So we sat by the pool and enjoyed ourselves with her and her fiancé, Bryan, Toni Starnes and her boyfriend, Kyle, another couple, and two girls from Bridget and Toni's sorority, Delta Delta Delta.

"Bridget's a good hostess," Abby said as she and Kendall climbed into the back seat of the Jeep.

"And her house is *huge*," Gina added.

I nodded. Bridget's family lived in one of the oldest, most exclusive neighborhoods in Knoxville. The houses were *all* large, and looked extremely expensive. The smallest were at least the size of Gina's house in Atlanta, while many of them were quite a bit larger.

"Bridget's fiancé is cool, too," Gina said. "Is he a student at UT?"

"He's in law school," Kendall said as I started the Jeep.

"And what does Kyle do?" Gina asked.

"He's a senior at UT," Kendall said. "I think he's a business major."

In the mirror, I saw Abby nod. "His father owns a bunch of restaurants. They did the catering for the party."

"That barbeque was *good*," I said.

"Uh-huh," Abby agreed. "It's the only restaurant that my dad says makes barbeque as good as his."

"He's right," Kendall said. "Your dad's barbeque is really good."

As I turned out of the subdivision and headed back to campus, the conversation slowed. Even though there had been wine and beer at the party, none of us had drunk too much. I guess we were all content to ride along quietly, the silence broken only by the hum of the Jeep's tires.

"What'd you think of Bridget and Toni?" Kendall asked Gina a few minutes later.

Unlike me, Gina hadn't spent much time with Kendall's former suitemates.

"They're really cool," Gina said. "Bridget especially. She's so nice. I mean, I knew some girls in school whose families were rich, and most of them had their noses in the air. But Bridget's just like a real person. I don't mean that like it sounds, but… you know. Sometimes, rich people think they're above everyone else."

"But you and Paul are rich too," Kendall said to her.

"We are *not*," Gina said. "Not like Bridget."

"Well, maybe not," Kendall demurred, "but your families have more money than mine. Or Abby's."

Abby nodded.

"No we don't," Gina said.

Tactfully, Kendall didn't argue, even though she was right.

"But what difference does that make?" Gina asked, not content to let the subject drop.

"It doesn't," Kendall said. "My point was that money doesn't make you a good or bad person."

Abby silently agreed.

"I know," Gina said. "But don't you know what I mean? There are just some rich people who look down on everyone else."

"So what did you and Bridget talk about?" I asked, abruptly changing the subject. "You two were having a serious discussion while us guys were devastating the leftovers."

"It wasn't really a serious discussion," Gina said. "She was telling me about her sorority. It sounds really cool."

In the back seat, Kendall and Abby looked at each other.

"Toni and the other girls were telling me about Rush Week, and all the skits they do," Gina continued. "Bridget said it's kinda late for me to register for Rush, but she knows a couple of the coordinators, so she could get me on the list. It sounds really cool," she repeated.

"Bridget and Toni were always trying to get me to join the Tri-Delts," Kendall said.

"Why didn't you?" Gina asked. "They seem really nice."

"Oh, they *are* nice," Kendall replied. "But I guess I just wanted to concentrate on school."

"There's no reason you can't do both," Gina said. "Bridget was telling me that collectively, the Panhellenic women—those're the girls in sororities—have the highest GPAs on campus. They really want you to focus on school."

In the rearview mirror, I saw Kendall bite back a reply. I knew she respected—and genuinely liked—Bridget and Toni, but I also knew her opinion of most fraternities and sororities; it wasn't good.

Fortunately, we reached her apartment a few moments later. With the engine still running, I put the Jeep in Neutral, let the clutch out, set the parking brake, and opened my door. Abby got out as I tipped the seat forward. On the other side, Gina did the same for Kendall.

Then Kendall walked around the Jeep and I pulled her into my arms.

"Thanks for not getting into it with Gina about the sororities," I said quietly.

"It's okay. She just doesn't know what they're *really* like. Sure, they *say* they're about academics and all, but that's just so the school and parents don't shut them down. What they're *really* about is partying, guys, drinking, partying, and guys. Oh, and academics. In *that* order. And don't get me *started* about fraternities," she practically spat.

"I know," I said. "But Gina seems happy. So I'm not gonna rock the boat."

"She *does* seem happier," Kendall admitted after a moment. Then her eyes flew wide. "Oh my goodness."

"What?"

"We *completely* forgot to talk about the girlfriend/best-friend thing."

"*Someone* I know—no names mentioned, but her initials are Kendall Lynn Payton—was too horny to bring it up."

"It's your fault too," she said with feigned petulance.

"Yeah, you're right," I said seriously. "I'll talk to her tonight. She's in a good mood, and she doesn't seem all that tired. So I'll see if she wants to spend the night with me. Then I can bring it up."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm sure," I said heavily.

"Okay. I'd better let you go, then."

I nodded.

"Do you want to have breakfast tomorrow morning?"

"You mean later *this* morning?" I asked.

She nodded.

"Sure. Seven o'clock?"

"Mmm hmm. I'll see you then."

"I love you," I said.

"I love you too."

With that, she kissed me and then pulled away. I watched as she and Abby walked into the apartment building, making sure they were safely inside before I got into the Jeep.

"Did you want me to drop you off at Carrick?" I asked Gina as I released the parking brake.

"I'll walk back with you from the garage, if you want."

"I was hoping you'd offer," I said. Then I looked at her sidelong. "I was also hoping you'd maybe spend the night. I mean, I don't know how long I'm not gonna have a roommate. And I'd hate for that empty room to go to waste."

"Oh really?" she asked with a wry grin. Then, "I thought you'd never ask."

Once we reached the dorm, I went in through the lobby and headed toward the fire stairs. On the lower level, I opened the door for Gina. The fourth floor hallway was deserted, so we casually walked the fifteen feet from the stairwell to my suite's door.

"I really had fun today," she said as I locked the room door behind us.

"Me too."

"I think this was the *first* good day I've actually had since we came here."

With that, I took a deep breath and marshaled my courage. I didn't *really* want to talk to her, but I knew I had to. I need to broach the subject before we started fooling around. It was one of those things like ripping off a Band-Aid: the longer I waited, the worse it would get.

"Hey," I said softly, as I gathered her in my arms. In truth, I wanted to hold onto her if she flew into a rage and tried to storm out. "There's something we've gotta talk about."

"What is it?" she asked, panicky. "Is everything okay?"

I nodded and then took a deep breath. "It's about you and Kendall," I said.

"Oh my God," she breathed. Then her face turned hard. "I *knew* it. You're dumping me, aren't you?"

"No!" I said, holding her tight as she tried to pull away. "It's nothing like that."

"Then what *is* it like?" she asked acerbically.

"It's nothing bad," I said. "We just need to figure something out."

"Figure *what* out?"

This is not *going well*, I thought pessimistically. "Who do I call my girlfriend?"

"Huh?" she asked in shock.

"Who do I call my girlfriend?" I repeated.

"*That's* what this is about?" she asked, her face darkening. "You scare me to death about *who to call your girlfriend?!*"

Completely taken aback, I didn't reply.

"You make me think you're breaking up with me, and all you wanted to talk about was a silly girlfriend thing? That's *it?*"

"I—"

"I don't care *who* you call your girlfriend," Gina said.

"But I—"

"As long as it's me or Kendall, why should it matter? I mean, we know who's who."

"You mean you're not angry?" I asked.

"Yes I'm angry," she said.

When I realized that she wasn't going to storm out, I released her and she stepped back.

"But not about that" she continued. "God, Paul, don't you know me better than that? I'm angry that you scared me over nothing."

"Nothing?"

"I mean, Kendall introduced herself as your girlfriend when we were helping her move into her apartment."

"Yes, but—"

"And do you think I didn't notice when you didn't introduce me as your girlfriend to those guys last night?" she asked.

"I—"

"I'm not stupid, Paul."

"I didn't say you were."

"And I'm not some silly thirteen-year-old girl. I mean, I'm *eighteen*. I'm an adult. I'm not going to get upset over some dumb name. Who *cares* who you introduce as your girlfriend?"

"I thought *you* would," I sputtered. "You mean you don't?"

"No. I mean, you've got *two* girlfriends. Do you think I hadn't *thought* about this?"

"I guess I—"

"No, you thought I'd just get angry and start shrieking and everything."

"You're kinda shrieking now," I said.

For a moment, she scowled at me, her eyes hard. I was about to brace for the worst when all of a sudden, she laughed.

"What's so funny?" I asked in surprise.

"You're right," she said at last. "I guess I *was* shrieking a little."

"Sorry."

"Just don't *scare* me like that," she said, her expression softening. "I thought you were gonna break up with me or something."

"Not now, not ever," I said.

"Good. Because I don't know what I'd do without you," she said. Then she smiled ruefully. "I'm sorry I got upset. I just…"

"I'm sorry."

"It's okay. Don't be," she said. Then she looked at me seriously. "I don't care who you introduce as your girlfriend. I guess it's time Kendall got the honor, though."

I cocked my head to the side.

"I mean, I've been your girlfriend for a couple of years. And while she's *sort of* had the same… um… position… I guess you've always introduced me as your girlfriend. She's been a

little short-changed."

I nodded.

"I mean, I don't want to be your second girlfriend, but it's okay if some people know her as your girlfriend and me as… I dunno… your best friend."

I was incredulous, but I hoped my expression didn't reflect that. Fortunately, Gina couldn't read me like Kendall could.

"After all," Gina continued, "Abby, Bridget, Toni, and a bunch of other people already knew her as your girlfriend." Then she shrugged. "It doesn't bother me. I mean, I know you love me."

Without hesitation, I nodded.

"Good," she said. Then she playfully punched my chest. "But don't scare me like that again. God!"

"I'm really sorry, sweetie," I said.

"I know. And I'm sorry I overreacted. I just… well… you know."

I nodded.

Then she shook her head and muttered to herself, "He wants to know *who* to call his girlfriend? God."

I lifted her chin and grinned at her. "Do you forgive me?" I asked.

"No," she said teasingly. Then, "Yes, I forgive you. You're such a goof."

"But I'm *your* goof," I ventured.

"But you're my goof," she agreed. Then hugged me tight.

Relief and love washed over me as I held her.

A few minutes later, she pulled back, looked at me speculatively, and waggled her eyebrows. "Are you a goof who's in the mood for a bedtime blowjob?" she asked.

"I could probably be persuaded," I said with a sly grin.

She tilted her head up for a kiss.

When our lips met, I cupped her ass and pulled her toward me.

"Good," she said when we broke the kiss. "Sucking you always calms me down."

"Then I should get you worked up more often."

"Don't push your luck," she said, even though we both knew she was kidding.

With that, we turned out the lights, got undressed, and sank to the makeshift king-size bed.

✧ ✧ ✧

Tuesday morning, my alarm went off at six thirty and I immediately opened my eyes. Since the mattresses were still on the floor and the alarm clock was on the desk next to my erstwhile bed, I pulled my arm from beneath Gina, rolled to my feet, and lunged for the buzzing device.

Gina didn't want to wake up, so I shook her gently.

"C'mon, sweetie," I said. "We've got to meet Kendall for breakfast."

"Uh-uh," she mumbled. "Lemme sleep."

"Do you wanna shower?"

"Unnnnh."

"Okay, I'll shower first. I'll be back in a few minutes. Okay?" When she didn't answer, I gently shook her again. "Okay?"

"Fine. Whatever," she mumbled.

Ten minutes later, when I came back into the room after my shower, she still wasn't awake.

"C'mon, sweetie," I repeated, more forcefully this time. "We've got to meet Kendall for breakfast."

"Don' care 'bout breakfast."

I debated whether or not to just let her sleep, since her first class wasn't until ten. Unfortunately, I only had one room key, and I needed it to lock the door when I left. I could simply leave the key for her, but then we'd have to meet after her class, and I'd be locked out of my room until we did.

Worse, I didn't want to leave the mattresses on the floor, in case the hall director assigned me a new roommate. (Having a new guy move into your room with the mattresses pushed together on the floor sends the *wrong* message. Trust me.)

"Gina, come on," I urged.

"What time is it?"

"Almost seven. We need to meet Kendall in ten minutes."

"Jus' let me sleep."

"Fine," I said at last, frustrated. "I'll leave you my key to lock the room."

"Whatever."

"Meet me in the South Carrick lobby after your class."

"Okay, okay! Just let me get back to sleep."

I took my room key off my key ring and put it next to her clothes. Then, with barely suppressed misgivings, I left.

✧ ✧ ✧

My class ended at nine fifty. But Gina's class ended at *ten* fifty, so I had an hour to kill. I got to the South Carrick lobby a little after ten and flopped onto one of the couches.

I had an assignment from class, so I took out my sketchpad to pass the time. The assignment was lettering, and my handwriting had always been fairly neat. (I wrote like my father, whose engineering background demanded legible handwriting.) So it didn't take me long to master the letter shapes required for architecture.

After twenty or thirty minutes of practice, I flipped to a new page and used my straightedge to draw faint guidelines. Then I began writing in earnest, forming the letters carefully. Soon, I became accustomed to writing at speed, and the words began to flow, block letters filling the page. I was actually proud of myself—for the first time in my life, I was writing like an architect.

Unfortunately, I finished the assignment quickly. Then I glanced at my watch: Gina's class had just finished. So I shouldn't have long to wait.

By eleven thirty, she still hadn't shown up, and I was getting frustrated. My twelve fifteen class was Art History, and my book was still in my room. I could live without it, of course, but I was mostly irked that Gina still hadn't returned my room key.

By twelve, I was even angrier, but I was also a little worried. I was just about to head back to my room to see if she was still asleep, when she and another girl walked into the lobby. I shoved my sketchpad into my backpack and stood up.

"Hey," Gina said as she approached.

"Do you have my key?" I asked abruptly.

"Of course."

When she handed it over, I snatched it and pocketed it without thanking her.

"God, what's the matter with *you?*" she asked.

"I've been waiting for two *hours*," I said.

"God. Sorry."

"Whatever," I said. "Bye."

With that I walked off.

On the way back to my room, I began to feel guilty about being a jerk, but I also felt a little justified. If Gina had simply gotten up in the first place, or if she'd been on time after class, I wouldn't have been so angry. But she *hadn't* gotten up, and she *hadn't* been on time. Consequently, I had wasted two hours. Worse, I was going to be late to class.

I ran from my dorm to the A&A building, but I was still too late. Once again, I had to sit in the back of the auditorium. I tried to be quiet as I slid into a chair, still breathing hard from the run over. Then I scanned the room for the cute brunette and her friend, but didn't see them. When the professor began speaking—droning would be more like it—I started taking notes.

In my peripheral vision, I caught a flash of movement and turned. My eyes met the brunette's and I felt my pulse quicken. Behind her, her blonde friend took a seat. The brunette held my eyes for a moment. Then she raised an eyebrow and smiled coquettishly. I tried not to stare as she sat down, stretched her firm, tanned legs, and then crossed them.

For the remainder of the class, I tried not to let my eyes drift toward her. I also tried not to be distracted by her perfume, which was heady and intoxicating. I don't think I really succeeded on either count.

"Did we miss anything?" she asked after the bell rang.

"Not really," I said.

I started to introduce myself, but she stood up before I could. Since it would be awkward for me to hold out my hand while I was still seated and she was standing, I stood as well. Unfortunately, she and the blonde turned to leave. From the aisle, the blonde turned and her blue eyes met mine.

"Have a nice day," she said with a warm smile.

"You too," I said lamely.

With that, they headed toward the exit. At the doorway, the brunette said something to the blonde, who looked back and caught my eye again. Like a complete idiot, I waved. She rewarded me with another smile and then they were gone.

In the hall, I caught sight of them again. As before, they were heading toward the atrium and sharing a bag of carrot sticks. Fortunately, neither of them looked back, so I paused for a moment and simply enjoyed watching them walk.

They were both petite, but slim and well-toned, rather than willowy. And they both had good tans. For a moment, I imagined them nude, lying on the raft at camp. I pictured the blonde's breasts, firm and round, small, but shapely. Then my mind's eye turned to the brunette, whose breasts were a bit larger, about the same size as Gina's.

As soon as my thoughts turned to Gina, however, I felt guilty. I'd been a real jerk about the key, but I *was* angry about waiting for two hours. It was inconsiderate of Gina, but I shouldn't have been an ass, especially in front of the other girl (whom I didn't even know).

As I walked back to the dorm, I resolved to call Gina and apologize. Unfortunately, the thought deserted me as soon as I opened the door to my room.

My new roommate had moved in.

One mattress was still on the floor, but he had up-ended it, and it was flopped over my bed frame. He had replaced his mattress on the frame on his side of the room, but he'd pulled off my extra sheets and simply thrown them on the floor next to my mattress. Then he'd simply piled all of his stuff on his bed. He had also taken the few things of mine that I'd left on his side of the desk and haphazardly tossed them to my side.

And, of course, there was a note.

I crossed the room and plucked it from the mirror.

It read, *Keep your shit on your side of the room.*

"Fuck you too," I said to the empty room.

In a fit of pique, I picked up my backpack and left without a backward glance.

✧ ✧ ✧

My initial anger redoubled when I returned to my room later that night. It looked like my stuff had been gone through. It wasn't obvious, but little things were different or rearranged. I waited for my roommate to return. While I did, I thought about what I wanted to say to him. My mother wouldn't have approved.

When he still hadn't returned by midnight, I turned out the lights and climbed into bed. By the time I left to meet Kendall for breakfast on Wednesday morning, I still hadn't seen my roommate. I was still angry about him going through my stuff, though (not to mention the nasty note).

Even Professor Tow's wisecracks in my Calculus class didn't cheer me up. In my Intro to Architecture class, Professor Spielman was interesting, so my mood improved a little. My ten o'clock class, American Literature, was the hippy, Professor Feller. I didn't like the fact that she really *did* seem intent on giving a passing grade to anyone who simply showed up for class, but at least I wouldn't have to do much to earn an A.

Over lunch, I told Kendall about the situation with my room key.

"Have you apologized?" she asked.

I shook my head. "I got distracted by my asshole roommate."

"You don't *know* he's an asshole, Paul," she said gently. "After all, you did leave the mattresses on the floor and all."

"I didn't *want* to," I said testily. "Gina wanted to sleep in. So it's not *my* fault."

Kendall read my mood and prudently let the subject drop.

After lunch, my one o'clock class was Architectural Design, with Professor Joska, and I wasn't in the mood for his abuse. I wanted to skip the class, but decided against it. I reminded myself that my parents were paying a lot of money for me to attend college, and I knew they expected me to actually *go* to class. So I swallowed my festering anger and promised myself that I wouldn't let Joska get to me.

Since I'd been surly during lunch, I tried to lighten my mood as Kendall and I left the dining hall. She could tell that I was still angry, but she seemed to appreciate the attempt.

"I'm sorry you've had a rotten day," she said as we stood together before heading to our separate classes.

"Me too. And I'm sorry I've been a jerk."

"You haven't been a jerk. You've just got a lot on your mind right now."

"I know, but that's no excuse," I said.

She shook her head in agreement.

"I've still got to apologize to Gina," I said. "I haven't talked to her all day."

Kendall nodded again and then kissed me. "I love you."

"I love you too," I said. Then I took a deep breath and pasted on a false smile. "Time for Joska," I said.

"You'll do fine. Just relax and don't take it personally."

"I swear," I said, "if that guy goes off on me today, I think I'll slug him."

"I'll come bail you out," she said, trying to cheer me up. "After all, I think I know half the cops in Knoxville."

I laughed and then reluctantly smiled. "Thanks for being you," I said.

"I don't know who else to be."

"Good. Now, we gotta go. I don't wanna give Joska any excuse, so I'd better not be late to class."

"I'll call you when I get back to the apartment," she said. Then she kissed me again. "Bye."

"Seeya," I said.

With that, I shouldered my pack and turned toward the A&A building.

✧ ✧ ✧

"Joska wasn't a dick today," Trip said as we walked back to the dorm. "I think that's a first."

"No kidding," I said darkly.

"I'm sure that'll change," he said.

"You're probably right."

"Oh, I was talking to Samantha and Antonio before you got to class," he said. "They seem pretty cool. Samantha's *real* organized, which'll help with some of the more complex projects. She already has a calendar with due dates marked in red."

"Cool."

"And Antonio's a pretty sharp guy, although I gotta wonder what an Asian dude's doing with a name like Cardenas. And he says he's from Campbell County, which is up by Kentucky. So he's probably got an interesting story."

"I was wondering about that myself," I said.

"Yeah," Trip agreed with a nod. "Anyway, you wanna hang out? Luke wanted to go shoot some hoops."

"Sure," I said.

When we got to my room, I opened the door and stopped in my tracks.

"What's the matter?" Trip asked.

"My roommate's gone."

"Huh?"

"That's *two!*"

"What're you talking about, man?"

I quickly explained about my first roommate and his disappearance. "So now," I finished, "my second roommate's gone too."

Trip looked past me into the room. Sure enough, all of the new guy's stuff was gone.

"Well," I said at last, "at least I never met this guy either. He seemed like an asshole."

"Good riddance," Trip said.

"No kidding. But this is really starting to piss me off," I said as we entered the room. I threw my backpack on the bed and shook my head in amazement. "I mean, I haven't met *either* of these guys, but the RAs still haven't told me a thing about them moving out. No warning, no nothing. One day they're here, the next, they're gone."

"That sucks, man," he said.

"Do you mind if I see if I can find Cary? I mean, this is really bugging me. I'd like to at least *talk* to a roommate before he moves out."

"Sure, man," Trip said. "I'll go with you."

Surprisingly, Cary answered the door when I knocked.

"Paul," he said.

At least he remembered my name, I thought sarcastically.

"What can I do for you?" he asked.

"My roommate's gone," I said flatly. "Again."

"Oh dear," he said. Then he stood aside. "Come in." As we stepped into the room, he studied Trip for a moment. "Franklin, right?"

"Right," Trip said. "But everyone calls me Trip."

"Sorry," Cary said. Then he turned to me. "Your roommate, Karl Younkin, was arrested today. He's going to be expelled."

"What for?" I asked, shocked.

"I don't know if I can say," he said. But after a moment's consideration, he leaned close. "He was busted for selling cocaine. Can you believe it? So we moved him out of your room. We're storing his possessions until his parents pick them up."

For a moment, I was dumbfounded.

"What're you going to do next?" Trip asked. "Will Paul get a new roommate?"

Cary nodded quickly. "Wade said he's already notified your next roommate."

"I want to be there when he moves in," I said.

"Well, I don't know…," Cary hedged.

"Paul hasn't met *either* of his roommates," Trip said evenly. "I think the least you could do is make sure he meets this one, *before* he moves in."

"I suppose that would be okay," Cary said.

"What *did* happen to my first roommate?" I asked, changing the subject before Cary could change his mind.

"He dropped out of school and moved back to Florida," Cary said. "I think his girlfriend broke up with him. He seemed very upset."

"Oh, shit," I said, smacking my forehead as I suddenly remembered the room key incident with Gina. If I didn't want *my* girlfriend to break up with me, I'd better give her a call and apologize.

"What?" Trip asked.

"Nothing," I temporized. "I've just gotta make a phone call." Then I turned to Cary. "Do you know anything about my new roommate?" I asked.

"He's currently living in Hess," Cary said. "He was supposed to have a room in Reese, but there was a problem with his paperwork. I don't know anything else, though."

"When is he moving in?"

"I don't know," Cary said. "But I'll talk to Wade and let you know."

"Okay, thanks."

"Thanks, Cary," Trip said.

As we turned to go, Cary picked up the phone.

"I'll tell Luke we'll play basketball some other time," Trip said as we walked down the hall. "He'll understand."

"Thanks, man," I said.

"No problem."

"And I've gotta call my girlf— I mean, I've gotta call Gina."

"Cool. Come on across the hall when you're off the phone. We'll hang out."

"Okay. Thanks," I said.

When I called Gina's room, Faith answered. Then I remembered that Gina was in class until four. I left a message for her to call me and then headed across the hall. When I entered the room, Luke was telling a joke in his Cajun patois.

"So Boudreaux says, 'Thibodeaux, you *couillon*, you don't need no doctor, your finger's broke!'"

Trip and Jeff roared with laughter.

"Hey y'all," I said when they settled down.

"Hey Paul," Luke said.

"How they hangin'?" Jeff asked.

"Sorry about your roommate," Luke said.

"Trip told you?" I asked.

They nodded.

"Bummer," Jeff said.

"Not really. This last guy didn't really seem like the coolest dude," I said

"Then fuck him," Jeff said. After we all nodded, he turned to Trip. "How 'bout some music?"

"What do y'all wanna listen to?" Trip asked as he began flipping through albums.

"Zeppelin," Jeff said. "Or AC/DC." Then, "Hey, do you have any Black Sabbath?"

"No, not that crap," Luke said. "Styx. Or Cheap Trick."

"How about *I* pick something?" Trip suggested.

We spent the rest of the afternoon just shooting the breeze and listening to music (mostly The Cars and Hall & Oates).

Unfortunately, I forgot all about Gina.

CHAPTER SIX

When I returned to my room after my first class on Thursday, I found a note on my door.

It read, *Paul, please find me when you get in.* Signed, *Cary.*

I dropped my backpack on my bed—the other side of the room was still bare—and headed down the hall to Cary's room.

"Hi, Paul," he said as soon as he opened the door. "Your new roommate's ready to move in. But Wade said he wanted to talk to you first. Do you have a few minutes?"

"Sure," I said.

With that, he locked his door and we pressed the button for the elevator. Downstairs, we went behind the front desk and into a back hallway. At the end of the hall, Cary knocked on the hall director's half-open door.

"Come in."

Wade looked up as the door swung open. When he saw us, he stood.

"Thanks for coming, Paul," he said. "We're sorry for all the confusion with your roommates."

"It's cool," I said.

"No, it's not," he said. "But thank you for being understanding. Please, have a seat." When I did, he sat as well. "Cary told me that he explained about Terry," he said. "And after Mr. Younkin was arrested yesterday, we felt it best to move his things before his parents came to claim them. Once again, I'm sorry for the confusion, and I'm sorry no one told you beforehand."

"I'll survive," I said. "But thanks."

He nodded and then picked up a folder. "Your new roommate is named William Vaughan," he said. "But I understand he goes by 'Billy.' He's been living on the seventh floor in Hess," he continued. "That's the Vault over there, so he'll be very happy to be living with you."

"Cool," I said.

"He's a theater major, and he's from Knoxville. I met him earlier this morning, and he seems like a nice guy. I think you'll like him."

"To be honest, if I get to *meet* him, I'll be doing better than the last two guys," I said.

"We're *very* sorry for that," Wade said again. "Cary raised his concerns with me when your first roommate, Terry, missed the floor meeting. But by the time we had any information, he was already moving out."

"It's cool," I said with a shrug.

"When's your last class today?" Wade asked.

"I'm done at one thirty. I should be back here by one forty-five. Why?"

"When would you like me to tell Billy he can move in?" he asked.

"Any time after that, I guess," I said.

"How about three o'clock?"

"Sounds great."

"Does that work for you, Cary?" Wade asked.

Cary nodded.

"Okay," Wade said. "I'll call Billy and let him know. I've told him a little about you, and he's eager to meet you." Then he stood and reached across the desk.

I rose and clasped his hand.

"Thanks for being so understanding, Paul," he said. "We try not to screw up like this, but events moved faster than we did this time. Once again, I apologize."

"It's cool," I said.

"I've told the other RAs what's going on with you and your roommate, so if you have any questions, feel free to ask either Cary or one of the guys at the front desk. And if you ever need to speak to me, for any reason, my door's always open."

"Thanks, Wade," I said.

"No, thank *you*."

With that, Cary and I left.

"He seems pretty cool," I said to him as we walked down the hall.

"He *is*," Cary said. "And he's a lot better than the last hall director."

"Oh?"

He nodded emphatically. "We had all *kinds* of problems last year. We haven't had many so far this year."

"Except my roommates," I said.

"Well, except them, yes," Cary admitted. At the front desk, he bid me farewell.

"See you at three," I said as I walked toward the elevators.

✧ ✧ ✧

"Well, I've got a roommate," I said to Kendall later that night, as we talked on the phone. "He's actually pretty cool. Meeting him was kinda anticlimactic, though. I mean, after two roommates that I never saw, I guess I expected something more when I met this guy. But it was more like five minutes of conversation and that's it."

"Is he there now?" she asked.

"Uh-uh. He and his friend went back to his house to get some more stuff," I said. "Since he was living in Hess—and he wasn't supposed to be—he didn't bring a lot of stuff from home."

"Ah, that makes sense. What's he like?"

"Pretty cool, I guess. He's a little shorter than me, but skinny. He's got dark hair and… um… hazel eyes, I think. I don't really remember."

"You probably weren't gazing adoringly into his eyes," she said with a soft chuckle.

"Um… *no*. Anyway, he seems like a nice enough guy. At least I've *met* him, which is more than I can say about the last two guys. And he seemed happy to be living in Carrick. He was in the Virgin Vault at Hess."

"Oh, bless his heart," she said.

"No kidding. I don't know if he's got a girlfriend or anything, though. He's good-looking, I guess, so I'm sure he does. Anyway," I said, changing the subject, "what're you up to tonight?"

"O. Chem. homework for tomorrow morning," she said. "Yuck."

"Yeah," I said. "I've got Calc. homework, some reading for Am. Lit., and a boatload of stuff to go over for Joska's class."

"It sounds like you're busy."

"Yeah."

"Me too," she said. "So we'd better get to work."

"Yeah."

"I love you," she said.

"I love you too."

"Breakfast tomorrow?"

"Same time, same place," I said.

"Okay. Bye."

"Bye."

When I walked back into the foyer, I hung up the phone but then decided to call Gina.

"Hey, what's up?" I said when she answered.

"Not much. What're you doing?" she asked.

"I was about to start my homework, but I wanted to talk to you before I got busy."

"Oh," she said. "Okay."

"I met my roommate."

"Cool. What's he like?"

I repeated the description I'd given Kendall. As I talked about my roommate, however, I remembered that I hadn't ever apologized for being a jerk about my room key.

"Listen," I said, "I'm sorry for Tuesday, about the room key."

"Whatever."

"I was just mad 'cause I'd been waiting for two hours, and I had to get to class, and… well… anyway, I'm sorry."

"That's cool. I didn't realize it had taken so long. I had to go to the bookstore after class, and I met this girl who lives down the hall. When I left your room yesterday morning, I forgot my watch, so I didn't know it had been so long."

"Oh."

"Anyway, it's cool. Did you find my watch?"

"No," I said. "Where'd you leave it?"

"On the counter, next to your hair dryer."

The long phone cord stretched as I walked into my room. I rooted around on the counter, but didn't find her watch. "Sorry," I said. "It's not here."

"Great," she said sarcastically.

"If I don't find it, I'll buy you a new one."

"Whatever. Anyway, I've got to read for my Western Civ. class, so I'd better go."

"Okay. Sorry about your watch."

"Don't worry about it."

"I love you," I said.

"Yeah, I love you too."

Super, I thought when I hung up the phone. *I apologize and then I end up feeling even* more *guilty.*

But it wasn't my fault she left her watch in my room. My unlamented former roommate probably took it as a souvenir, or to finance his coke habit. I wondered what else he might have taken. I was standing there brooding about it when T.J. came out of his room.

"Hey, Loverboy," he said.

Don't start *with me, you little racist prick,* I thought viciously. Then I bit back an equally heated reply.

"Can I use the phone, or do you have other girlfriends to call?" he asked. "Just kiddin'," he

added almost as an afterthought.

"Be my guest," I said icily.

It took every ounce of willpower I possessed not to slam the door when I went into my room.

✧ ✧ ✧

"Hey," Trip asked as we walked back to the dorm after class on Friday, "what're you up to this weekend?"

"Kendall, Gina, and I were gonna listen to the football game tomorrow." UT was playing Southern Cal, in Los Angeles. Kendall and her roommates were having a couple of people over to listen to the game on the radio. "You wanna come?" I asked him.

"Do you think they'd mind?"

"I don't think so," I said. "But I'll call and ask just to be sure."

"Cool. And while I'm inviting myself," he said, "would it be okay if Luke came too?"

"Probably. What about Jeff?"

"He's doing something with his family this weekend," he said. "I think it's his sister's birthday or something."

"Oh, okay."

"What about your new roommate? Billy, right?"

"Right," I said with a nod. "I dunno what he's doing. I haven't really seen him much. I mean, he spent the night last night, which is the first time I've actually slept in the same room as my roommate, but I left before he got up. So I don't know what he's up to."

"Oh."

"What about Hector?" I asked, referring to Jeff's roommate.

"He doesn't spend much time in the suite," Trip said. "He's cool and all, but he's got a girlfriend who lives in Hess. So he's over there a lot. What about your suitemates, the good ol' boys?"

"T.J. and Glen?" I asked, my tone dark. "Let's just say that I probably won't be spending much time with them."

"That bad?"

"Kinda," I replied. "T.J. just gets on my nerves. And I don't think I've heard Glen say more than four words."

"I know what you mean," he said. Then we reached the dorm and he changed the subject. "Rush starts next Tuesday," he said. "Luke really wants to go. I think Jeff does too. You up for it?"

"I dunno," I hedged. "Fraternities are cool and all, but I just don't know if I'll have time for it. I mean, architecture's a *lot* of work. You know that. And I want *some* free time with Kendall."

"Who wouldn't?"

"Exactly."

"She seems pretty cool," he said. "And smart, too."

I nodded.

"Anyway," he continued, returning to the original subject, "I think Rush would be fun. I'm like you, though, I don't really think I'll have time for a fraternity. But I wanted to check 'em out and see what the guys're like. I don't wanna rule anything out without at least *trying* it first. And Luke's really enthusiastic about it. C'mon," he said, "you'll have fun."

"I dunno. I just don't see the need. I mean, I can party without a bunch of *Animal House* rejects. You know?"

"They're not all like that, I'm sure. But still," he said, "you should give it a try. At least you can keep me company while I keep Luke out of trouble."

"That could be a full-time job."

"You're probably right," he said with a laugh. "But c'mon. You'll have fun."

"What're the dues?" I asked, still trying to come up with excuses not to go. "I mean, joining a fraternity isn't free, is it?"

"There's a Rush fee," he said, "but it's ten dollars. I don't know what the dues are if you actually join a fraternity, but they can't be all that bad. I mean, I don't brag about it, but I can afford it. If not, my dad'll help me out." Then he looked at me and sized me up. "I don't mean to be rude, but you don't look like you're hurting for money."

I shook my head in agreement, although I didn't want to ask my parents for more money, especially to pay for something I wasn't even sure I wanted to do. But I knew that they would help pay for a fraternity if it was more than I could afford.

"But we're getting ahead of ourselves here," Trip continued. "No one's even *asked* us to join a fraternity, much less told us about the dues. So let's just go and have fun."

"I guess," I said after a moment's consideration. Trip honestly seemed to have the same attitude about fraternities that I did. But he also wanted to go, if only for Luke's sake. And that's what friends are for, right?

"Great!" he said. Then, "Have you got a coat and tie?"

"Yeah. Why?"

"It's kinda formal," he said. "You need to wear a coat and tie. I dunno why, but that's the way it is."

"No problem," I said.

"Hey, Luke still wants to go shoot some hoops. You up for it?" he asked.

"Sure."

"Cool."

Back in my room, I changed into a pair of workout shorts and a loose-fitting t-shirt. Then I looked at myself in the mirror. Was I gaining weight? I'd been trying to watch what I ate, so I hoped not. I still needed to start a regular workout schedule, but I didn't know when I'd have time. *I need to* make *time*, I told myself sternly.

Unfortunately, I had a lot of other priorities vying for my attention: Kendall, Gina, classes, friends like Trip and Luke, and more. That meant I had less time for myself, and less time to work out.

With a sigh, I looked at myself in the mirror again. Then I smoothed my shirt down and sucked in my stomach. For a long moment, I simply stared at my profile. Finally, I decided that I probably *was* gaining weight, even if I couldn't see it. As I put on my socks and sneakers, I resolved to eat less and start working out again.

"You ready to go?" Trip called as he banged on my door.

"Yep," I said as I swung it open.

Luke and Jeff were waiting in the hallway.

"Guys, I can't play basketball for shit," Jeff said as we left the dorm.

"Me either," I echoed. "I mean, I know how to play and all, but I'm probably not very good."

"Luke, why don't you team up with Jeff?" Trip suggested. "And I'll take Paul. Cool?"

"All right," Luke said.

"Luke and I both played basketball in high school," Trip explained.

"I thought you played baseball," I said.

"I played both—basketball in the winter and baseball in the summer," he said.

"What about you?" I asked Luke. "Did you play baseball too?"

"*Mais, non*. In the summer, I went to the movie theater. Baseball fields aren't air conditioned."

"You got *that* right," Trip said. Then he looked at me. "Luke played football."

"Cornerback," Luke said. "But after football season, I played basketball to keep in shape."

"Jeez," I said. "I just wrestled."

"You mean you rolled around with other guys?" Jeff asked. "Fuckin' A. What are you, a fag?"

"I'll show you 'fag,'" I said as I lunged for him with a laugh.

Unfortunately, he darted out of my reach. Laughing and shouting, Trip and Luke ran after us. A minute or two later, we screamed into HPER like a band of marauding barbarians.

Several older guys—professors, probably—frowned at us, so we calmed down. Then we headed toward the back of the large building, to where the basketball courts were located. At the desk, we signed in and checked out a basketball using Trip's ID. Then we waited for a court to free up. Since it was Friday afternoon, the place was busy, but a half-court eventually cleared and we ambled onto it.

"Okay," Trip said, "two on two, friendly rules. No charging and no elbows. Check the ball to the other team at the top of the key. One point per basket. First team to twenty-one wins, but you gotta win by two points. Okay?"

We all nodded.

"You okay with being skins?" Trip then asked me.

"Not a problem."

"Good," Jeff said. Then he nodded at Luke. "'Cause that hairy fuck should keep his shirt on."

"What about you, you skinny dork?" Luke asked without heat.

Trip and I merely grinned at each other and stripped off our shirts. He was actually a lot more muscular than I'd originally thought. He didn't have my bulk, but he wasn't nearly as skinny as Jeff.

"Look at Mr. Olympia," Jeff said as I tossed my shirt to the side.

"Don't make me run after you again," I warned jokingly.

"Yeah," Luke said, "you don't wanna hear him wheeze and whine like before."

"I did *not* wheeze and whine."

"C'mon y'all," Trip said, interrupting Luke's retort. "Shoot free throws to see who gets the ball first?"

"*Mais*, yes," Luke said seriously, his comeback forgotten.

Trip dribbled the ball a few times, went to the free throw line, and promptly sank a basket. Luke sank his as well. They each took two more shots, until Luke missed one. Grinning, Trip dribbled the ball to the top of the key and passed it to Luke, who bounced the ball once and then passed it back.

With that, we began to play.

Trip and Luke guarded each other, while Jeff and I tried not to make fools of ourselves. Jeff was gangly and awkward, but he was having fun. I wasn't much better, but at least I could dribble the ball without it ricocheting off my feet. Trip and Luke were both pretty good, and guarded each other like the skilled players they were. Jeff and I were mostly there for passing and the occasional outside shot (which we invariably missed).

Trip and I won the first game 21–14. Chagrined, Luke came back and walked all over Trip in the second game—scoring 20 of their 21 points—to win 21–8. The third game was a little more even, with Luke and Jeff narrowly beating us, 23–21. Trip and I won the fourth game, 21–17. (I even managed to score six points!) Trip's height won out in the fifth game, and we beat them 22–20.

Laughing and joking, we picked up our stuff and returned the ball. Then we headed back to the dorm. As we walked, we talked about the games and how bad Jeff and I were.

"You didn't do *too* bad," Trip said to me.

"Thanks, man."

"*You* did," Luke said to Jeff.

"Shut the fuck up," Jeff said. "I'm not good with my hands."

"No wonder your sex life is suffering," Luke said.

"Does your mother know your girlfriend, Rosy Palm?" Jeff shot back.

"You leave Rosy out of this," Luke said. Then he raised his right hand. "Don't listen to him, *mon chèr*. Mother likes you."

"You're disgusting, Luke," Jeff said with a laugh.

Suddenly, Luke reached for Jeff, but Jeff was too quick. He dashed ahead of us, with Luke in hot pursuit. Trip and I merely grinned at each other and ran to catch up.

✧ ✧ ✧

The football game was still on in the living room, but Kendall and I had slipped into the kitchen to get more snacks (which I studiously avoided).

"Trip and Luke want me to go to Rush with them," I told her.

She stiffened. "Are you going to?"

"I was thinking about it."

"Why?" she asked plaintively, turning toward me. "You're not going to become like one of *them*, are you?"

"One of who?"

"A frat rat, that's who."

"Of course not," I said.

"Then why are you going to Rush?"

"I thought it'd be fun," I said with a shrug.

"It's just one big party. All the guys want to do is get drunk and get laid," she said caustically.

"I just wanna see what it's like," I said. "I don't wanna join a frat."

"Then why are you going?" she asked again.

"Luke wants to go. And so does Trip. Besides, I thought it'd be fun," I said. Then I pulled her close. "Just because I go to a fraternity party—or even a bunch of them—doesn't make me like those guys. I'm the same guy you fell in love with. Okay?"

She looked down and then reluctantly nodded. “I know,” she said. Then she wiped her eyes. “But those guys are all alike. They treat women like pieces of *meat*, Paul.”

“I’m sure they’re not *all* like that,” I said.

“You don’t know them, then.”

I started to argue with her, but then I Got It: this was one of her blind spots. When she got emotional about something, she tended to lose her objectivity. For a moment, I wondered why she got so upset about fraternity guys, but then I remembered Big Mistake Guy—the one she’d had sex with when she’d been drunk. From her meager description, I suspected that she’d been at a fraternity party with Bridget and Toni. I seethed as I thought about what he must have done.

“It’s okay,” she said, looking up, her eyes full of unshed tears. “You go and have fun.” Then she wiped her cheeks and smiled wanly. “I know you’re not like them. You’ll *never* be like them.”

Stunned by her vehemence, I simply hugged her tight and shushed softly in her ear.

“And if you do decide to join a fraternity,” she said when we separated, “I’ll just have to learn to live with it.”

“I won’t,” I said. Then I shook my head. “I really don’t have the *slightest* interest in joining a fraternity. I’m just going because Trip asked me to. And he’s a lot like me; he doesn’t want to join one either. We won’t do anything stupid.”

“Promise me you won’t,” she said.

“I promise.”

Then she hugged me tight. “I love you *so* much,” she whispered.

“I love you too,” I said. “Very much.”

After a few moments, we separated and she smiled. She was trying to look cheerful, but I could see the uncertainty behind her eyes.

“It’ll be fine,” I assured her. “I’m just going to have a little fun. Okay?”

“Okay.”

“Now, we’d better get back to the living room, before they send a search and rescue party after us.”

With a tentative smile, she nodded and began picking up bowls of snacks.

✧ ✧ ✧

Rush.

Believe it or not, I was actually kind of excited about it. I really *didn’t* think I wanted to join a fraternity, but it wasn’t as simple as I’d made it sound to Kendall. I was sure that not all fraternity guys were like Big Mistake Guy. A number of them probably *were* like him, but certainly not all of them.

Nonetheless, I had promised to call Kendall when I got home, no matter how late it was. I think she just wanted to hear my voice and assure herself that I wasn’t turning into a dreaded frat rat.

Gina, on the other hand, was excited that I was going to Rush. She had talked to Bridget several times, and was enthusiastic about Sorority Rush. After talking to Gina, however, I realized that Fraternity Rush and Sorority Rush were two *vastly* different experiences.

For Sorority Rush, the girls—I mean women—all dressed up and gathered at the Panhellenic building. UT sororities didn’t have houses, so they used the large building for all of their

functions. Once there, each sorority had a chapter room of their own, where they put on skits, played games, and basically promoted the sorority's virtues.

The sorority members talked to prospective pledges, but from things Gina said, it seemed like the results were predetermined. Some girls literally applied months in advance. They even had to send pictures with their applications. (Gina and Bridget had taken a couple of Polaroids for Gina's hastily prepared application.) Before Rush Week even began, the sorority members more or less decided who they wanted to extend bids to.

In reality, it sounded like a popularity contest—or a racket—but Bridget had assured Gina that she would definitely fit in with the Tri-Delts. And since Bridget was actually fairly important within the sorority's hierarchy, Gina was excited about the prospect.

Fraternity Rush, on the other hand, resembled nothing so much as one giant party. Each night, from seven until ten o'clock, prospective members simply went from one frat house to the next. Each house had a sign-in book, which was usually staffed by a covey of attractive coeds. The coeds were actually the fraternity's "little sisters," girls from a loosely associated sorority. (Sororities had their Rush earlier in the evening, so the girls could go to the parties.)

After each night's party, the fraternity brothers would get together and talk about all the guys who had signed the book (whether or not he was cool, whose younger brother he was, etc.). They would do the same on Wednesday night, getting a better feel for the guys who came back a second night. Thursday night's parties were by invitation only, so prospective pledges had to check with a list posted by the Intra-Fraternity Council, to see which fraternities had invited them back.

In all cases, Formal Rush only lasted until ten o'clock. The parties afterward were the real attraction. Since UT was technically a dry campus, each frat house would hire an off-duty police officer to "guard" the house. The officer was actually insurance against the frat house getting busted for having alcohol on the premises. It was a useful pretense, for everyone involved.

At the end of Rush Week, on Friday, fraternities and sororities extended bids to prospective members. Since it would be embarrassing to extend a bid and have it declined, they were very, *very* selective with their offers.

On Tuesday, as I showered and shaved in preparation for the first night of Rush, I wondered what it would be like.

Would the fraternity guys be like me? Would they be party animals? Would they have wild, drunken orgies? Would they be jerks? What if two fraternities offered me a bid? Would I choose either (and disappoint Kendall)? Would I turn them down (and disappoint Gina)?

"Treacherous imagination," I muttered as I cinched my necktie and straightened my collar. Then I put on my dark blue blazer, dusted some imaginary lint from the lapel, and studied myself in the mirror. "Time to go," I said to myself.

"Yee-haw!" T.J. whooped as I opened the door. "Lookee here, Glen, Froggy went a'courtin'."

To my surprise, T.J. and Glen were both dressed in coat and tie as well. Not surprisingly, they were just leaving their room.

"Are you going to Rush too?" I asked rhetorically.

"What's it look like?" T.J. asked.

So much for being nice, I thought.

"Just kiddin'," he said. "Yeah, we're going. You too, huh?"

I nodded.

"You wanna walk down there together?" he asked. "We can hang out."

"No thanks. I'm meeting some friends first."

"Okay. Take it easy."

With that, they headed out. T.J. could be a sarcastic son of a bitch, but his invitation had seemed genuinely friendly. I shook my head in puzzlement and then walked across the hall.

"Cool tie," Trip said by way of greeting as I entered his room.

"Thanks," I said. "My girlfriend bought it for me."

"Kendall's got good taste," he said.

"I think so, thanks," I said. In reality, I had meant Gina, but I reminded myself—again—to watch what I said when I mentioned "my girlfriend."

"You ready to go, Luke?" Trip asked.

"*Mais*, yes."

"Hey, Jeff!" Trip shouted across the foyer. "You ready?"

"I can't get this fucking tie tied," Jeff grumbled as he walked across the hall.

When I turned and looked at Jeff, I had to stifle a chuckle. His tie looked like it was knotted with a double-*double* Windsor knot. It was as fat as a fist and the tie itself didn't even extend to his waist (since he'd used so much of its length in the knot).

"Give it here," Trip said.

Jeff gratefully loosened the tie and lifted it over his head. Unfortunately, when Trip managed to get the knot untied, the fabric was hopelessly wrinkled.

"Here," he said without hesitation, "you can borrow one of mine." Then he opened his closet, glanced at Jeff's pale yellow shirt, and selected a tie to match. "This should bring out the blue in your eyes too," Trip said as he held it up to Jeff's collar.

"'Bring out the blue in my eyes'?" Jeff repeated. "Shit, dude, you sound like a fag."

"You want the tie or not?" Trip asked.

"Okay, okay, I want it," Jeff said.

"Then don't give me a hard time about fashion advice."

"Sorry," Jeff said, chastened.

"It's cool," Trip said. "You want me to tie it for you?" When Jeff nodded, Trip put the tie around his own neck. Then he tied it with a few quick, practiced flips. Finally, he loosened and removed it, then handed it to Jeff.

When Jeff put it on, Trip helped him straighten his collar and adjust the knot.

"There," Trip said. "That's better."

"Thank you, dear," Jeff said.

Trip gave Jeff two playful slaps on the cheek. "You're welcome, *honey*."

"Get a room, you two," Luke said. Then, "Come on, we're gonna be late."

"Okay," Trip said. "Is everyone ready?" When we all nodded, he grinned. "Then let's go."

We joined a steady throng of guys who were walking from the dorms toward the fraternity houses. For the most part, they were dressed like us: blue blazers, khaki pants, light shirts, and patterned ties. We were like sheep.

"Just like sheep," Trip commented, echoing my thoughts.

"But we're *party* sheep," Luke said. "I've been talking to this guy in my English class, and he

says the Pikes, ATOs, SAEs, and Fijis have the best parties."

"Cool," Trip said.

"Yeah," Jeff added. "Fuckin' A."

That night, we went to every house in Fraternity Park, from the Phi Sig house to the Lambda Chi house, thirteen in all. I signed guestbook after guestbook and tried not to stare at the *exceedingly* cute girls with the books.

The first night of Rush was mostly for prospective members to get acquainted with each fraternity. Some of the fraternity guys were really cool, while some treated us like dirt. For the most part, however, they were ordinary guys.

After Formal Rush ended, we made our way to the Fiji house. (The fraternity was actually Phi Gamma Delta, but no one ever called them that. I have no idea why.) Luke had really hit it off with some of the Fiji guys, and the rest of us didn't care enough to go anywhere else, so we headed to "Fiji Island."

The party was loud and fun, with lots of cute girls. And lots of beer, of course. The Fiji guys seemed cool too, and I was glad Luke had insisted on coming to the party. I kept hoping to see Gina, but I never did.

Finally, however, Trip, Jeff, and I wanted to head back to the dorm. I had an eight o'clock class in the morning, and I still had to call Kendall (not to mention breakfast with her at seven). Luke was still having a good time, so he told us to leave without him.

On the way back to the dorm, the three of us talked about the different fraternities.

Jeff, who was kind of shy (and a little dorky), had been the invisible man at a couple of houses. The brothers had talked to him, but they clearly didn't want him as a member. He bore it with equanimity, which was more than I would have done. At other houses, however, he seemed to fit right in, while Trip and I felt a little out of place.

The frat guys' treatment of Jeff notwithstanding, we made plans to go to a couple of parties the next night.

When I got back to my room, I called Kendall. It was after midnight, but she answered the phone on the first ring.

"Hey," I said, my voice a little slurred from all the beer I'd had at the Fiji party.

"Well?" she asked tentatively.

"I had fun," I said.

"Did you join one?"

"It doesn't really work like that," I said with a soft chuckle. "But no, I didn't join a fraternity."

"Oh, thank goodness."

"I told you, we were just having fun."

"I know," she said at last. "I kept telling myself that you just had to get it out of your system. Now that you have, I'm happy you're done with them."

"Oh, we're going to a couple of parties tomorrow night, too," I said.

Silence greeted me from the other end of the line.

"Hello?"

"I'm here," she said coolly.

"What's the matter?"

"I thought you were done with Rush," she said.

"I just wanna see what some of the other parties are like," I said. "I mean, we spent maybe fifteen minutes at each house tonight. And we only went to the Fiji party. I wanted to see what some of the other parties are like." I *tried* not to sound defensive, but I knew Kendall would probably read me perfectly.

"Paul, why? You're not like them."

"Going to their parties isn't going to *make* me like them, is it?"

"No," she answered after a moment.

"We're just having fun. Isn't that what college is about?"

"It's also about an education," she said. "Remember?"

"I know. But going to a few frat parties isn't going to get in the way of my education. I went to parties in high school."

"This isn't high school."

"It's just one week," I said. "It's not like I'm going to *join* one of them or anything."

"Okay," she said at last.

"It's just this week," I repeated.

"I know. I just get worried. I'm sorry."

"It's cool," I said. "You don't have anything to worry about it, though. I'm still the same guy. I haven't been infected by frat cooties or anything."

At that, she chuckled.

"Did you have a nice night?" I asked, changing the subject.

"More or less," she said. "Abby and I made sandwiches and then we watched TV. But I was also a little worried about you," she admitted after a moment.

"You don't need to worry about me," I said softly. "But thank you. Seriously, I'm just having fun. I'm not going to turn into a frat rat, I'm not going to start treating women like meat, and I'm not going to start talking to your tits instead of your face."

"I know. I'm sorry I got so upset," she said.

"That's okay. It's because you love me."

"I do."

"Good," I said. "'Cause I love you too."

"And you don't know how *happy* that makes me."

"Oh, I think I do."

"I'd better get to bed," she said at last.

"Me too. I was gonna call Gina, but it's getting late. So I think I'll just hit the rack."

"Okay," she said. "I love you."

"I love you too. G'night."

"Night."

As I closed the door to my room, I decided not to turn on the overhead light. I hung up my jacket and pants and then stripped off the rest of my clothes. I was just about to climb into bed when I remembered my roommate.

Sure enough, I looked across the room and saw Billy's outline in bed. I shook my head and quickly found my discarded underwear. I was used to sleeping in the nude, so wearing the tight shorts would definitely take some getting used to.

For a while, I lay in bed, staring at the dark ceiling and thinking about Kendall and her

misgivings about all things Greek. At the thought of Greeks, however, I remembered our afternoon together, and her concubine fantasy. My dick stiffened and I reached for it. When I remembered Billy, I quickly withdrew my hand.

With a sigh, I rolled over and tried to will my erection to subside. Eventually, it did. Unfortunately, it took me a while to fall asleep. I spent most of the time thinking: about Rush, Kendall, Gina, and a dozen other things, all of them vaguely unsettling.

✧ ✧ ✧

As soon as Professor Joska walked into the classroom, we grew quiet. He'd made it clear that he had little patience when it came to getting our attention.

"Mr. Hughes," he said, fixing his baleful eyes upon me. "What is a building?"

I blinked.

"It's not a difficult question, Mr. Hughes, is it?"

I shook my head.

"So," he prompted, "*what* is a building?"

"Um…"

"No," he said when I paused too long. "A building is not an 'um.' Do you have a more lucid answer?"

I felt my face heating and ground my teeth to keep from telling him where to *stick* his "lucid answer."

"If you had done your reading, Mr. Hughes, you'd know that a building is simply a means of modifying the climate of a particular place, so certain activities can be carried out in comfort and convenience."

In truth, I *hadn't* read the assigned chapter from our textbook. Instead of reading, I'd gone to Rush parties. It was my own fault that I didn't know the answer to the question, but that didn't make Joska's ridicule any easier to stomach.

"Should I waste my time, *and the class's*," he asked, looking at me again, "by asking you what the four design paradigms used throughout history are?" Before I could even open my mouth, he continued. "*No*, I shouldn't waste my time," he said. "Because you wouldn't be able to tell me. Since you didn't deign to do your reading, I'll tell you what they are: pragmatic, iconic, analogical, and canonic." Once again, he speared me with his uncompromising gaze. "Mr. Hughes, if you're going to waste your time—not to mention *mine*—by not reading the assignments, you should drop this class now." Then he reached into his briefcase and pulled out a pink slip. "I'll sign a Late Drop, if you wish."

It took every ounce of willpower I possessed not to say something I knew I'd regret. Instead, I shook my head and smiled, my lips bloodless and my jaw clenched so tight that my face hurt.

"And that goes for the rest of you, too," Joska continued. "Half of you had blank looks when I asked my question. So let Mr. Hughes serve as an object lesson. Because next time, it could be *you*."

His words hung in the air as he scowled at us. Without further comment, he turned to the blackboard and picked up a piece of chalk.

"Now," he said, "let's consider the first design paradigm, pragmatic…"

I unclenched my fists and jerked my notebook out of my backpack. My eyes met Trip's as I sat upright. He gave me a sympathetic shrug and then flipped open his own notebook. I *hated*

being humiliated by Joska, and I vowed not to make the same mistake again. Ever.

✧ ✧ ✧

"What the *fuck* does that guy have against me?" I growled as Trip and I walked out of class. I didn't care if Professor Joska heard me or not.

"Better you than me, pal," Trip said.

For a moment, I stared at him, incredulous.

Then he cracked a grin.

"You're taking your life into your own hands," I said, unable to maintain my scowl in the face of his sanguine self-assurance.

"That's what friends are for, right?"

"Some friend you are," I muttered.

"Well," he said as we walked toward the building's atrium, "you're not going to skip your reading again, are you?"

I shook my head tersely.

"Lesson learned, so let's move on," he continued.

"You're just lucky he hasn't got it in for *you*," I said.

"No kidding."

For a while, we walked along in silence. I didn't feel like talking; I was still fuming.

"I was talking to a guy in my Calculus class," Trip said, breaking my dark train of thought. "He went to a couple of different Rush parties last night. He said the Sigma Chi and SAE parties were pretty good. You wanna try those tonight?"

"Whatever."

He blithely ignored my indifferent reply. "Luke wants to go to the Fiji party again," he said. "I think he really likes those guys. They're pretty cool, but they're serious party animals."

I nodded.

"Just like Luke."

At Trip's tone, I looked at him sidelong.

"Luke's cool and all," he said, "but I don't know if he really takes life that seriously." Then, to my surprise, he chuckled. "He's definitely not as serious as *you*," he said, "but then again, I don't know many people who are."

"I'm not *that* serious," I said.

"You are too, Mr. Dark and Brooding."

"I'm not dark and brooding."

"Are too."

"Am not."

"Are too," he said, his lips quirked up in a grin.

"Am not!"

"Are too, are too, are too!" he said. To my utter disbelief, he playfully shoved me and then took off running.

I hesitated for a moment, too shocked to do anything but stare at his retreating back. Finally, my brain got my legs working, and I raced after him.

He easily stayed ahead of me, his long legs pumping effortlessly. A minute later, we pounded up the stairs to the dorm courtyard. Then he pulled up short and turned to me, panting and

grinning. I stopped a few steps from the top and bent over, my hand on my side.

"You could learn a lesson from Luke," he said seriously, still panting. Then he held my gaze, his eyes full of a depth I hadn't seen before. "Life's too short to worry about the little things," he said. "And I'll tell you a secret," he added soberly. "They're *all* little things."

With that, he extended his hand.

I gripped it and he pulled me up the last two stairs.

"C'mon," he said. "Let's head upstairs. Luke wanted to play some two on two before we head to the parties."

"Sure," I said absently, still thinking about what he'd just said. In the moment he'd said it, he seemed different. I couldn't put my finger on it, but he seemed older, wiser. I looked at him out of the corner of my eye and wondered what had made him that way.

✧ ✧ ✧

I tried to call Gina after basketball, but her line was busy. She had class most of the day on Wednesdays, so I hadn't talked to her all day. I wanted to see if she had fun with the Tri-Delts. I also wanted to know if she planned to come to any of the fraternity parties.

After my shower, I tried her room again, but the number was still busy. As I started to dial Kendall's number, T.J. came out of his room with a towel wrapped around his waist.

"Hey, Loverboy," he said. "Calling your girlfriends? Just kiddin'. Which parties did you go to last night?" he asked.

"The Fiji one, mostly," I said.

He nodded. "Yeah, that one was cool. Glen and me went to the Sigma Chi party, and then the one at the Kappa Alpha house. Them boys sure know how to party," he said. Then he looked at me earnestly. "Where're y'all going tonight? You and them guys from across the hall, right?"

I nodded. "I think we were gonna go back to the Fiji house," I said. "But I'm really not sure where else."

"Glen and me'll be at the KA party tonight," he said. "Come on over, we'll have a good ol' time."

"Thanks for the invite," I said.

"No problem. I'll seeya there. Have a good one."

"You too," I said, more confused than ever. Had I just had a pleasant conversation with T.J.? Had he just offered me a friendly invitation? Had he *meant it?* As he got into the shower, I shook my head in puzzlement. Then I picked up the phone and dialed Kendall's number.

"Hello?" Vivian answered.

"May I please speak to Kendall?" I asked.

"Hey, Paul. Sure. Hold on a sec."

"Hi," Kendall said a moment later.

"Hi yourself," I said, imitating her usual reply. "How's it going?"

"Okay."

"What're you up to?"

"Just a little studying. O. Chem. Yuck," she said. "Do you wanna come over? I could make us some popcorn or something."

I mentally sighed. "Thanks, but…"

"I know," she said. "You're still going… out… aren't you?"

"Yeah."

"Are you sure you don't wanna come over?"

"I *want* to, but… Can I have a rain check?" I asked.

"Sure. Call me when you get home, no matter how late it is."

"Okay." Then I paused for a moment, to gather my thoughts. "Kendall?"

"Yes?"

"I'll be fine."

"I know," she said. "I'm not worried."

I didn't need to have her insight to realize that she was lying.

"Do you want to come over tomorrow afternoon?" she asked. "We'll have the apartment to ourselves."

"That sounds good," I said sincerely. "Are we still on for breakfast?"

"Of course," she said. Then, "I love you."

"I love you too."

"Have fun."

"Thanks. I'll talk to you later."

"Bye," she said.

"Bye."

✧ ✧ ✧

That night, Luke wanted to go to the Fiji house and *only* the Fiji house. Since we didn't think he could get into *too* much trouble, Trip and I let him go alone. Surprisingly, Jeff wanted to head off alone as well, to the Sigma Nu house. Evidently, he had hit it off with them the night before.

"Well," Trip said as we watched Jeff walk down the street. "I guess it's just you and me."

"Yep."

"How about we go to the KA house first," he suggested. "Since it's right here."

"Sounds good to me," I said.

Not surprisingly, we saw T.J. and Glen at the party. T.J. waved and then beckoned us over.

"Paul," he said, "this here's Lou Stubbs. He's the Sergeant at Arms for KA. Lou, this is Paul and… um…"

Trip introduced himself. We chatted with the two of them for a few minutes, and T.J. was actually nice. I was surprised.

Soon enough, however, Trip and I decided to go to another party. T.J. even waved to us as we left.

"That was weird," I said as we walked out of the house and breathed in the fresh air.

"What?" Trip asked.

"I don't know what to make of that guy. T.J., I mean. One minute, he's a prick, and the next, he's all smiles and good ol' boy friendly."

"He seemed pretty nice tonight."

"I know," I said. "*That's* what was weird."

"I guess," Trip said. "Anyway, let's head to the SAE house."

"Sure," I said as we walked to the house next door.

The SAEs were some of the guys who treated Jeff as if he weren't there, but they'd been pretty cool to Trip and me. Most of them were jocks of one variety or another, so Trip and I fit

in. Unfortunately, they also had the arrogance that some athletes have. We decided to leave after less than an hour.

Our next stop was the Sigma Chi house. The guys were really cool, and we ended up staying more than an hour. We met the president, vice president, and Rush coordinator, and got a grand tour of the house. I don't know what sorority the little sisters were from, but they were definitely cute. Finally, Trip nudged me.

"You ready to go to the next party?" he asked. "The Pikes are next door."

"Sure."

The Pi Kappa Alpha house had a band and the party was already getting rowdy. The girls with the sign-in book handed us cups as soon as we walked in. Then they pointed us toward the back of the house, where the kegs were. The guys seemed nice enough, but Trip and I decided to leave after we finished our first beer.

"Let's go see what Luke's up to," he said, nodding toward Fiji Island.

The Fiji house was one of the larger ones on campus, and their party was already in full swing. Formal Rush had just ended as we arrived, and when we found Luke, he directed us to the beer keg.

Trip and I had fun at the party, but decided to head back to the dorm shortly before midnight. We'd had our fill of cheap beer and smoky fraternity houses. So we made sure Luke was okay and then left.

"What'd you think?" Trip asked as we walked toward the dorms.

I shrugged. "I liked the Sigma Chis. The Pikes were kinda snobbish, though."

"Lots of guys with money in that fraternity," he said. "You could almost smell it."

"No kidding."

"I liked the Sigma Chis too," he said. "The KA guys were cool too, but some of them were a little too… um… Old South, if you know what I mean."

I nodded.

"The SAEs were okay," he said. "But I think they'd get on my nerves sooner or later."

"Yeah."

When we got back to the dorm, we said goodbye and headed to our separate suites. I called Kendall to let her know I'd gotten in safely. Then, I gambled and called Gina's suite. A sleepy Faith answered.

"Hello?"

"May I please speak to Gina?"

"She's not here right now. May I take a message?"

"Sorry, Faith," I said. "It's Paul. Do you know where she is?"

"Uh-uh. She and some other sorority girl were here a while ago. But they left."

"Okay. Will you tell her I called, please?"

"I will," she said. "Bye."

In my room, Billy was still awake, so we chatted as I took off my coat and tie.

"How was Rush?" he asked. "Did you have fun?"

"Yeah," I said. Then I told him about some of the houses, and how different the groups of guys were. "How come you didn't go?" I asked.

He shrugged. "I dunno. I never really thought about it. Besides, I've been working on the

play. We're doing *Dracula*," he said. "It's so cool. Jamie, my friend, got the part of Van Helsing, and I've been helping him with his lines. And we've got props and costumes and sets to create, so…"

I listened as he excitedly talked about the play. He seemed to have several jobs, all backstage with the crew. I didn't know much about theater, but it was fun to listen to him.

Billy was still talking about Jamie and learning lines when I climbed into bed and turned out my desk light. I tried to keep my eyes open, but I just couldn't. I know I dozed off a few times while he was talking, but he didn't seem to notice. Finally, the conversation wound down and we said goodnight.

✧ ✧ ✧

Gina didn't have class on Thursday morning, so I called her room when I got back from my Drawing class. She answered on the seventh or eighth ring.

"Hey," I said.

"Hey. What time is it?"

"Ten after ten," I said. "Did you just get up?"

"Yeah," she rasped. Then she paused for a moment. "Um… I was out late."

"With the Tri-Delts?"

"No, not really."

"Oh. I tried to call last night, but you weren't there."

She yawned. "Sorry. No, I wasn't here. I was with Regan."

"Reagan?" I asked. "Like the president?"

"No, R-E-G-A-N. I met her at Rush, in the Chi O chapter room. She's really cool," she said. Then she yawned again. "Listen, I'll tell you about her later. I'm gonna go back to sleep before I have to go to class."

"Oh. Okay," I said.

"Bye."

Before I could say goodbye, she hung up.

✧ ✧ ✧

I managed to make it to Art History on time, but I still sat in the back of the class. I was hoping that the brunette and her blonde friend would sit near me. Sure enough, the professor had just started lecturing when the two girls came in. The blonde smiled when she saw me. The brunette merely raised her eyebrows. Then she smiled wryly as I indicated the seats to my left with a glance.

All through class, I struggled to pay attention to Professor Dubois as she talked about Greek and Roman sculpture. To the left of the brunette, the blonde was intensely interested. She wasn't taking notes—she was idly chewing on her pencil instead—but I could tell that she was soaking up the material. The brunette glanced my way a few times, but I pretended not to notice. Finally, the bell rang. I rose and turned, intent on introducing myself.

"We've got to stop meeting like this," the brunette said, completely disarming me. "People will talk."

"Um… yeah. I mean, no. Um… no, I mean, yeah. Yeah," I stammered. *Get it together, Hughes! Say something witty! Say something charming! Say* anything*!*

The brunette moistened her lips and tilted her head to the side, her eyes sparkling with mirth. Then she made a moue when I didn't offer anything further. "Well," she said, her moue turning to a wry grin, "*some* people will talk." With that, she smiled again and turned to go.

"Bye," said the blonde.

I didn't trust myself to say anything coherent, so I merely waved. When they walked into the hall—and out of my sight—I shook my head in bewilderment. What was I *thinking?* Normally, I was much cooler than that. I didn't know why I'd suddenly gotten so tongue-twisted.

As I walked toward Kendall's apartment, I chastised myself for flirting with the brunette. I had a girlfriend already—two!—and I certainly didn't need the complications of a *third* relationship (as if *that* were likely to happen).

So I consciously put thoughts of the brunette out of my mind. When my thoughts turned to Kendall, however, I frowned. I knew she didn't want me to go to Rush, but Trip and I had both been invited back to the Sigma Chi house (as well as the Fiji and KA houses).

I wondered what I'd do if the Sigma Chis offered me a bid. They were really cool guys, and most of them seemed a lot like me. They liked to have fun, but were serious about school. They didn't have a reputation as party animals, but they weren't nerds either. All in all, they just seemed like people I'd like to hang out with.

As much as I told myself—and Kendall—that I didn't want to join a fraternity, a little part of me really *did*. I liked the camaraderie; it was one of the things I'd always enjoyed about the wrestling team. And I liked the idea of belonging to another group like that, a group that shared a bond. I don't know why. I guess *everyone* wants to belong, in one way or another, and I was no different.

Once again, I wondered what I'd do if they offered me a bid. Would Kendall be disappointed if I pledged? Would she break up with me? What would Gina think? Would she be happy? And what if *I* got a bid but Trip didn't? Even though I'd known him for only a couple of weeks, he was rapidly becoming my best friend. Would I pledge Sigma Chi if he didn't?

My mind was still awhirl as I got off the elevator on Kendall's floor. I tried to clear my thoughts as I knocked on her door. I honestly didn't know *what* I'd do if the Sigma Chis offered me a bid. I guess I'd just have to wait and see.

When the door opened, I smiled. Kendall smiled in return and beckoned me inside.

"Hi," I said as I stepped into the entry hall.

"Hi yourself."

"Wow, you look nice," I said. "Do you always answer the door dressed like that?"

She was wearing her short white terrycloth robe, and it was belted loose enough that I could see a healthy expanse of her tanned and generous cleavage. I quickly shut the door, so passersby wouldn't see her.

"No," she said. "But I knew it was you. So…"

"I always like the way you look in that robe," I said.

"I know," she replied. "That's why I wore it."

It had been a couple of days since I'd had sex, and my penis twitched as my eyes roamed over her. Normally, it wouldn't be a problem for me to go a day or two without sex, but my masturbation opportunities had been severely limited, since I had a full-time roommate. I actually enjoyed jerking off, but the shower wasn't my favorite place to do it. And while it

relieved the pressure, I didn't want to do it *all* of the time.

"What's so funny?" Kendall asked when I chuckled ironically.

"I was just thinking about my roommate," I said.

"Billy? Is something the matter?"

I quickly shook my head. "No, he's still in school, he hasn't broken up with his girlfriend, and he hasn't been busted for selling coke."

"Then what's so funny?"

"Well, at first, I was frustrated because I never saw my roommate. *Now*, I'm frustrated because I *do*."

She furrowed her brow.

"I don't really have any… um… privacy."

"Privacy?"

"Well, it's been a couple of days since I've been with you or Gina," I said somewhat sheepishly. "And… well…"

"Oh," she said. Then, "*Oh*."

"Uh-huh."

"Bless your heart," she said, her eyes softening. Then she cast her eyes down and smiled shyly. "Actually, that was kind of why I wore this robe."

"Oh?"

She nodded. "I knew you liked it, and …"

"And…?" I prompted.

"You know."

"No, tell me," I said with a roguish grin.

"I was hoping you'd… you know…"

Instead of answering, I tugged one end of her belt. The knot came loose and the terrycloth parted to reveal her lush body. My dick immediately sprang to attention.

As I stepped forward and cupped her breasts, she shrugged and the robe slid off her shoulders. A moment later, she lowered her arms and the white terrycloth dropped to the floor to pool around her feet. I put my hand on the back of her neck and pulled her to me. She tilted her head to the side and our lips met. The skin of her back felt warm and soft as I hugged her to me, and I could feel the pressure of her breasts against my chest.

When we broke the kiss, I gently pushed her to her knees. Once there, she gazed up at me, her eyes bright with anticipation. I wanted to let the tension build, so I took my time unzipping my shorts. Her eyes never left my hands as I slowly lowered the zipper.

Before reaching into my underwear, I cupped her face and tilted it upward. She closed her eyes and pressed her cheek into my palm.

"I love you," I whispered, my voice husky with desire.

"Mmmmm, I love you too. And I love it when you touch me."

For a moment, neither of us moved. My erection pressed against the fabric of my underwear, but I ignored it. The expression of love and devotion on Kendall's face was too enthralling to tear my eyes away from. With her eyes still closed, she began planting tender kisses on my palm and up the inside of my wrist, sighing softly as she did. Finally, she pulled back and looked up at me, her blue eyes hooded.

"Do you want to go to my bedroom?" she asked quietly.

I brushed an errant strand of dark hair out of her eyes and gently tucked it behind her ear. For a moment, we simply gazed at each other, our eyes locked in an embrace of their own. With a smile, I nodded.

After I helped her to her feet, I impulsively scooped her into my arms. Even though she was a big girl, I easily supported her weight.

"Why, sir," she said in her exaggerated Southern belle drawl, "where *are* you takin' me?"

I couldn't think of a clever reply, so I simply kissed her passionately. She wrapped her arms around my neck and held me close. When we broke the kiss, I carried her toward her bedroom.

Once there, I gently set her upon the bed and kicked off my shoes. While I unbuttoned my shirt, she sat up and unfastened my belt. In a few moments, I was nude, my erection pointing at her face.

"Oh, dear," she drawled. "Whatever will I do with this prodigious appendage?"

"Frankly, my dear," I said, doing a lousy Rhett Butler imitation, "I don't give a damn… as long as you suck it." (I don't think Rhett ever said that last part; I made that up on the spot. I can be pretty clever when I think with my dick.)

"Why, sir," she protested, "I've never done that before. I wouldn't know what to do."

"You'll learn quick enough," I said. Then I put my hand on the back of her head and pulled her toward my hard-on.

Her lips parted and she swallowed the first few inches.

When her soft, soft mouth closed around my shaft, I felt light-headed. "See? You're a natural," I said.

Instead of replying, she pulled back, her lips tight around the crown. Then she opened her mouth again and swallowed about half my length.

"A natural…," I breathed.

For a few moments, I simply relaxed and enjoyed the feeling of her mouth and tongue as they moved over my shaft. Then I looked down and watched her fellate me. Instead of just sucking my dick, she made love to it, her tongue swirling along the underside ridge as she slowly bobbed back and forth.

"Play with yourself while you suck me," I said.

Without opening her eyes, she dropped one hand to the juncture of her thighs.

"Spread your moisture around, get yourself ready for me," I directed. As she continued sucking, I watched her run her middle finger over her parted labia. "Now, slide your finger into your pussy," I said.

Her finger disappeared into her slit and she moaned, her lips still around my cock.

"That's right," I said softly, "finger yourself while you suck me. Get your tight, hot pussy ready for my cock."

She whimpered at the paired sensations in her pussy and mouth. Over the years, she'd grown to enjoy giving me head. I don't think she liked it as much as Susan (who could work herself nearly to orgasm simply by fellating me), and she didn't crave the taste of semen like Gina did, but she definitely enjoyed sucking me.

"You can't wait for me to fuck you, can you?" I asked.

She shook her head and pulled her lips from my organ.

"Keep sucking me," I ordered, and she immediately returned her mouth to my dick. "You like having my cock in your mouth, don't you?"

She nodded.

"You want me to fuck you?"

Another nod.

"You want me to fuck you on the dinner table," I said. "At Thanksgiving, right?"

She moaned around my cock, but never took her lips from it. Between her legs, her finger vibrated over her clit.

"You want me to fuck you on the dinner table at Thanksgiving," I said, "in front of your whole family." It was a fantasy of hers, and it never failed to get her incredibly worked up.

Instead of answering, she quickened her pace as she bobbed back and forth, sucking my cock for all she was worth.

"Everyone will be at the table," I said. "Your aunts and uncles. Your mother." I waited a moment to let her excitement build. "Your father," I added at last.

She moaned softly.

"He'll watch as his little girl gives me head, her lips wrapped around my cock. Your uncles will watch too. They'll watch as you suck me, while you swallow as much of my cock as you can. You'd like that, wouldn't you? Keep sucking," I said as she started to shake her head. "Yeah, you know you'd like it. Your uncles watching, their dicks hard as they see their niece—sweet, innocent Kendall—with my dick in her mouth."

She pulled her mouth off my cock long enough to swallow, then plunged her lips over me again.

"And your aunts," I continued. "They'll be thinking about sucking your uncles. Do you think their pussies will get wet as they watch us? I think they will. They'll think about what it feels like to have a dick in their mouth, to suck cock," I said, letting the words draw out.

Kendall's fingers were a blur as she played with her clit, and I could tell by her breathing that she was incredibly aroused.

"What about your mother?" I asked. "She's seen me with a hard-on before, hasn't she? And she's seen my hot, white, sticky come all over your face, hasn't she?"

She nodded.

"You remember what she did afterward? She got your father to fuck her and then had him come on her face. Do you think she'll be thinking about the same thing as she watches you suck me at the dinner table? I do. I think she'll imagine how much she loves sucking your father, how much she loves his come on her face. I think her mouth will start watering, just thinking about it."

Kendall moaned softly and tried to swallow me whole. With her lips mere inches from the base of my cock, she clamped her mouth shut and swirled her tongue over the underside ridge.

"And what about your father?" I continued. "What will *he* be thinking? Will he be thinking about his wife's lips?" I asked. Then I let a few seconds tick by. "Or *yours?*"

Kendall's reaction always amazed me whenever I mentioned her father. If we weren't having sex at the time, she was aghast at the thought of having sex with her father. But if we *were* having sex when I mentioned him, her reaction was far more powerful, more visceral, more heated. This time was no exception.

"That's right," I said, my mind's eye returning to the imaginary scene at the dinner table. "You know your father's dick is hard, and he's thinking about your lips wrapped around it. He's thinking about you sucking him. But you're mine," I whispered as I ran my fingers through her hair.

She moaned softly and wrapped her hand around the base of my shaft.

"And to prove that you're mine," I said, continuing the fantasy, "I'm going to fuck you in front of him. I'm going to move the turkey and stuffing out of the way and we're going to climb onto the table. When you spread your legs, your father will have a perfect view of your wet, slippery, clean-shaven pussy. Would you like that?"

She shook her head, but I knew better. Not only had her sucking become more urgent, her fingers were in constant motion over her clit.

"I'll climb between your legs, my cock hard, wet, and shiny from your sucking. All of your aunts will be watching it," I said. "And your uncles' eyes will be glued to your body. They'll be watching as I set my cock at your pussy and rub the head along your slit. Your father will be watching too. He'll be watching his little girl with her legs spread.

"Your mother will be watching as well," I said. "She'll be watching, but she'll be thinking about what it feels like to have a cock inside her, to spread her open and fill her. Do you think her pussy's as tight as yours?" I asked. "Do you think your father has to take his time and enter her slowly, spreading her open with his dick?"

Kendall moaned incoherently, her lips sliding along the smooth skin of my shaft and making it difficult for me to concentrate.

"Will he watch me spread you open and imagine what it would be like? What it'd be like to fuck his little girl?"

She shook her head, but her lips never left my shaft. Between her legs, she plunged a finger into pussy, up to the second knuckle.

"As I slide into you, your family will watch. The men will know what it feels like to slip into a hot, smooth, tight, wet pussy. They'll know how good it feels. And the women will know what it feels like to have a big, hard cock fill them and spread them open, invading their pussies. Do you think any of them will play with themselves as I fuck you in front of them? Will your aunts lift their skirts and run their fingers over pussies wet with desire? Will your uncles unzip their pants and jerk off as they watch me fuck you?

"And what will your parents do? Your father will have a perfect view as my dick slides into you. He'll be able to see every detail as I spread you open. What will he be thinking? Will he want your mother to shave her pussy too? Will he want her to look like you? If she does, will he be thinking of her… or *you?*"

With a barely suppressed groan, Kendall clamped her lips around my shaft and stopped moving. Her fingers practically buzzed over her clit. In a moment, she tensed up as climactic pleasure seized her. Her face began to turn red as she held her breath in ecstasy. Finally, she shuddered in orgasm and let out an explosive breath. My cock slipped from her lips, but I didn't care. I was too caught up watching her climax.

When it subsided, she panted, momentarily disoriented by the force of her orgasm. Then she wrapped her hand around the base of my dick, swallowed once, and plunged her lips over my shaft. Her breasts swung gently as she bobbed back and forth, intent on making me come.

In only a few minutes, my breathing grew ragged and she knew I was going to reward her efforts. Instead of keeping her lips wrapped around my shaft, though, she pulled back and began stroking me.

"Come on my face," she begged.

Who was I to refuse?

I replaced her hand with my own and stroked my slippery erection. In a moment, the pressure grew too great, and I felt the first surge of come gushing up my shaft.

Kendall shut her eyes and then gasped as a thick rope of semen splashed over her face, trailing from her bangs to her chin. The next stream splattered over her nose. A third struck her in the cheek. The final gush washed over her pursed lips, coating them. I stroked myself a couple more times, squeezing the final drops onto her chin, neck, and chest

As I slowly relaxed, she gripped my shaft and began rubbing it over her face, smearing my come into her skin. Then she opened her mouth and greedily sucked me, moaning as she tasted my sperm. A moment later, she put her hands on my hips and tried to swallow me whole. I was still very hard, and she couldn't take all of me, but it wasn't for lack of enthusiasm.

Then, incredibly, she opened her eyes, her eyelids fluttering tentatively. Her eyelashes did their job and protected her eyes from the stinging semen. She smiled up at me and then grinned in amazement.

"Wow," she said.

"No kidding."

"Wow," she said again. Then she closed her eyes, moaned softly, and resumed sucking me.

When I didn't stop her, she grew bolder, and began taking long strokes. My cock entered her throat and she held it there. But then she started to gag, and quickly pulled back. She repeated that a few times, taking me as deep as she could and holding me there. Her breathing came in ragged gasps as she sucked me. Finally, she lay back on the bed and spread her legs, beckoning to me.

"I need you inside me," she whispered.

Without hesitation, I climbed between her thighs and eased forward, the tip of my still slippery cock brushing against her spread labia. She reached up and pulled me forward. I could smell my semen on her face as I drew near, but I didn't shy away from it. I don't know why, but it seemed natural.

Then I felt the heat of her pussy wash over my cock, and I stopped thinking about anything else. I lowered my hips and slid into her. She was still tight, but loose enough that I didn't have to enter her slowly. When I bottomed out, she groaned and lifted her knees, her toes pointed. Then she tilted her pelvis up and put her hands on my hips. Her eyes fluttered open again and she gazed up at me.

"Make love to me, Paul," she said softly. "I want to feel you come inside me."

I nodded and began thrusting.

Plunging into her was like sinking into molten ecstasy: her pussy surrounded me with incredible heat and moisture. I felt ripples within her as aftershocks surged through her body. She shuddered once and then closed her eyes, her nostrils flaring as she inhaled.

I kissed her.

Her face was still covered with my semen, but I didn't care. I felt the sticky wetness of my

own come as it coated my cheeks. I tasted it on her lips. I smelled it when I breathed. Still, I didn't care. She twined her fingers through my hair and held me close. All the while, my hips rose and fell, burying my cock in her depths.

Even though I'd come just a short time before, I felt another orgasm welling up. Beneath me, Kendall felt it as well.

"I love you *so* much," she whispered.

"I love you too," I said as I collapsed against her.

Her soft, expansive breasts cushioned my chest as I continued thrusting into her. I could feel her sperm-covered face against mine, smearing my juices between us, over our skin, into our hair. I didn't care. All I cared about was filling her, *ful*filling her.

With a grunt, I thrust deep inside her, my hips grinding against her pelvis. I supported myself on my elbows, my arms under her shoulders, holding us chest to chest. My buttocks clenched as I tried to bury myself even deeper. I clamped my eyes shut and felt the rush of my oncoming orgasm.

As I emptied my balls into her, our twined bodies became one. Then I lost track of time; the seconds becoming minutes, the minutes becoming hours, the hours becoming lifetimes.

Finally, when I regained my sense of time, I opened my eyes. We were both panting from the exertion, our chests still pressed together.

I inhaled deeply, my senses still reeling from the intensity of my orgasm. As I held my breath, I picked out the briny tang of semen, the slightly acrid odor of our sweat, the flowery smell of her shampoo, and a myriad of other scents.

I could feel her moisture around my dick, and the dampness of my pubic hair. Her skin was hot against mine, yet smooth and silky. I could even feel my own come drying on my face, making my skin taut.

Above all, however, I could feel my own heartbeat. And if I paid attention, I could pick out hers. I could even feel my slowly shrinking cock as it throbbed with my pulse. With my eyes closed, I concentrated on the sensations.

Finally, I lifted my head and gazed down at her.

"Wow," she breathed.

I simply nodded.

"That was… wow."

"Mmm hmm."

She wiggled her hips. "I like feeling you inside me."

"Me too."

Then she blushed. "I can't believe what you *said*, though."

"About what?"

"About… you know… about my father."

"You got pretty worked up over it," I said.

She couldn't deny the truth.

"It's okay to do that in fantasies," I assured her.

She nodded silently.

"It *is* pretty hot, though, isn't it?"

Her eyes flashed and then she rolled them. "You're *so bad*," she said.

"That's why you love me."

"I love you for a million reasons," she said. "That's just one of them."

"Good," I said softly.

Then, with my semi-hard dick still buried inside her, I kissed her. As our breathing slowed to normal and our heartbeats with it, we continued kissing, lost in our own little world.

✧ ✧ ✧

Later that afternoon, Kendall and I showered together and then had a quiet dinner. (At least as quiet as we could get in the Morrill dining hall.)

"When do you have to be at the Sigma Chi party?" she asked.

"I told Trip I'd meet him at six thirty."

She nodded.

"You don't mind that I'm going?"

She hesitated a moment before shaking her head. "I trust you." Then she looked up and smiled bravely. "And if you become a frat rat, I'll just have to learn to be a frat rat's girlfriend."

I reached across the table and grasped her hand.

She gazed into my eyes and then smiled.

"Thanks," I said.

"You're welcome," she said. Then she changed the subject. "How's Gina like Rush? Does she think she's going to become a Tri-Delt?"

"You know," I said, "I have *no* clue. I haven't really talked to her since Tuesday. And she was in class all day yesterday. I talked to her for a few minutes this morning, but she wanted to go back to bed, so…"

"I hope she's having fun," Kendall said.

"Me too. I'll call her when I get back to my room."

✧ ✧ ✧

"May I please speak to Gina?" I asked when Faith answered the phone.

"One moment, please," she said.

"Hello?" Gina said a moment later.

"Hey, sweetie," I said. "Long time no talk."

"Oh my God," she said. "I've got *so* much to tell you. You won't believe what's happened."

"Good or bad?" I asked, although she sounded excited.

"Good, silly," she said. "Very good. And very cool." Then she paused for a moment. "Oh, darn. I've got to go. I have to be at Panhellenic in twenty minutes." Then, "Hey! Can you meet me downstairs in a few minutes?"

"Sure," I said. "I'll see you in a few minutes."

Once downstairs, I waited in the South Carrick lobby. I'd only been standing there a few minutes when Gina and another girl appeared. The other girl was taller than Gina, and slender, with wheat-blonde hair and chiseled features. She was very attractive, and her red dress showed off her lithe body.

Gina wore a wine-colored dress that I knew was one of her favorites. It made her black hair and exotic features stand out. It also had a slit up the left side of the skirt, and I could see a healthy expanse of thigh as she approached me.

"Hi," I said.

As the other girl stood back discreetly, Gina glided into my arms and tilted her head back for a kiss.

Needless to say, I obliged her.

"Hi," she said. Then, softly, "I've missed you. I've been having fun, but… well… I've *missed* you."

"Me too," I said, although my afternoon with Kendall had completely sated any urges I might've had.

"Good," she said. "I've got to keep you wanting more." With my left arm still around her, she turned to include the other girl in our conversation. "Paul," she said, "this is Regan Thomas."

"Pleased to meet you," I said as I extended my hand.

"Nice to meet you too," Regan said. "I've heard a lot of good things about you."

Gina beamed when I glanced down at her. "I told her how wonderful you are," she said. "I couldn't *help* myself."

"Well, thanks, I guess," I said, a little abashed. I started to say something else, but Regan unobtrusively glanced at her watch. "Do you all need to go?" I asked.

"Oh, I completely forgot," Gina said. Then she held up her empty left wrist. "I need to get a new watch."

"I'll get one for you," I said.

"Don't worry about it," she said. "I'll get one. Besides, Regan's father knows a jeweler, so I can get a good deal on a nice watch."

"We'd better get going, though," Regan said. Then she looked at me, her blue eyes full of apology. "Sorry."

"It's okay."

"I've got a great idea," Gina said excitedly. "Why don't you walk with us, Paul? Fraternity Rush doesn't start till seven. You can make it back before then."

"Okay," I said. "Let's go."

On the way from Carrick to the Panhellenic building, we talked about Rush. I told them about going to the different parties and they told me about Sorority Rush. Gina had been interested in the Tri-Delts at first, but when she went to the Chi Omega chapter room, she met Regan. The two of them hit it off immediately.

Regan was from Knoxville, and like Gina, she was a pre-med major (her father was a doctor in town). In addition, she was a Chi O legacy, so she was virtually guaranteed a bid. Not only that, she was good friends with several of the sorority's officers, so she was pretty sure that Gina would get a bid too.

This was only their third night together, but the two of them seemed like long-lost friends.

I was happy that Gina had found someone she could be friends with. Her relationship with Faith, her roommate, seemed a little cool. And her suitemates hung around with other musicians. So I knew that she'd been lonely.

Worse, my schedule often clashed with hers: when she was in class, I wasn't, and vice versa. So we hadn't been able to spend that much time together. It hadn't strained our relationship—yet—but I knew it would, if we didn't do something about it.

"Here we are," Gina said as we reached the Panhellenic building.

Regan seemed to understand that Gina wanted some time alone with me, so she shook my hand in farewell.

"It was nice meeting you, Paul," she said. "Gina said so many great things about you that I didn't think you could be real."

I tried not to blush, but I don't think I was successful.

"She even told me how cute you are when you blush," she added with a grin. "I didn't believe her, but she was right."

"Thank you very much," I said, my face heating further.

"I'll see you inside," Regan said to Gina. Then she looked at me again. "Bye."

"Bye," I said. Then I turned to Gina and raised my eyebrows. "What did you tell her?" I asked.

"I told her you were cute, sexy, smart, and *super* good in bed," she said, pulling me close.

"You're *kidding?!*"

She shook her head. "Girls talk about stuff like that. I've told you that."

"Yeah, I guess you have. But it still surprises me when I hear it. Guys aren't like that *at all*."

"Maybe you should be," she said. Then looked up suggestively. "She told me about something I wanna try."

"Oh?"

"We've gotta buy something first. It's a surprise. But I think you'll like it."

Suddenly, I was intensely curious. I tried to get her to tell me, but she didn't give in.

"You'll see," she said at last.

"Okay," I said, "if you won't tell me, that's cool. I'm patient."

She nodded, her eyes sparkling mischievously.

"What parties are you gonna go to tonight?" I asked. "I could meet you. Then maybe we could spend the night in my room. How's that sound?"

"We can't go to the frat parties," she said.

"Huh? There are sorority girls at every one of those things."

"But not prospective pledges," she explained. "We can't even be *seen* at a frat party."

"What kind of double standard is *that?*"

"That's just the way it is," she said.

"That's dumb," I said.

She shrugged. "I'd still like to spend the night with you, though," she said. "What time will you be back from Rush?"

"Midnight. Maybe later."

Her face fell.

"But I'm sure I could get home earlier," I said.

"What time?"

"Ten thirty, eleven."

"Do you want to call me?"

I nodded.

"Good. Because I *need* to spend some time with you. Telling Regan all about you last night made me horny, and it's not the same with—"

"With…?"

"With*out* you, I mean. It's not the same without you. I mean, I wanted you, but you weren't there."

It didn't take Kendall's insight to figure out that Gina hadn't told me something. And given Regan's good looks and blonde hair, I didn't need to be a rocket scientist to figure out *what* Gina had left out.

"Anyway," she said before I could press her. "I've gotta go. I'll see you tonight," she said. Then she kissed me and hurried into the building.

✧ ✧ ✧

Later, Trip, Luke, Jeff, and I headed down to fraternity row, four guys among the hundreds of others. Everyone was dressed alike, and once again, I thought about sheep.

"Do y'all wanna come to the Island?" Luke asked as we reached frat row.

Trip and I glanced at each other.

"I think we're gonna go to the Sigma Chi house," he said, including me with a nod.

"What about you?" Luke asked Jeff.

"I got invited back to the Sigma Nu house," he said. "They're cool guys."

At the Sigma Chi house, Trip and I said farewell and watched as Luke and Jeff continued down the street.

The party that night was a lot of fun, and Trip and I enjoyed ourselves. I didn't really want to leave, but I had promised to meet Gina. So at ten thirty, I nudged Trip.

"I gotta go," I shouted over the music.

"Why, man?" he asked, leaning close. "Aren't you having fun?"

"Yeah," I said. "I'm having a great time. But I gotta meet… someone."

"Who?" he asked.

"Um… Gina."

"Gina?"

I nodded.

He could see that I didn't want him to ask any more questions, so he didn't.

I sighed in relief and then wondered—for the umpteenth time—how my life had become so complicated.

"Okay, man," he said. "You want me to go with you?"

"Nah, man," I said. "I'm cool. Thanks, though."

"You sure?"

"Yeah. You stay and have fun. I'll see you tomorrow in class."

"Okay," he said. "Seeya."

While I walked back to the dorm, I thought about becoming a member of Sigma Chi. I guess I really *did* want to be in a fraternity after all. I couldn't explain it, but that was how I felt. I still had some misgivings, but I was sure I'd get over them.

The end of Rush Week was Bid Day, when all the fraternities and sororities officially extended bids to prospective candidates. For the sororities, it was largely a foregone conclusion who would get a bid. For the fraternities, it was a bit more uncertain.

From what I'd been able to gather, if the Sigma Chis wanted to extend me a bid offer, they'd call me and ask me to come have lunch with them on Friday (although no one would be clear about *when* I'd get this call). Trip and I had also learned what the yearly dues were, and we could

both afford it, which was a relief.

So as I walked up the hill to Carrick, I thought about getting the call and playing it cool, as if they wanted me, but I wasn't sure I wanted to join. In my head, the guy on the phone told me how much the brothers of Sigma Chi wanted me as a member. It was pure fantasy, but it was still fun to think about.

My reverie was broken as soon as I walked into the South Carrick lobby.

"Hi!" Gina said as she practically knocked me over. "Guess what?" she asked excitedly.

"What?"

"I'm going to pledge Chi O!"

"Cool. Congratulations. But how do you know already?"

"Regan took me aside tonight and told me. The sorority president told her that we both have bids. Isn't that cool?"

I nodded.

"When will you hear back from Sigma Chi?"

"I don't know."

"It's a shame you aren't going to pledge Pike," she said.

"Pike?" I asked. Neither Trip nor I had really liked the Pikes. "Why?" I asked.

"Because the Chi Os are Pike little sisters. Regan's boyfriend is a Pike. He's a sophomore."

"Oh, the Pikes were kinda cool," I lied. "But I guess I just liked Sigma Chi better."

"That's okay. Regan says they're cool too."

"Oh."

"You look nice," she said, changing the subject, "but you smell like cigarette smoke. Ugh!"

"Sorry."

"We'll just have to get you out of these clothes," she said without missing a beat. Then she looked around to make sure no one was near us. "Out of these clothes and into *me*," she said. "*We* need to *celebrate*."

"That sounds like a good idea. But what if Billy's in the room?"

"Then we'll ask him to leave," she said.

"*Gina*. It's *his* room too."

"So?"

Fortunately, Billy wasn't in the room when we got there. He'd left a note, though. He was working on sets for the play, and was going to spend the night at his friend Jamie's apartment.

"Cool," Gina said when I read her the note. Then she sort of quivered.

At first, I thought it was because she was excited about having the room to ourselves. Unfortunately, she quickly dispelled that notion.

"I'm going to be a Chi O," she gushed. "Isn't it cool, Paul? You'll be a Sigma Chi and I'll be a Chi O. We'll have formals, and mixers, and Greek Week, and all sorts of parties. God, I can't wait." Then she glided toward me. "When will they call and tell you about your bid?" she asked.

"I don't know. And I might not get one," I cautioned her. "I mean, it's not the same with fraternities. They don't tell you beforehand."

"But you *know*, right?"

"More or less. I mean, I like them, and they seemed to like me. They invited me back tonight. I had fun at the party. So yeah, I think they'll offer me a bid. I just don't know when they'll call

and do it," I said. "It'll probably be tonight, though. Late, I imagine. So I guess I'll be watching the phone all night."

"I'm sure we can take your mind off the *phone*," she said as she sank to her knees.

As she unzipped my pants, my dick began to stiffen and I silently agreed.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Friday morning, my alarm went off at six thirty. I extracted my arm from my covers and turned it off.

"What time is it?" Gina mumbled.

"Six thirty."

"Did they call after I fell asleep?" she asked sleepily.

I sighed. "No."

"I thought you said they usually call on Thursday night."

"That's what I heard," I said. "But maybe they didn't want to wake anyone up." It was a thin excuse, but I couldn't think of any other reason why they hadn't called me. Well, I could think of *one* other reason, but I didn't want to dwell on it.

"Are we having breakfast with Kendall?" Gina asked.

"Yeah."

She yawned daintily and then blinked her eyes to clear them.

"Do you want to shower first?" I asked.

She shook her head. Then she rolled over, her warm breasts pressing against my chest. "I'll just shower after breakfast," she said, "back in my room."

I nodded half-heartedly. I didn't really care about taking a shower, but I knew I needed to. In reality, I was disappointed that I hadn't heard from the Sigma Chis. Why hadn't they called? I ran through scenarios in my mind, but I kept returning to one. Finally, I shook my head in growing disappointment and then started to get out of bed.

"Paul," Gina said, stopping me with a gesture, "I'm sure they'll call."

"Yeah," I said.

"Seriously," she said. "They probably just wanted to wait till morning."

"I guess," I said.

"Do you want me to take your mind off it before you shower?" she asked. "It's okay if you don't want me to. I mean, I just thought…"

"I dunno," I answered with a shrug.

"It'll help you relax," she said. As she put her hands on my chest, she looked at me earnestly, her eyes soft and full of love. "They'll *call*," she said with conviction.

"But everyone told me that if I got a bid, they'd call on Thursday night," I said.

"I know," she whispered. "They probably had trouble with the phones or something. They'll call. But right now, there's nothing you can do about it."

"But what if I don't get a bid?"

"You *will*," she said with unshakable certainty. Then she smiled and caressed my chest. "Just relax," she said softly.

As she disappeared under the sheet, I laced my fingers behind my head and stared at the ceiling. I was still brooding over not getting a call as she started to suck me.

At first, my mind wasn't really in it. Gina could tell, but she didn't let that discourage her. Finally, I decided to stop worrying and simply enjoy the blowjob she was giving me. When I did, she quickened her pace, her head bobbing up and down as I ran my fingers through her hair.

After several long, pressure-building minutes, I clutched at the sheets and erupted. Gina

moaned when the first spurt hit the back of her throat, but she didn't take her lips off me. As my orgasm subsided, she continued nursing my deflating cock. Then she let it slip from her lips and crawled up my body.

"Better?" she asked, her eyes full of concern.

"Better," I agreed. Then I cupped her face and smiled. "I love you," I said.

"I love you too. And I don't like it when you're worried."

I nodded.

"They'll call," she said. "Don't worry."

"I won't." *Much,* I thought sourly.

"Do you want me to shower with you?"

"I thought you were going to shower after breakfast," I said.

"I was. But I thought you might want the company. You know, someone to wash your back."

"That'd be nice," I said softly. "Thanks."

✧ ✧ ✧

"Are you getting football tickets?" Kendall asked me during breakfast. "It's the first home game."

I nodded. "Trip and I were gonna go to the UC after Design class."

"Okay," she said. "Do you mind if I give you our cards so you can get all the tickets together?"

"No problem," I said.

"Vivian gave me hers too," she added as she reached for her purse, "so you can get one for Drew."

"Isn't Vivian going to the game?" I asked.

"She's in the *marching band,*" Kendall said.

"You're such a goof," Gina said to me. Then she grinned at Kendall. "But he's *our* goof."

"How many tickets are we getting?" I asked.

"Well, you, me, and Gina," Kendall said, beginning to count on her fingers.

"I can't go with you all," Gina interrupted. "Sorry. I want to, but… tomorrow is when I officially pledge Chi O—"

Somehow, Kendall managed to keep her expression neutral.

"—and then we're supposed to help with the sorority's pre-game party," Gina finished.

"Are you sure?" Kendall asked.

"Yeah, sorry," Gina said. "I really wanna go with you all, but… I just can't."

"We'll miss you."

"You'll have fun, I'm sure," Gina said.

"So I guess it's just you, me, Drew, and Abby," Kendall said.

"Trip and the guys from across the hall wanted to go with us," I added. *If Trip's not doing something with the Sigma Chis,* I thought petulantly.

"Okay," Kendall said. Then she turned to Gina. "Are you sure you can't go?"

I don't know why, but I suddenly got the impression that Kendall wasn't exactly upset that Gina couldn't go to the game with us.

"No, I can't," Gina said. "Sorry."

"Okay," Kendall said lightly. "We'll miss you."

With that, she handed over three Activity Cards and I pocketed them.

After breakfast, Gina went back to her dorm, while Kendall and I headed toward the Hill and our classes.

"I can't believe Gina's actually going to pledge a sorority," Kendall said as we climbed the steps.

"She's looking forward to it. And she's already made one friend," I said, thinking of the Nordic-looking blonde, Regan.

"Who's probably another sterling example of everything that's wrong with sororities."

"I dunno. She seemed pretty nice to me."

"I'm just glad you didn't join a fraternity," she said.

I felt a knot in my stomach at my growing certainty that I wasn't going to get a call from Sigma Chi. Surprisingly, Kendall didn't pick up on my dejection.

"I'm sure some of those guys are okay," she continued, "but the majority are… are… *assholes*."

I looked at her in frank amazement.

"Yes," she said heatedly, "you heard me. They're assholes."

I thought the Sigma Chis were pretty cool, I thought morosely. Why hadn't they called? Was it something I did? Or said? Had they just pretended to like me? Was Kendall right? Deep in my heart, I knew she wasn't, but the question still nagged at me.

"You're *not* like them," she said.

"What about Gina?" I asked pointedly, my melancholy turning to irritation. "Is *she* like them?"

"I didn't say she was," Kendall said hastily.

"But you thought it."

She paused for a moment, defiant. Then she nodded guiltily.

"She's not like that," I said softly. "Gina's a good person. She's just lonely here. And you said it yourself, she's out of her comfort zone. She's finding a new one. So what if it's with a sorority?"

"But Paul, you don't understand what they're like."

"I understand what Bridget and Toni are like," I said. "And they're really nice girls. Are they the only two exceptions among hundreds of sorority girls?"

"No."

"Then if they're not, aren't there probably others like them?" When she reluctantly nodded, I continued. "And if there are, then it's possible for Gina to be a good person *and* be in a sorority?" I asked. Before Kendall could answer, I pulled her close. "This is one of your blind spots," I said softly. "When you get emotional, you don't always see things as clearly as you normally do. You know that."

She sniffled and wiped her cheek as she nodded.

"Gina's still the same person; she still loves us both."

"I know," Kendall said softly.

With my thumbs, I wiped away her tears and tilted her face up. Then, inexplicably, I chuckled.

"What?" she asked, sounding wounded.

"Sorry," I quickly explained, "I was just thinking how beautiful you are, even when you're crying."

She gifted me with a wan smile.

Once again, I wiped away her tears and looked at her seriously. "Listen," I said, "I don't know what Big Mistake guy did—and I don't think I *wanna* know, since I'd probably find him and beat the shit out of him—but all frat guys aren't like that."

She nodded.

"And all sorority girls aren't shallow bitches."

"I know."

"This is important to Gina, so it should be important to us. After all, we're probably her best friends in the world right now. Okay?"

"Okay," she said. Then she sniffled and smiled, her eyes glistening with unshed tears.

"Now," I said softly, "are you ready for class? Or do you wanna skip it?"

"I can't," she said. "I want to, but I've got to go. If my grades slip, I'll lose my scholarship."

"One class isn't going to kill you," I said.

"I know, but you've got Calculus, and I really *should* go to O. Chem. I've got to learn this stuff for medical school."

I nodded.

"Thanks for not getting angry with me."

"I wouldn't get angry with you," I said with a soft chuckle. "Not over something like this." Then I looked at her and smiled. "Life's too short to worry about the little things," I said. "And I'll tell you a secret," I added as seriously as I could. When she looked up, I continued. "They're *all* little things." I don't know if I believed that or not, but it sounded good when I said it. *Good advice, Trip,* I thought with a mental nod of thanks.

"I guess," she said.

"Trust me."

"I love you *so* much," she said quietly.

"And I love you too. But we'd better get to class. We're already late."

She wiped her eyes and nodded.

Then I pulled her tight and kissed her tenderly.

"I love you," I whispered.

"I love you too. Bye."

"Bye."

✧ ✧ ✧

"How'd it go last night?" Trip asked before Professor Joska arrived in class.

"Huh?"

"With Gina. You had to meet her, right?"

"Yeah," I said. "We just hung out."

"Cool. A bunch of the guys at the party asked about you, though."

At that, I perked up. Maybe the Sigma Chis had asked *Trip* to offer me a bid. I knew it was a long shot, but I still had my hopes.

"Uh-huh," he said. "They wanted to know why you left so early. So I told 'em you had to meet your girlfriend."

I nodded absently, my hopes of getting a bid dashed again. Then I looked up in shock. Had he said "girlfriend"? Did he suspect that Kendall and Gina were *both* my girlfriends? Did he *know?* What if he did? Would he tell anyone? Would he…?

"Yeah, sorry," he said. "I didn't think Kendall would mind. I didn't mention any names, though, so if anyone asks, you can just tell 'em you were meeting *her*. Cool?"

A wave of relief washed over me as I nodded.

"So," he asked, "did they offer you a bid?"

"Um…"

"Me neither," he said, reading me perfectly. "I think they could tell that I wasn't really interested."

But I *was*, I thought morosely.

"They're cool guys, though."

Before Trip could say anything else, however, Professor Joska entered the room and we immediately grew quiet.

"Mr. Hughes," Joska said with deceptive calm.

I straightened in my desk and my eyes narrowed.

"Give me two examples of iconic design paradigms."

For a moment, I panicked. Then I squared my shoulders and lifted my chin—I *knew* this. "Igloos and teepees," I said. On tenterhooks, I waited for him to find fault with my answer.

"You read your assignment, I see," he said.

"Yes, sir."

"Then tell me what you know about iconic design."

"It builds upon pragmatic design," I ventured.

"Go on."

"And it copies successful designs to produce a building that serves the purpose just as well as a pragmatic one," I said with growing confidence. I was mostly parroting what I'd read, but he seemed to be satisfied with my answer.

"Keep going," he prompted.

"Successful pragmatic designs become a template for the creation of new buildings."

"And…?"

"The design becomes the accepted form for other buildings which serve the same purpose."

"Correct," he said.

I felt a surge of defiant pride.

"Mr. Fekete," Joska said, turning his attention away from me. "Give me two examples of modern iconic designs."

"Um…," Fekete said.

"Too slow," Joska said after a moment. "You didn't read your assignment. Were you not paying attention during Wednesday's class?" he asked. "Mr. Hughes obviously was. Why weren't *you?*" Not surprisingly, he reached into his briefcase and pulled out a Late Drop slip. "Since Mr. Hughes might not be needing this, perhaps you'd like me to sign one for you?"

"Um…"

"'Um'? You're not sure?"

"N-n-no, sir."

"No, you're not sure? Or no, you don't want a late drop? Which is it, Mr. Fekete?" Joska asked with almost comical intensity.

"No, I don't want a late drop," Fekete said at last.

"Then you'd better start doing your reading. I don't assign it for my health, although God help me if I ever enter a building designed by *you*."

Then Joska turned to the blackboard, picked up a piece of chalk, and started sketching. As he did, he talked about modern iconic buildings.

I glanced at Trip and he gave me a thumbs-up. I don't know why, but his approval meant more to me than Joska's.

With that, I took out my notebook and started copying the sketches.

I was still upset about not getting a call from the Sigma Chis, but my day was already getting better.

✧ ✧ ✧

"Okay," I said as Trip and I walked out of class, "we're off to get football tickets, right?"

He nodded.

"I've got Kendall and her roommate's Activity Cards, and another one for Kendall's brother. Have you got Luke and Jeff's?"

"Luke got a bid from the Fijis," Trip said.

"Yeah, I figured."

"So he's going to the game with a couple of them," he said. Then he laughed. "And Jeff just about flipped out when the Sigma Nus called him last night."

I stopped in my tracks and stared at Trip, flabbergasted. After a moment, I shook my head in disbelief. "*Jeff* got a bid?"

"Yeah," Trip said. "Can you believe it?"

Jeff?! And not me*?!* I wailed silently.

"He was pretty freaked out. He was happy, though. He was dancing up and down in the foyer when he got the call."

"There ain't no justice!" I spat, quoting one of my favorite authors.

"Dude," Trip said, surprising me with his intensity. "Are you a Larry Niven fan?"

"What's that got to do with me not getting a call from Sigma Chi?"

"Nothing," he said. "But I didn't know you read Sci-Fi." Then he shook his head and grinned wistfully. "Lori used to tease me about reading 'all those nerdy books.' Man, I didn't know you read Sci-Fi."

"Lori?" I asked, more confused than ever. As soon as I said the name, however, Trip grew sober.

"An old girlfriend," he said, his eyes dim.

"Sorry, man."

"Don't worry about it. I just don't wanna talk about… her."

"Okay."

"Anyway," he said, returning the conversation to its original subject, "who else do you read?"

For a moment, I wondered what happened with his ex-girlfriend, but I didn't want to be rude and dwell on it. "Heinlein," I said. "I guess he's probably my favorite."

"Yeah, he's good."

"Right now I'm reading Frank Herbert."

"How about Fred Saberhagen?"

I shook my head.

"Oh, dude, you don't know what you're missing," he said, affecting a brighter mood. "His *Berserker* books are really cool. They're about these sentient machines, called the Berserkers, duh, and…"

While we walked toward the University Center, I let Trip do most of the talking. I guess I was curious about why his mood had changed so suddenly, and why he avoided the subject of his ex-girlfriend. As angry as I'd once been with Amy, I didn't become melancholy when she came up in conversation. Granted, she didn't come up in conversation very *often*, but I didn't harbor any regrets about breaking up with her.

As Trip talked about Sci-Fi books—with more enthusiasm than I really thought the subject warranted—I got the distinct impression that he was using the topic to stave off thinking about Lori. Had she become pregnant? Had she cheated on him with another guy? Had she *dumped* him for another guy?

Eventually, Trip and I got the football tickets and headed back to the dorm. When he didn't want to hang out, I didn't push the issue. I guess he was thinking about Lori after all. So we said goodbye in the hallway and made plans for the next day.

✧ ✧ ✧

Sunday afternoon, I decided to work out in my room. Billy was out, working on the sets for his play, so I had the room to myself. I locked the door, stripped off my clothes, and stood in front of the mirror, looking at myself from every angle. Even though I didn't *look* any bigger, I was still worried about gaining weight.

As I stared at myself in the mirror, I flexed my muscles. Then I struck a pose, arms up and curled, my chest puffed out and my lats flared. My arms and shoulders had gotten bigger over the years, but my stomach still had some fat on it. I wanted to see the washboard abs that bodybuilders displayed.

Still nude, I struck another bodybuilder pose, clasping my hands in front of me as I flexed my arms, shoulders, and traps. Then I turned and clenched my abs, my face turning red with the effort. My legs and buttocks had always been muscular, but they still looked a little chunky. I'd need to work on them as well, to get rid of the excess body fat.

For a warm-up, I started off doing sit-ups. After a hundred, I switched to push-ups and did a hundred of those as well. Then I switched back to sit-ups, determined to get rid of the thin layer of fat on my stomach. Since I didn't have a proper bench for doing presses, I finished with another hundred push-ups.

Then I sprang up, a sheen of sweat coating my naked body. From under my bed, I retrieved my curling bar. As I watched myself in the mirror, I started thinking about Kendall. She said she liked my personality more than my body, but I wanted to look good for her—and good didn't include pudgy.

As I thought about her, I started getting an erection. I guess maybe I'm crazy, but I liked the way I looked as I pumped the weights while my dick stood ramrod straight. Then I thought about Kendall sucking my cock, on her knees, worshiping my shaft and trying to swallow me whole.

All the while, I continued lifting. I did palm-up curls, palm-down curls, lifts, presses, and

more. I was in a kind of trance, simply pumping the heavy bar and thinking about sex with Kendall. My body tingled all over as I closed my eyes and imagined her bent over in front of me. I imagined the line of her waist as it flared to her hips. Then I pictured my cock as I buried it in her ass.

Before I knew it, my arms were shaking from the effort and I felt like I was ready to come. I dropped the bar with a clang and reached for my dick. Two or three quick strokes and I spurted over the sink, splattering the mirror with droplets of pearly semen. Then I groaned softly as a tremendous rush of ecstasy washed over me, drowning out all other sensations.

When my orgasm finally subsided, I looked down and blinked incoherently. Slowly, ever so slowly, my eyes focused. My body tingled all over, and I didn't care that I had semen all over my hand. I didn't care that one of my spurts had missed my toothbrush by mere inches. I didn't care that the mirror, sink, and carpet were flecked with droplets of come. I didn't even care that someone was knocking on my door.

Wait! Someone's knocking on my door?!

In a panic, I reached for something to clean myself with.

"Who is it?" I asked, trying to put off opening the door.

"It's Trip and Luke," Trip said. "Is it a bad time?"

"Um… no! I was just working out… wait a sec… lemme finish this set… um… hold on…"

Frantically, I reached for my underwear and hastily wiped the cooling sperm from my hand. Then I tossed the sticky garment in the corner, hoping that the guys wouldn't notice it. Finally, I looked down at my nude body and then cast about for something to wear. My workout shorts were nowhere to be found, so I snatched my khaki shorts from the floor. When I put them on, I realized that I hadn't cleaned my sperm-covered cock.

Forget about it! I thought. Then I stuffed my slick penis into my shorts and zipped them.

When I finally answered the door, Trip and Luke must have thought I was a madman. Fortunately, I think they attributed my heaving chest and sweaty skin to my workout (although that was *partly* the cause). I don't know *what* they made of the wild look in my eyes.

"What's up?" Trip asked.

"Nothing much," I said as calmly as I could.

"Can we come in for a sec?" he asked.

After a moment's hesitation—and panic—I couldn't think of a good excuse to keep them in the foyer. "C'mon in," I said at last. Then I leaned against the vanity, hoping to hide the pearly signs of my orgasm.

"D'you always work out in your room?" Trip asked. "Why not go down to the Bubble? Or HPER?"

"I've got my weights here," I said with affected nonchalance. *Besides, I can work out in the nude and then jerk off afterward,* I thought sardonically.

"I need to start working out," Luke said. "To keep the ladies happy." Then he glanced at me. "How much do you bench?"

"About three twenty."

"*Dit mon pas come même!*" he blurted.

"Huh?" Trip and I said at the same time.

"Three twenty?" Luke asked, ignoring the question.

"Give or take," I said. "It's been a while since I maxed out. Why?"

Luke turned to Trip. "How much can *you* bench?"

"Two twenty," Trip said. "Maybe two thirty."

"I max out at two forty," Luke said. "Two *forty*. And that's a lot of weight."

"Well, look at him," Trip said. "If you had a chest like that, you could probably lift three hundred and twenty pounds too."

"No kidding," Luke said with a whistle. Then he looked at me and laughed.

"What?" I asked defensively.

"I was just asking 'cause I wanted to know if you'd be able to spot for me," he explained. "Ha! I hope I'll be able to spot for *you*."

"So I guess this means you wanna start working out together?" I asked.

"Well, yeah. What'd you *think* I wanted to do, watch you get all hot and sweaty for fun? Although…," he said with a goofy grin.

"You're so bad, Luke," Trip said.

"*Mais*," Luke said. "I've got a reputation to uphold." Then he turned serious. "You wanna work out with us?" he asked Trip.

"Sure. Why not? When's a good time?"

For a few minutes, we discussed our schedules. Since none of us had classes on Tuesday or Thursday afternoons, we decided to work out on those days. We also added Saturday afternoons, so we'd have a balanced three-day regimen (chest and arms; shoulders and back; abs, sides, and legs).

"Anyway," Trip said to me after we settled the workout schedule, "we wanted to see if you wanted to go get some pizza. You up for it?"

"Sure," I said. "D'you mind if I invite Kendall?"

"Does she have a friend?" Luke asked. "Maybe a twin sister?"

"Her roommate's cute," I said.

"Abby?" Trip asked.

I nodded.

"She *is* cute," he said to Luke.

"Does she have a boyfriend?" Luke asked.

I shook my head. "I don't think so."

"Cool," Luke said. "Invite her too."

"Hold on," I said to him, "I thought you were after the waitress at the pizza place."

"Yeah," he said nonchalantly, "she's got the hots for me too."

"Man, you're unbelievable," Trip said, shaking his head.

"You know," Luke said with a cocky grin, "that's what *she* said."

Trip and I merely looked at each other and laughed.

"C'mon over when you get cleaned up," Trip said, still chuckling.

As I ushered them out the door, Luke froze. In a moment of panic, I wondered if he'd noticed the semen spots on the mirror. Or if he'd seen something else to tip him off to what I'd been doing before they arrived. He turned slowly, and my stomach knotted.

"What?" I asked, trying to keep my voice steady. In my mind, I made up excuses for the splatters on the counter and mirror. Unfortunately, "I was just cleaning it, and it went off," was

the best I could come up with.

"You've got a *TV*," Luke accused.

What?! "No, I don't," I said, reflexively defending myself.

"Then what's *that?*" he asked, pointing to my computer.

"What do you mean? That's my computer."

"Then what's the TV-looking thing sitting on your desk?" he asked.

"That's a TV," Trip said to him, grinning wryly. "Don't you know anything?"

"Yeah," I said, "I guess it *is* a TV. But I never thought of it that way. I mean, it just came with the computer. What's the big deal?"

"*Dallas*," Luke said.

Trip and I looked at each other in confusion.

"Huh?" Trip finally asked.

"*Dallas*," Luke repeated. "You know, *Dallas*. Who shot J.R.? Southfork? *Dallas?*"

"Yeah," Trip said, "I know the show. But what about it?"

"You mean you don't watch *Dallas?*"

Trip shook his head. When Luke looked at me for support, I shrugged and shook my head as well.

"You don't watch *Dallas?*" Luke asked in disbelief. "Friday nights? CBS? Ten o'clock, nine central? What've you been doing on Friday nights?"

"Having a life?" I ventured.

"Going on dates," Trip added, grinning at me sidelong.

"Dude," Luke said, "girls are cool and all, but it's *Dallas*."

"I guess," I said.

"Trust me," he said, "you'll love it. You'll be here, right? Friday night?"

"You wanna watch it over here?" I asked, trying not to sound sarcastic.

"*Mais,* yes. I don't care what you all are gonna do, but *I'm* gonna be right here on Friday nights. Just leave me the keys if you wanna go out."

"I guess I don't have much choice," I said. Then Trip and I grinned at each other.

"Nope," Luke said. "Otherwise, I'd have to go to South Carrick"—the TV lounge for both Carrick dorms was in the South Carrick lobby—"and watch it with a bunch of girls."

"I thought you liked girls," Trip teased.

"Oh, I do," Luke replied. "But not while I'm watching *Dallas*. They talk too much, and they want you to actually pay attention to *them* instead of the TV."

Once again, Trip and I laughed at Luke's enthusiasm.

"Okay," Trip said, still chuckling. "It's settled. Unless Paul has some major objection…?"

I shook my head.

"Then we'll be here on Friday nights," Trip concluded.

"At ten o'clock," Luke said seriously, "nine central."

"At ten o'clock, nine central," Trip echoed just as solemnly.

"I don't think you're taking this seriously," Luke accused.

"I'm taking this as seriously as I should," Trip said with a laugh. "Now let's get out of here and let Paul take a shower."

As they left, I heaved a sigh of relief. Apparently, neither of them had noticed the drops of

come on the counter and mirror. I took a washcloth, wet it, and cleaned up my mess.

When I went to take off my shorts, I discovered that the semen on the head of my dick had dried and glued my sensitive skin to the fabric. I grimaced in pain as I pried myself free. Still wincing, I wrapped a towel around my waist, grabbed my shower basket, and headed for the foyer.

At least I won't need to jerk off in the shower, I thought with a wry grin.

✧ ✧ ✧

Later that evening, I got back to my room just as the phone started ringing.

"Hello?"

"May I please speak to Paul?" asked the voice on the other end of the line.

"This is he."

"Oh, I didn't recognize your voice. How are you?"

"I'm fine, thanks. Um… who *is* this?" I asked. It wasn't Kendall, and it certainly wasn't Gina.

"Oh, sorry. It's Susan."

"Hi!" I gushed. Then I looked at my suitemates' flag-draped door and decided to take the conversation into my room. "Hold on a second," I said. "I just got in, lemme unlock my door."

"Sure," she said.

I fished out my keys and reached for the doorknob. Unfortunately, it was already open, which meant…

"Hey, Billy," I said. *Super*.

"Hey, Paul," he said as he looked up from his books.

"Hold on a sec," I said to Susan. Then I looked back at Billy. "I'll talk in the foyer."

Back in the suite's entryway, I looked around for someplace to talk with some privacy. The only place was the bathroom. It seemed weird, but I dragged the phone cord along and then shut the door behind me.

"Hey," I said into the phone. "How're you?" Unfortunately, the bathroom echoed, and I was positive that not only Billy, but T.J., Glen, and the rest of the floor could probably hear my conversation. "Um… wait just a sec," I said to Susan, forestalling her reply. Then I decided to head into the hallway. It wouldn't echo, and while I wouldn't have any privacy, I *was* at the end of the hall, so I could see anyone long before they could actually overhear me. "Hi," I said at last, sinking to the floor with my back to the cool cinderblocks of the wall.

"What was that all about?" Susan asked.

"Sorry. My roommate's home, and so are my suitemates. I didn't want to talk in my room, and the bathroom echoed, so I came out into the hall."

"Oh."

"Anyway, here I am. Hey, where are you? You're not in Knoxville, are you?"

"No," she said, laughing. "I'm still in Austin, at Doug's house."

"Oh."

"Don't sound so depressed," she playfully chided. "That's why I'm calling."

"Oh?"

"I'm flying out of here on Friday, and I wanted to fly into Knoxville and spend the weekend."

"*This* Friday?"

"Mmm hmm, the 25th. If it's okay with you all, I'd like to take you, Gina, and Kendall to

dinner that night. And then perhaps we could go to the football game on Saturday, if it's a home game."

"I think it is," I said. "We're playing Auburn."

"Does that sound okay?"

"Okay? It sounds *great!*" Then I chuckled at myself.

"What's so funny?" she asked.

"I sound like Tony the Tiger," I said.

"No you don't," she said. "You sound like a good friend who's happy to see me. A lady could get used to that."

"No kidding."

"So," she asked, "how's school? Did you get my card?"

"I got it, thanks. School's okay, I guess. I mean, it's school. My architecture classes are cool, except for one professor who hates me. I think he hates everyone, but he seems to have it in for me personally."

"Oh, I'm sure he doesn't *hate* you."

"Well," I admitted, "he might not hate me, but he sure finds enough things to criticize me about. And he doesn't do the same thing to anyone else."

As we talked, I lost track of time. I don't know why, but talking to Susan always relaxed me. I guess it was because she was a good listener.

I told her about my other classes: Professor Tow and his wisecracks, Professor Feller and her give-away grades, Professor Dubois and her monotone lectures, and the others. But mostly, I talked about Professor Joska. I don't know why I let the man get under my skin, but he obviously did.

When I finally got off the subject of Joska and his hostility toward me, I told Susan about my life with Kendall and Gina, and the complications of being together outside of camp. I told her about Gina's excitement at joining Chi Omega, and my disappointment at not getting a bid from Sigma Chi. I told her about eating breakfast every morning with Kendall, and hanging out with Trip and Luke. I even told her about the brunette and her blonde friend, from my Art History class.

"Don't you have enough adventure in your life already?" Susan asked with a chuckle. "You're already checking out other girls?"

Even though she couldn't see me, I shrugged. "There's just something about this girl," I said, referring to the brunette. "The blonde is just as cute, but… I dunno… there's just something about the brunette. I mean, I don't even know her *name*."

"Why haven't you introduced yourself?"

"I've *tried*. But there's always some reason I don't." Then I felt my face heat at the memory of getting tongue-tied in front of the girls.

"It sounds like you've got a crush."

"I don't have a crush," I said defensively. Then, "Much."

On the other end of the phone, Susan laughed brightly.

"What?"

"Welcome to the real world of complex relationships," she said, gentle humor coloring her tone. "Even though you already *have* two girlfriends, you're still looking for someone else."

"I'm not looking for someone else. I'm just… well… I can't explain it."

"You don't have to," she said. "I'm just teasing you."

"Yeah, well," I grumbled without rancor, "you're always teasing me."

"But you give me such wonderful opportunities!"

"You don't have to *take* 'em," I said.

"What would be the fun in that?"

"I dunno," I said, shrugging again.

"I'm sorry, Paul," she said with genuine contrition. "I know you aren't looking for anyone else. But that doesn't mean you're not interested in this girl in your Art History class."

"There are *two* of them," I said, thinking of the blonde's bright blue eyes and warm smile.

"But it sounds like the brunette's flirting with you."

"Yeah."

"You're a handsome young man."

"But I've already *got* two girlfriends."

"They don't know that. And that doesn't mean you can't *look*, Paul," she said gently. "Acting on your desires is an entirely different matter, but looking never hurt anyone. It's the feelings and emotions behind the looking that you should be careful about."

I nodded to myself. "Yeah, that makes sense. I mean, I'm not in love with this girl or anything. Heck, I don't even know her *name*. But yeah, I see what you mean."

"I knew you would."

At that moment, the suite door opened and T.J. stuck his head out. First, he looked to the left. Then he followed the phone cord and glanced to the right, at me.

"Hey, Loverboy," he said without heat.

"Sorry," I said, covering the mouthpiece. "I'm on long distance with my… um… with my aunt. Do you need to use the phone?"

"Yeah, but it's not important," he said. "Take all the time you want. Just lemme know when you're off. Okay?"

"Sure," I said.

With that, he smiled and closed the door.

"I'm back," I said as I uncovered the mouthpiece.

"Do you need to go?" Susan asked.

"Yeah, in a few minutes. He was cool about it, but my suitemate needs to use the phone."

"That's okay," she said. "Doug and his girlfriend are taking me out to a movie in a little while, so I'd probably better get ready. Do you have a pen?"

"Yeah," I said, standing up. "Lemme get one." I walked back into my room, dragging the long phone cord with me, and then sat down at my desk. "Go ahead," I said into the phone.

As Susan gave me her flight information, I wrote it down. Not only had she already made the reservations, but she had booked a room at the Radisson as well.

"Okay," I said, "We'll meet you at the gate, and then chauffer you around in the Jeep. How's that sound?"

"Actually," she said a bit diffidently, "I was just going to rent a limo."

"What? A limo? Why?"

"Two reasons, actually. One, I don't think I can get all of my luggage in your Jeep, especially

with four of us …"

"Good point," I said. "I hadn't thought of that."

"And two, I don't want to worry about renting a car while I'm there, especially for only a couple of days. Besides, it'll be fun to ride in a limo, won't it?"

"Yeah!"

"So I've already made the reservations with the limousine company," she said. Then she gave me the name and phone number. "You can call them and make arrangements for them to pick you up for the trip to the airport."

"Okay."

"I've already told them to expect your call."

"You did all this before you even talked to me?" I asked, a little surprised.

"I was hoping you'd want to see me," she said. Then I could almost hear her blushing. "And I guess I got a little excited about seeing *you*," she said softly.

It was my turn to chuckle.

"Well," she said, pretending exasperation, "you can't blame an old girl for getting her hopes up."

"You're *not* old," I said. Then I remembered that Billy was in the room.

She could tell by my sudden change in demeanor that I was trying to protect our secret, so she turned businesslike. "Do you have all the information?" she asked. "Flight? Hotel? Limo?"

"Uh-huh," I said, glancing at my notepad. "I've got it. We'll see you Friday, at the airport."

"Paul?" she said softly.

"Yeah?"

"I miss you."

I felt my face heat as I surreptitiously glanced at Billy. His nose was still buried in his textbooks, and he looked like he was trying not to eavesdrop, but it *was* a small room. Finally, I decided to throw caution to the wind. "I miss you too," I said.

"And I love you," she said.

For *that*, I decided to step into the hall. "I love you too," I said softly.

"Oh," she said suddenly, her tone changing. "I almost forgot."

"What?" I asked, anxious all of a sudden.

"Call your mother," she chided.

"Did she tell you to say that?" I asked.

"No. But when I called her to get your phone number, she said you hadn't called her in almost two weeks. What kind of son are you?" she asked, half teasing, half serious.

"Sorry," I said. "I'll call her."

"Good. And tell her you love her. She's worried about you, but don't tell her I told you that. I'll get in trouble."

"Yes, ma'am," I said, teasing her in return.

"Good," she said, her tone conveying the smile that distance hid. "Now, let your suitemate use the phone. But then call your mother," she admonished again.

"Okay, I will."

"I know you will," she said. "She's proud of you, Paul. But she misses you too."

"Okay, okay, I'll call."

"Okay. Then I'll see you and the girls on Friday. Bye."

"Goodbye," I said. Then I opened the suite door and hung up the phone. "I'm off the phone," I said with a knock on T.J.'s door.

"Thanks, dude," he said as the door swung open. He must've been waiting right next to it.

It's a good thing I went back in the hall, I thought.

"I won't be long. Then you can call your other girlfriends."

"You know, T.J.—"

"Dude, I'm just kiddin'."

"Whatever," I said. Then I walked into my room and swung the door shut.

Five minutes later, T.J. knocked on my door. "I'm off the phone, Loverboy."

I bristled at what was becoming his regular nickname for me.

"It's all yours," he finished.

Fortunately, he was back in his room by the time I reached the foyer. (I don't know if it was fortunate for *me*, or fortunate for *him*, though.)

Erin answered the phone when I called—collect, of course. She accepted the charges and then greeted me warmly. For a few minutes, we talked about school—both hers and mine—and then she yelled for Mom.

Mom and I talked for longer than I thought possible. I told her some of the same things I'd told Susan, but not all of them. Mostly, I talked about my classes and some of the other students. I told her about my roommate fiasco and about Rush Week.

"Gina was real nice about it when I didn't get a bid from Sigma Chi," I said. "I mean, I could tell she was upset, but she was mostly mad at *them* for not calling me."

"She really cares about you," Mom said.

"Yeah, I know. I guess I sometimes forget how compassionate she can be."

"Mmm hmm."

"Anyway, I'm still kind of upset about not getting a bid, but I guess it's probably for the best."

She agreed, and then tactfully changed the subject. She told me about life at home, but I already had a disconnected feeling about events in Atlanta. It was like they were happening to someone else's family. It's not that I didn't *care*, but it didn't really affect me. I think it made my mom feel good to tell me about them, though, as if I were still living at home.

Unfortunately, my dad wasn't home, so I couldn't talk to him as well. He had a layover in Orlando, but Mom promised to give him an update when she talked to him later that evening (he called her every night when he was out of town).

After a little more small talk, I told her I loved her and hung up.

Then I dialed Kendall's number and told her about Susan's impending visit. Her parents were driving the Winnebago to Knoxville for the football game, and she was sure that they'd love to have Susan join them for the game-day festivities.

Finally, I called Gina to let her know. She was almost as excited as Kendall (albeit for different reasons, probably). We talked for a little while, but I got the feeling that she was being circumspect about something. For a moment, I was puzzled. Then I realized that she wasn't telling me about her sorority activities, so I wouldn't feel bad about Sigma Chi.

I mentally thanked her as we talked about other things for fifteen minutes. Finally, we each had homework to do, so we said goodbye and hung up.

✧ ✧ ✧

Tuesday, in Art History class, I purposefully sat in the back of the auditorium. The brunette and her blonde friend showed up just as Professor Dubois began her lecture. With a grin, the brunette sat next to me.

Once again, I had to fight not to be distracted by her perfume. And whenever I glanced at her, she met my gaze and smiled.

When class was over, I was determined to introduce myself. For a moment, I mentally rehearsed what I wanted to say. The brunette and I stood up at the same time, and I turned to her. Our eyes met and…

"Hi," I said, extending my hand. "I'm—"

"Tall, dark, and mysterious," she said, interrupting me. Then, surprisingly, she shook my hand.

"No… I mean… I'm… um… that's not what I mean… I'm—"

"Tongue-tied," she said.

Aaargh!

"That's okay," she added with a wry grin. "You're still cute."

With that, the blonde smiled in apology. Then she rolled her eyes at her friend's antics. "Come on," she said to the brunette.

"Bye, Mysterious," the brunette said to me.

"Sorry," the blonde said. "She's high-strung."

"But cute," I said, finally finding my wits. *How dumb was* that*?* I mentally groaned.

"Bye," the blonde said, tugging her friend toward the door.

I didn't trust myself to say anything wittier than "duh," so I merely waved. When they were finally out of sight, I shook my head to clear it. "You've got to get a *grip*, Paul," I muttered to myself.

✧ ✧ ✧

Later that afternoon, my friends and I worked out together at the Sports Bubble. Trip and Luke had invited Jeff along as well, so there were four of us.

It felt good to work out with my usual amount of weight, but I also realized that I'd lost some of my edge. A cushy summer spent vacationing had taken its toll. I couldn't bench-press three hundred and twenty pounds anymore, but I did manage to lift two eighty, which was still respectable. I vowed to keep pushing myself, however.

Since Tuesday was our chest and arms day, I also did a bunch of curls and triceps presses. And each time I had to wait for the other guys to finish with a machine, I did push-ups to keep my heart rate up. By the time we finished our workout, my arms were like rubber bands, but I felt as if I had all the energy in the world.

"Hey, y'all," Luke said as we walked back to the dorm, "I saw this thing on the bulletin board about intramural football."

"Yeah," Trip chimed in. "I saw that too. Are you all up for it?"

"*Mais*, yes," Luke said.

"What about you?" Trip asked, turning to me.

"I guess," I said. "Although I've never really played football. I mean, just Saturday afternoon

games with friends. Nothing serious."

"Don't worry, it's easy," Luke said. "With your size and strength, we'll just give you the ball and let you run through the other team."

"Is it tackle football?" Jeff asked.

"Why?" Luke asked. "Are you afraid?"

"No way," Jeff said defiantly. "I just don't wanna get my glasses broken or nothin'."

"Actually," Trip said, "I think it's flag football."

"That sucks," Luke said.

Trip shrugged. "It's still football," he said.

"Lemme guess," I said to him. "You played football too? Baseball in the summer, football in the fall, and basketball in the winter. What do they play in the spring?"

"Soccer," Jeff said.

"Soccer?" Luke scoffed. "That's not a sport."

"It is *too*, you hairy fuck," Jeff shot back.

"It's a bunch of guys running around on a field," Luke said.

"Oh yeah? Then what's football, a bunch of *dumb* guys running around on a field?"

Predictably, Jeff was quicker than Luke, and he took off running before the big blonde Cajun could pounce.

"To answer your question," Trip said nonchalantly, as our friends raced ahead of us, "no, I didn't play football in high school. I played all through elementary and middle school, though. I quit when— Well, I quit when my life got a lot more complicated." For a moment, he turned melancholy. Then he shook it off and tried to smile. "It's easy," he said. "You'll do fine."

I wanted to ask about his sudden change in mood, but I could tell that he didn't want to talk about it. "What about Jeff?" I asked instead.

Jeff seemed to be terminally uncoordinated when it came to basketball, and I wondered how he'd fare at football.

"I don't think he's gonna be Roger Staubach anytime soon, but he'll do fine," Trip said with a laugh, his good spirits returning as he banished whatever thought had upset him. Then he glanced into the distance. "As long as Luke doesn't catch him, that is."

At that moment, Jeff turned to race up the stairs to the Presidential Complex. By then, he was already fifteen yards ahead of Luke.

"And I don't think that's gonna happen any time soon," Trip finished with a chuckle. "Now c'mon, let's go."

With that, he playfully shoved me and then took off running. After a moment's hesitation, I sprinted after him.

✧ ✧ ✧

I got to Design class a little early on Wednesday. Samantha and Trip were talking as I sat down.

"What's up?" I asked.

"We've got a project coming up," Samantha said. Then she whipped out her calendar and showed me a big red "X" by October 2.

"What's the project?" I asked, fishing in my backpack for the class syllabus.

"It's an individual project, but we have to critique each other's drawings. It's called 'Your

Home,'" Samantha said before I could find the paper. "Whatever that means."

"So we were kinda wondering about it," Trip said. "Maybe Joska will tell us about it today."

Samantha nodded gravely.

"Maybe we'll get to actually *design* something," I said peevishly. "All this reading is killing me. And the first two projects were piddling. I mean, basic design methods? *Boring.* And the last project? I can *already* draw with perspective," I said. "This is all just simple stuff."

Trip looked sidelong at Samantha—who had struggled with the perspective drawings—and then cautioned me with a glare.

"Seriously," I said, "I can do this stuff in my sleep."

"I was thinking the same thing," Professor Joska said as he entered the room.

With a sinking feeling, I realized that I'd spoken louder than I intended to. Worse, Joska was looking at *me*.

"Because judging by your most recent drawings, Mr. Hughes," he continued, "that's what you were doing… sleeping."

My face heated, a combination of anger and embarrassment.

Joska opened his briefcase and withdrew a sheaf of papers. "Come get your drawings when I call your name," he said to the class at large. "Miss Fisher…"

With each student who retrieved their drawings, Joska made disparaging remarks. The better ones were "shoddy" or "barely adequate," but they ranged all the way to "a four-year-old could do better" and "you'd better learn to say 'would you like fries with that?' Mr. Fekete."

When Joska called my name, I clenched my fists and walked to the front of the class.

"Try drawing when you're awake, Mr. Hughes," he said as I reached for the paper.

It took every ounce of willpower I possessed not to snatch it from him and storm back to my desk. Joska had circled several details on the drawing and written "sloppy." At the bottom, he'd written "Haphazard and somnambulant, Mr. Hughes. You'll have to do better than this."

"Somnambulant"? I thought. *What the fuck does that mean?*

Without even a pause to let us to wallow in our misery, Joska turned to the blackboard after he finished passing out the drawings.

"Your next project is your home," he said, writing the words as he spoke. "Please try to stay awake for it, Mr. Hughes."

I muttered something my mother wouldn't have approved of.

"Relax," Trip whispered as he leaned toward me. "He's just baiting you."

When I turned and glared daggers at him, he returned the look with a lot more sangfroid than I thought possible.

"Remember," he continued, sotto voce, "life's too short to worry about the little things."

"This *isn't* little," I grated.

"*Yes*, it is. Trust me."

"He's not picking on *you*."

"*Mr. Hughes*," Joska said, turning from the board. "I'm not going to compete with you and Mr. Whitman."

Trip and I immediately shut our mouths and faced forward.

"We're sorry, sir," Trip said. "It won't happen again."

Joska leveled his steely gaze at me, looking for agreement.

I gritted my teeth and held my head defiantly still. I was tired of him humiliating me, and I wasn't going to take it anymore.

"*Little things*," Trip hissed out of the corner of his mouth.

Joska arched an eyebrow.

Fuck you, Joska, I thought venomously.

Trip cleared his throat, his meaning clear.

As the tableau drew out, Joska merely stared at me, implacable.

I was so furious—and determined to be defiant—that I wasn't even thinking about the consequences of my actions.

"He's sorry, sir," Trip said. "It won't happen again." Then he glared at me and tried to get me to nod by force of will alone.

I turned and his eyes implored me. Then I returned my gaze to Joska. I knew I'd hate myself for it, but I nodded.

"Mr. Hughes, you owe your continued presence in this class to Mr. Whitman," Professor Joska said after a tense moment's silence. "I hope you appreciate that."

I felt my face pull into a grim smile, which never touched my eyes.

Joska decided not to make further issue of it, and turned to the blackboard. Even though I was still fuming, common sense began to pervade my dark thoughts and I took out my notebook.

✧ ✧ ✧

As we left the classroom, Trip and I walked in nerve-racking silence.

"What the *fuck* were you thinking?" he asked as soon as we were more or less alone. "You almost got yourself kicked out of class—or worse—over *nothing*."

"It's *not* nothing."

"It *is* nothing! So you got your feelings hurt. Dude, when are you gonna learn that it's *not personal?*"

"With *you*, or with Joska?" I snarled.

Trip looked like I'd slapped him.

"Sorry," I muttered.

"It's not personal with Joska," he said softly.

And with you? I thought, my anger cooling.

"Joska just picks on you to see if you'll break. It's not 'cause he hates you or anything. Don't you get that?"

"What's *that* supposed to mean?"

"You can't have any personal attachment to your work in architecture," he said, his tone reasonable. "Joska's just trying to toughen us up."

"That's easy for you to say," I said. "He's not picking on you."

"Do you think he wouldn't've tossed *me* out of class too?" he asked.

Reluctantly, I agreed.

"Paul, listen, I had a baseball coach just like him. He was always criticizing something about my game, and I was one of his best players. During practice and before games, I don't think he ever had anything positive to say about my swing, my fielding, or anything else."

"Yeah? So?"

"At first, when I played well, I told myself I was doing it just to show him that I *could*, you

know? And do you know what he'd say to me when I did?"

I shook my head.

"'It's not good enough, Trip.'"

"That sucks, man," I said.

"No it doesn't. Don't you get it? When I stopped trying to piss him off, I started listening to what he was saying, and I started seeing problems with my game. He wasn't picking on *me*, he was picking on my *game*. But *I'm* not the game. It's the same with architecture. You're not the design. Listen to Joska's criticism, and you'll start to see what he's talking about."

"What was he talking about today?" I asked sullenly. Then I mimicked Joska's sibilant accent, "'Try drawing when you're awake, Mr. Hughes.'"

"Dude, look at your drawing. Seriously. Take it out."

I fished the half-crumpled paper out of my backpack. It was a drawing of the A&A building—as assigned—from about two hundred feet away.

"Is that the best work you've ever done?" Trip asked.

After a tense moment's reflection, I shook my head.

Trip pointed to where Joska had written "haphazard." Then he looked at me earnestly. "How long did it take you to draw this?" he asked.

"About twenty minutes. Why?"

"Dude, it took me an hour and a half to do the same drawing."

"So?"

"Look at your drawing, man," he said sincerely. "Even *I* can tell that it's not perfect," he added, pointing to the areas Joska had circled. "And I'm not Joska."

"Yeah, I guess it *is* a little haphazard," I grudgingly admitted.

"Haphazard buildings collapse," Trip said gravely.

I hadn't thought about it in those terms.

"Exactly," he said, reading the shock on my face. "If it'll make you feel any better, Joska didn't have anything better to say about my drawing. Here, see for yourself," he said. Then he handed me his sketch.

Joska had written "Crude and amateurish, Mr. Whitman. This looks as if it were drawn by a toddler with crayons. You need to develop an eye for the soul of a building."

"This doesn't piss you off?" I asked Trip.

He shook his head. "I'm a first year architecture student, for cryin' out loud. I've been in class for a grand total of three weeks. What the heck do *I* know about 'the soul of a building'? I mean, compared to Joska, we're total amateurs. Yeah, he's a prick, but he's also a prick with a lot more experience than either of *us*."

I handed him the drawing and we resumed walking.

"Seriously, man," he said, "he's baiting you. He wants you to react, so he can slap you down and make an example out of you. Don't give him the satisfaction."

"Easier said than done," I half-growled.

"I know," he said. "But you've gotta keep your cool and relax. Save your anger for something that really matters, like the war in Afghanistan, or the dumbass Libyans. When Joska tells you something, it's not about *you*, it's about your work. *You're* not your drawings," he said emphatically. "They're just lines on paper."

"I guess," I said. Intellectually, I knew he was right. But that still didn't cool the simmering anger I felt about Joska and how he treated me. It just wasn't fair. Why did he have to pick on *me?!*

"Hey," Trip asked, changing the subject as I grew sullen, "you wanna go throw the football around? It'll take your mind off Joska. Luke and I wanted to get some guys together and practice for intramural football."

"I guess," I said with a shrug.

"Luke even talked to your suitemates," he added. "They want to play too. The little guy, T.J., was a safety in high school. And the big guy, Glen, played DE."

"DE?"

"Oh, sorry, defensive end. T.J. said he's really good."

"As big as Glen is," I said, "I believe it."

For the rest of the walk back to Carrick, we talked about football. Trip had played quarterback when he was younger, which didn't surprise me a bit. He was also pretty excited to have T.J. and Glen playing for our floor's team, T.J.'s grating personality notwithstanding.

With Luke as cornerback and T.J. as safety, the other team would have a hard time passing the ball. And with Glen up front, no one was likely to get through to harass Trip. He also insisted that I'd make a good halfback, even though I didn't have any real experience.

"What's Jeff gonna play?" I asked.

"With his speed, I definitely want him at wide receiver."

"He can barely catch a basketball," I scoffed. "And it's big and round. Now you want him to catch a football?"

Trip laughed. "Yeah, I know, not likely. But if he *does* catch it, man, no one's gonna be able to catch *him*."

"You got *that* right. Anyway," I said as we reached our rooms, "lemme change clothes and I'll be right over."

"All right, I'll see you in a few minutes."

"Hey, Loverboy," T.J. called as soon as I entered the foyer.

"Yeah?"

"A girl called for you. Gina? Yeah, Gina," he said as he appeared in his doorway. "She sounded pretty excited. She wanted to know if you could meet her in her lobby at four thirty."

I looked at my watch. It was a little after two, and Gina wouldn't be out of class until three fifty. "Thanks," I said distractedly.

"Are you comin' to football practice with us?" T.J. asked.

I nodded as I unlocked my door.

"Cool. Them guys from across the hall said you were. We're gonna have a good ol' team," he said excitedly. "Except for Four-eyes."

"Who?" I asked, turning. As I stared at T.J., I felt my face darkening.

"Dude, I'm just kiddin'. What's his name? Jeff? Yeah, Jeff. They guy who's pledging Sigma Nerd. Say, that reminds me. Me and Glen are pledging KA. Did you pledge Sigma Chi?"

My guts wrenched. "I decided not to," I lied. I guess I didn't want to deal with T.J.'s biting sympathy if I told him the truth.

"Well, that was dumb," he said. "Just kiddin'."

"Thanks for giving me Gina's message," I said. Then I stepped into my room and shut the door, effectively ending the conversation.

After I changed clothes, I headed across the hall to Trip and Luke's room. A few minutes later, Jeff came over. After T.J. and Glen joined us, we headed toward the elevator. Luke had managed to recruit several other guys from our floor, none of whom I recognized. Two of them had played football in high school, but the rest were neophytes, like me.

I was still brooding over Joska and his derision, but Trip asked Luke to tell some Boudreaux and Thibodeaux jokes, and it was hard to maintain my dour attitude in the face of Luke's humor.

When I looked up, Trip smiled tentatively and mouthed, "Little things," as he shook his head.

"*Okay,*" I mouthed in reply.

With that, we sorted ourselves out and started passing the ball around. At least Trip was right, it *was* a distraction.

✧ ✧ ✧

"Hey," I said to Gina as I met her in the South Carrick lobby. "Sorry I'm late. We were playing football."

"That's okay," she said as she stood on tiptoe and kissed me. Then, "Can we go up to your room?"

"We'll have to sneak up the stairs," I said.

"That's okay. Is your roommate there?"

I shrugged. "Why?"

Her eyes flashed and she waggled her eyebrows. "I thought maybe we could take a shower together," she ventured.

"Sounds good to me."

Up in my room, Billy was just leaving as we arrived. His eyes widened when he saw Gina.

"I know it's not visitation," I said, hoping to head off trouble.

"It's cool," he said. "I won't tell anyone." Then he looked at Gina again. "Is this your girlfriend?" he asked.

With a bit of surprise, I realized that Billy hadn't met Kendall *or* Gina. I started to nod, but then suddenly stopped. Had I told him that *Gina* was my girlfriend? Or *Kendall?*

"Kendall, right?" Billy said as he held out his hand.

Well, I thought wryly, *that answers that question.*

"Actually, I'm Gina," she said smoothly, as she shook his hand. "Paul and I are best friends."

"Oh, cool. Nice to meet you, Gina," he said. Then he looked at me. "I'm heading out to work on the set. We're doing *Dracula*," he added as an aside to Gina. "Seeya."

"Seeya," Gina and I said at the same time.

"He seems pretty cool," Gina said as the door closed behind him.

I nodded.

Then we stepped into my room and I started stripping off my sweaty, grass-stained clothes. After Gina got undressed, we wrapped towels around ourselves and headed for the shower. At first, I thought Gina wanted to fool around, but she was quiet and introspective, so we simply washed each other. When we dried off, we headed back to my room and I locked the door behind us.

Billy and I need to come up with a system to warn each other if one of us has a girl in the

room, I thought. Then I chuckled softly, reminded of a similar story my dad had told me.

With her towel wrapped around her waist, Gina stood in front of the mirror and combed her ebony hair. She was still quiet, and even seemed pensive. I stood behind her and used the comb when she handed it to me.

"Um… Paul?" she said hesitantly.

When I heard her tone, I held her gaze in the mirror. "Yeah?"

"I think I may have screwed up."

"How?"

"I didn't *mean* to," she said, turning to face me, tears welling up. "It just happened."

"*What* just happened?" I asked. "Calm down and tell me."

"I know we're supposed to talk to each other if we want to fool around with someone else. Alone, I mean. And I know I should've talked to you first, but it all happened so fast."

What was she saying, that she had sex with another guy? Was he in one of her classes? Was he a fraternity guy? As a mixture of anger and fear washed over me, my skin prickled and I suddenly felt a chill. *I'll beat the shit out of him, whoever he is,* I vowed as my breathing quickened and my heartbeat raced.

"I didn't mean to do it," she said. "You've got to believe me."

While I tried to get control over my wild emotions, she continued.

"I mean, one minute, Regan and I were just talking," she said. "And the next—"

"Wait a minute. You and *Regan?*"

Tearfully, she nodded.

In spite of myself, I laughed. It was mostly the release of tension, but I also had to laugh at myself for thinking that Gina would ever cheat on me with another guy. She just wasn't like that.

"What's so funny?" she asked, blinking to clear her eyes.

"Sorry," I said. I didn't want to tell her what I'd *actually* been thinking, so I quickly came up with an alternate explanation. "I guess I already knew about you and Regan."

"You did? And you're not angry?"

I shook my head. It's difficult to explain, but if Gina had sex with another girl, I knew it was just fun. But if another guy came inside her—and I didn't know about it—it would be like another guy marking *my* territory. *That* would bother me. It was a double standard, I know, but at least I realized that it was.

"I thought you might've known," she said. "That night when you walked with us to Panhellenic."

I nodded.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I was so scared to tell you. I won't do it again if you don't want me to. I mean, I was just so lonely. I hardly get to see you anymore, and most of the time when I do, Kendall's there too."

I pulled her close and she tilted her head up for a kiss. "It's okay," I said when we broke the kiss. "I understand. What happened?" I asked. I'm ashamed to say that I already had some fairly steamy images parading through my head.

"At first, I didn't think Regan liked girls," Gina said. "But *God*, she does."

I nodded for her to go on.

"It was the second night of Rush, and I was really feeling lonely," she said. "Regan actually

lives down the hall from me, so we were hanging out in her room, since Faith the Goody-two-shoes kept trying to get us to go to church with her. Did you know that she actually *wanted* to live in the Virgin Vault?"

"Who? Regan?"

"No, Faith. God, she's such a priss. I *hate* holier-than-thou Christians, and she's the worst. Anyway, I don't wanna talk about her right now."

"Okay," I said, a little shocked by her vehemence. I'd spoken to Faith on the phone several times, and she always seemed polite, if a little prim. But just as Gina had never met my roommate, I'd never met hers. I guess our schedules conflicted more than I'd previously thought.

"But it was kind of a surprise," Gina continued. "I mean, I was upset about not seeing you, and Regan was sitting beside me with her arm around me. The next thing I knew, we were kissing. I mean really kissing, with tongues and everything."

I felt my penis twitch, but I tried to concentrate on Gina's story.

"I guess she could tell that I like girls too. Anyway, we lay back on her bed and kept kissing. While we did, she teased me with her fingers. The next thing I knew, we were both naked and she was between my legs. God, Paul, she's *so* sexy. And she really loves my shaved pussy."

"I love it too," I said.

"No, you don't understand. She likes just the lips shaved. She said I look really good with the hair on top. But that was later. Anyway, after she got me off, I wanted to go down on her. She was so hot and wet, Paul. God! I think I could've eaten her for hours."

At that point, I shifted to relieve some of the pressure on my dick. The towel wasn't as constricting as my underwear would've been, but it still wasn't comfortable.

"And oh my God, Paul, she has the coolest dildo. It has this harness, like a jock strap. Only, instead of a cup, it holds this big pink rubber dick. I swear, it was bigger than yours."

When Gina said that, I almost choked on my tongue. I'd *heard* of strap-ons, but I'd never known anyone who'd used one (Susan probably had, though we hadn't talked about it).

"She put it on and screwed me silly. I mean, it was totally cool, having her do it while I played with her nipples at the same time."

"No kidding," I said, my imagination running wild.

"Yeah," she said, nodding. "But the dildo couldn't come. That's the only problem with it. I mean, I really like sucking you—and feeling you inside me—but I *love* it when you come in my mouth. You know?"

I nodded.

"Speaking of which," she said, "if you're not angry…" With a devilish gleam in her eye, she reached down and loosened the towel around my waist. It fell to the floor as she sank to her knees. "God, I've been wanting to do this all day," she said when she grasped my hard-on.

In the mirror, I watched as her head bobbed back and forth. I put my hands on her wet, slick hair and directed her motions. Then I looked down and watched as she fellated me, her lips and tongue driving me wild.

I had jerked off in the shower that morning, of course, but listening to Gina's story had gotten me really worked up. So I knew it wouldn't be long before I came. Sure enough, I reached the point of no return a few minutes later. Gina sensed it and quickened her pace. When I erupted, she greedily swallowed my seed.

Finally, she let my cock slip from her lips. Then she wiped the corners of her mouth and smiled up at me, her dark eyes sparkling.

"Thank you," she said, her eyes closed. "Tasting you always relaxes me. And I *needed* that."

"Me *too*," I said.

With that, she wrapped her arms around my legs and hugged me, her breasts pressing against my thighs. "I'm sorry," she said after a moment. "I know I should've told you about Regan sooner, but I was scared that you'd get angry."

"I'm not angry," I said. "I'm a little surprised, but not angry."

"Good," she said, running her hands over my bare ass. Then she stood up and gave me a smoldering look. "I told Regan all about you," she said. "She thinks you're really sexy. And she's given me some cool ideas about stuff you and I can do together."

"Such as?"

"Such as… it's a surprise."

"Oh?"

"And I've got to buy something first. So we were hoping…"

"We? Hoping?"

"Regan and I were hoping you'd go with us tonight," she said.

"Where?"

"This store that sells vibrators and stuff. I need to get a replacement for Pinky"—her vibrator from high school, which she had passed on to Leah—"and… your surprise, of course. Regan said the store's pretty sleazy, though. So we don't want to go alone. But then maybe afterward…"

"Afterward?"

"Maybe we could come back here," she said softly. Then she gripped my hips and pulled herself close. "Please say yes, Paul. This is really important to me. *Please*."

"Sure," I said. "It sounds like fun."

"Oh, Paul," she gushed as she stood on tiptoe and wrapped her arms around my neck. "Thank you. I love you *so* much."

"I love you too," I said, as I mulled over the idea of having sex with both Gina and Regan. It didn't take a rocket scientist to figure out the possible results of shopping for sex toys with two girls, who would probably be tempted to try them out as soon as they could.

At first, I was a little piqued that Gina would simply *expect* me to have sex with Regan. I wasn't some sex machine she could simply use for her own pleasure. But as I thought about it, my irritation turned to intrigue. Regan *was* very cute, and she had a sexy body, with high, firm breasts that I imagined bouncing as I pumped into her. Ultimately, I decided that after the lousy day I'd had, a little mindless sex was exactly what I wanted.

I pictured dark-skinned Gina next to the Nordic Regan, both of them kneeling before me, worshiping my cock. Then I imagined them on their hands and knees, their asses in the air, inviting. Dozens of different images swirled through my imagination, each of them more arousing than the last.

✧ ✧ ✧

After we got dressed, Gina called Regan. We met her in the South Carrick lobby a few minutes later.

"He said yes," Gina excitedly told the blonde. "And then maybe afterward, we could…"

"Really?" Regan asked, arching an eyebrow.

As Gina nodded, I suddenly got the feeling that there was a lot more going on than I realized.

"So he's cool with it?" Regan asked.

I'm right here, I thought peevishly.

"Absolutely," Gina said.

"Are you sure?" Regan asked.

Gina looked at me, smiled, and then nodded to her friend.

"Okay," Regan said. Then she withdrew a small mirror from her purse. "Do you want to… um… freshen our makeup before we go?" she asked Gina.

At first, Gina started to refuse. Then Regan gave her a meaningful look and she suddenly changed her mind.

As the two girls headed toward the lobby bathroom, I furrowed my brow. *Gina wasn't* wearing *makeup,* I thought. She rarely wore much, but she'd washed off what she *had* been wearing when we showered together.

When the girls returned from the bathroom, Gina looped her arm through mine and we headed out.

"Let's take Paul's car," Regan said. "I don't feel like driving."

"That's cool," I said, all thoughts of Gina's makeup forgotten. "This way, ladies."

✧ ✧ ✧

After a fifteen-minute drive, we pulled up to a nondescript building. Oddly enough, it looked like any other store, albeit with no windows. From the outside, nothing gave away its purpose. Even the sign by the road simply proclaimed "Magazines, Books, and Novelties." Fortunately, the parking lot was empty, so we wouldn't have to deal with furtive looks from other customers.

"Are you sure this is the place?" I asked.

"I'm sure," Regan said. Then she looked at Gina, her eyes alight. "Are you ready?"

Gina nodded, her expression just as excited.

When we entered, a thick-jowled man glanced up, his eyes dull and bored. He was reading the newspaper and listlessly smoking a cigarette. He also looked like he hadn't showered or shaved in a couple of days. As the door shut behind us, he leered at each of the girls in turn and then stuck his nose back in his newspaper.

The store was dingy and dark, just like I'd imagined. But instead of being titillating, it reminded me of a shabby newsstand. As I looked around, I had to stifle a chuckle—the racks in *this* newsstand were full of magazines like *Swank*, *Screw*, and *Juggs*, as well as others that I hadn't seen before. In addition, there were racks of *Swedish Erotica* slicks and hard-core paperbacks.

Instead of shelves of candy and gum—as a newsstand would have—the back wall was lined with vibrators, dildos, and more things than I knew what to do with. Another wall held a rack of boxes that I didn't recognize. After a second look, I realized that they were videotapes.

"Isn't it cool?" Gina whispered, her eyes fixed on the wall-to-wall sex toys.

Even though I nodded, I couldn't wait to get out of there. The toys, magazines, and videos didn't bother me, but I didn't want to *touch* anything in the entire place. I'm usually not squeamish, but the store was definitely too seedy for my tastes.

"Let's go check out the vibrators," Regan said to Gina, keeping her voice pitched low. "You

said you want a smooth one, right?"

Gina nodded and the two girls made a beeline for the back wall.

I'd never seen so many sex toys in my life. Old Bernie Kestrel's armoire of bondage was tame compared to the expanse in front of me. The wall displays held vibrators in a myriad of colors: pink, blue, red, white, gold, purple, and more. They ranged in size from a little bigger than my thumb to the size of a large flashlight.

Dildos in all shapes and colors lined the wall next to the vibrators. The boxes were decorated with busty women who sported faux-orgasmic expressions. Some of the dildos were smooth, others were ridged, and still others were almost lifelike. Others had knobs, bulbs, or ticklers. I even spotted a few with harnesses like Gina had described.

Past the dildos were rings, sleeve-things, little egg-shaped devices, and more. Beyond them were pasties, clips, cuffs, and a few other things that would've been right at home in Mr. Kestrel's secret bedroom.

"Oh my God, Paul," Gina whispered, her eyes aglow. "Isn't this *so* cool?"

"God, I love toys," Regan said, her expression just as rapt as Gina's.

I glanced at the guy behind the counter, but he was still reading his newspaper. I *thought* he'd been staring at us, but…

I wanted to tell Gina to just pick out a vibrator so we could *leave*, but I decided against it. If she was enjoying herself, the least I could do was let her.

"I want one bigger than Pinky," she mused, her eyes roaming over the cellophane-windowed boxes. "Not so big that I get all loose for you, though," she said, glancing at me distractedly.

"I like this one," Regan said, holding up a box with a blue vibrator. It was about an inch in diameter and seven inches long. "Although it's kinda small," she added.

"It's nice, I guess," Gina said. "But it's too skinny."

"How about this one?" Regan asked, holding up a box with a red one, which was about an inch and a half in diameter, and just as long as the first one. It was called "The Pleasure Rocket."

"Perfect," Gina said. "What kind of batteries does it take?"

"'Requires two C batteries,'" Regan said, reading the box.

"Cool," Gina said. "We'll have to stop at K-Mart and get some batteries," she added with a glance at me.

"Oh, don't worry about them," Regan said. "I've got a bunch in my room."

I marveled at how matter-of-factly the two girls talked about vibrators and batteries. I couldn't imagine getting together with *any* of my friends and talking about the details of jerking off. Sure, we joked about *doing* it, but no one shared details. Ever.

Once again, I looked up at the counter and actually caught the guy staring at us. He gazed at me with flat, yellow eyes and then returned his attention to his newspaper.

"Hey, cool," Regan said, moving toward the dildos. "I've been wanting one of these."

The box she reached for was hot pink, and contained something called "The Passion Python." I almost laughed out loud when I saw the name. Then my eyes nearly bugged out when I saw what was *in* the box. It was about eighteen inches long, at least an inch and a half thick, and had a narrow penis-like glans at each end.

"It's a double-headed dildo," Regan said as she showed it to Gina.

"What's it for?" Gina asked, her eyes going wide. "Never mind," she added. "I think I figured

it out."

"Mmm hmm," Regan practically purred.

Cool, I thought. *Gina's got her vibrator, Regan's got her double-headed Passion Python thing, now let's* go*!* Even though the guy at the desk tried to act as if he were reading his newspaper, I could tell that he was staring at us out of the corner of his eye. He gave me the creeps almost as much as the atmosphere of the store.

"What about that one?" Gina asked, still browsing.

"Which one?" Regan asked.

"The big black dildo, up there," Gina said as she stood on tiptoe and pointed. "That looks really cool."

"Ew, *gross*," Regan half-squealed. "Don't be disgusting."

"What?" Gina asked, genuinely perplexed.

Gina was a smart girl, but I don't think she was prepared for that reaction, especially from one of her friends.

"I don't believe in bestiality," Regan said, her face a mask of distaste. Then she glanced at me for support.

I returned her look with a flinty stare.

"What*ever*," Regan said. Then she turned to Gina. "Did you still wanna get… you know… that thing… for Paul?"

"What thing?" Gina asked. "Oh, *that* thing. *Yeah*." Distracted by the mention of her surprise for me, she moved next to me. "Are you ready for your surprise?" she asked.

"I guess," I said, trying to hide my impatience.

"I think you'll like it," Regan said.

"And I *know* I will," Gina added with a smoldering look.

With that, the two girls pulled me toward the section beyond the dildos. As we got closer to the bondage stuff, I began to hesitate, but Gina and Regan stopped in front of a selection of rings.

"What're these things?" I asked.

"They're cock rings," Regan said.

"Excuse me?"

"It goes around your dick and balls," Regan said. "It helps you stay hard."

"Not that you need any help in *that* department," Gina added hastily.

"So I've heard," Regan said. Then she moistened her lips and arched an eyebrow.

"Regan's boyfriend uses one," Gina said. "He says it feels great."

"Speaking of which," I said. Then I turned to Regan. "Where *is* your boyfriend?"

"I don't know, and I don't care," the blonde girl said. "And he's not my boyfriend anymore." Then she practically snarled. "He's got some Delta Gamma bitch he's screwing. I swear, those girls go down faster than their anchor."

Huh?

"But I don't want to talk about it," she finished icily.

"Sorry," I said.

"Will you help me pick out a cock ring for Paul?" Gina asked, smoothly diverting the blonde's attention.

"I guess," Regan said with an affected smile.

"Hold on a second," I said. "I don't know if I really need something like this."

"Paul, please," Gina begged.

The guy at the desk looked up and smirked at me.

"Okay," I said. "Just pick one and let's get out of here."

"This is the one Rod has," Regan said, pointing to a black ring with six nubs spaced around its circumference. "And he's probably fucking that little tramp with it now."

"Sounds good to me," I said. "The ring, I mean," I added hastily.

"God," Regan said, "I need a bu— I mean, I need to freshen my makeup." Then she turned to Gina. "Do you want to go with me?"

"Sure," Gina said immediately.

With that, Regan handed me the box with the double-headed dildo. Then she dug through her purse and thrust a handful of cash at me. Gina barely had time to hand me her boxed vibrator as Regan practically dragged her away.

"What's up with all this makeup business?" I wondered aloud. Then I looked up to see the guy at the counter chuckling at me. As the girls disappeared into the women's restroom—I was surprised that the place actually *had* restrooms—I picked up the cock ring that Gina had dropped.

"Well, well, well," the guy said as I approached the counter. "That's some hot cooze you got there," he added, nodding toward the closing restroom door. His breath smelled of stale cigarettes and beer. "You ballin' both 'em?"

"I guess," I said vaguely.

"I seen blondie in here before, but with some other guy," he said as he started ringing up our selections. "She likes them big dildos too, don't she?"

"I guess."

"That'll be thirty-eight fifty," he said as the cash register beeped.

What?! Thirty-eight dollars for some plastic and rubber?! I glanced at the money Regan had handed me—fifteen dollars. Then I dug through my pockets and came up with another twelve. I was already embarrassed enough, and I didn't want the guy to realize that I didn't have the money.

"Do you take checks?" I asked lamely.

He snorted and then shook his head.

"Hold on a second," I said. Then I headed for the women's restroom.

"Just a minute," Regan said when I tapped on the door.

I heard some shuffling and then the door flew open.

"What *is* it?" Regan asked. From behind her, Gina glanced at me, her eyes wide (and a little wild).

"Um, Gina," I asked, "how much cash do you have on you. I mean, I've got the money," I said, "but they don't take checks."

"*Here*," Regan said before Gina could answer. Then the blonde reached into her purse and shoved two ten-dollar bills at me.

Before I could even say thanks, she shut the door in my face. The guy at the counter just laughed when I returned.

"Here," I said, handing him forty dollars. After he made change, I stuffed the remainder of the money into my pocket, grabbed the plain brown bag, and headed straight for the bathroom door.

It opened as I drew near. Gina and Regan practically tumbled out, giggling and wild.

"Let's get out of here," Regan said. "I'm horny." Then she giggled again and grabbed Gina's wrist.

From the counter, the guy laughed obnoxiously, his sweat-stained shirt heaving as he did. Without a backward glance, I followed the girls outside.

"God, that was fun," Regan said. Then her eyes darted to Gina. "Hey, d'you wanna do something totally cool?"

"Sure," Gina quickly agreed.

"Take off your panties," the blonde said.

Even though we were in public, Gina didn't hesitate to lift her skirt, hook her thumbs in her underwear, and slide them over her dark legs. I tried to catch a glimpse of Regan's pussy as she did the same, but I couldn't see a thing.

"C'mon," Regan said, laughing. Then she and Gina raced back to the store's entrance. The blonde pushed open the door and threw her panties inside. "Have fun, you fat fuck," she shouted with a laugh. Gina immediately followed suit, flinging her panties into the building. With that, they sprinted back to the Jeep. "Let's go," Regan shouted. "C'mon, hurry before he comes out."

"Or calls the cops," I mumbled to myself as we all piled into the Jeep.

When we peeled out of the parking lot, I looked in my rearview mirror, but the building's door never opened.

"God, that was fun," Regan said as she stuck her head between the seats. A moment later, she reached forward and grabbed the bag from the store. "I can't wait to get back to my room to try this thing out," she said as she extracted the box with the double-headed dildo.

Even though neither of the girls had said anything about the three of us getting together, I was pretty sure that it was a foregone conclusion. After all, I knew Gina, and this was her pattern. So as I drove back to campus, I once again imagined the girls—one dark and exotic, the other blonde and lithe—on their knees before me.

"Can you just drop us at the dorm before you park your car?" Regan asked, intruding upon my fantasy.

When I darted a glance at Gina, she shrugged apologetically.

"We'd really appreciate it," Regan added.

"Sure," I said after a moment's reluctance.

"Thanks so much," she said.

A few moments later, I pulled up to the Carrick breezeway. Gina got out of the Jeep and tilted the passenger seat forward. Regan put her double dildo back in the bag and then pulled out my cock ring. With a negligent toss, she dropped it in my lap.

"Thanks for the ride," Regan said.

At that point, I began to realize that whatever Regan had planned, *I* wasn't invited.

"D'you wanna meet me in the North Carrick lobby?" I pointedly asked Gina.

She looked at me like a deer caught in the headlights.

"Are you coming?" Regan asked from behind Gina.

Gina turned back to look at me, her eyes pleading.

"I'll be back in about ten minutes," I said firmly.

"Earth to *pledge* Gina," Regan called.

As I watched, Gina's willpower crumbled. At the same time, I felt a surge of rage boil from somewhere deep within me.

"Can we do it another night?" Gina asked me.

"*Fine*," I grated.

Without waiting for her to say anything else, I put the Jeep into gear, mashed the accelerator, and let out the clutch. The wheels chirped as the vehicle surged forward. The passenger door flapped, because it hadn't been latched. As I went around the curve and headed back to Andy Holt Avenue, the door swung open and then slapped shut again. I didn't care.

Back in my room, I called Kendall's apartment, intent on meeting her to slake my lust.

"I'm sorry, Paul," Vivian said. "She and Abby are in the library studying. Do you want to leave a message?"

"Fuck," I spat. Then I hung up. I felt a momentary pang of guilt about abruptly ending the call—*Vivian* certainly hadn't done anything to deserve that kind of treatment—but I quickly shrugged it off.

"What's the matter, Loverboy?" T.J. mocked as he came out of his room.

"Don't fucking start with me, *Tracy*," I said.

In a flash, he was in my face, all 140 pounds of him. "Don't you *ever* fuckin' call me that," he raged, his face turning red.

"Fuck you."

Instead of answering, he shoved me.

I shoved him in return and he staggered into the wall.

Then he launched himself across the foyer and hit me in the stomach. He knocked the wind out of me, but I immediately sprawled—a classic wrestling move—and landed atop him. Then I pulled his arm into a chicken-wing and got an elbow in the face for my trouble. As he fought to get free, I wrenched his arm upward.

I was just about to slug him when someone jerked me to my feet. It took me a moment to realize that Glen was practically holding me in the air. I didn't care. With reckless abandon, I decided to fight him next, if it came to that. As T.J. started to get up, I tried to get loose from Glen's vise-like grip. Incredibly, Glen grabbed T.J. as well. Then the big brute looked at me calmly.

"We don't want no trouble," he apologized, the first words I'd ever heard him say.

"Lemme *go*, Glen," T.J. said as he reached for me. "I'll fuckin' kill him."

"*Fuck* you, runt," I snarled at T.J.

"Leave it *be*," Glen said to me, his expression adamantine.

With that, he let me go.

"Go on," he said, nodding to my room.

"God *dammit*, Glen," T.J. raged. "He fuckin' started it."

At another implacable nod from Glen, I backed toward my door, adrenaline still singing through my veins. It took me three tries before I got the key in the lock. By then, Glen had dragged a kicking and cursing T.J. back into their room. At a word from Glen, T.J.'s caterwauling abruptly stopped.

I shut my door and locked it.

Then I started trembling as the adrenaline wore off.

"Fuck *this*," I said to the world in general.

CHAPTER EIGHT

"Paul, wait," Gina called as I walked through the North Carrick lobby the next morning.

Without turning around, I stopped. I was headed to meet Kendall for breakfast, and a night's sleep hadn't improved my disposition a bit. I was still upset with Gina, although my fury had gone from hot to cold.

"Paul, please."

When I turned around, I got a shock; Gina looked like hell. Her eyes were red, she snuffled miserably, and she still wore her clothes from the day before.

"I tried to call, but your line's been busy," she said.

"Yeah, right," I said. No one had been on the phone since my fight with T.J.

"I *did*."

"Whatever. So you thought you'd come stake out my dorm?"

"I know you have breakfast with Kendall every morning," she said.

"So how long have you been waiting here?" I asked.

"Since four," she said miserably.

"Four?!"

"I didn't want to miss you," she said. Then she looked around. "Is there somewhere we can go? Somewhere private?"

"Why? So you can tell me that you like Regan's fucking strap-on more than me?"

"Paul, *please*."

"Come on, let's go," I said. Billy had spent the night with his friend Jamie, so my room was empty.

"Hey!" the RA at the desk called as Gina and I headed for the elevators. "You can't go up there."

I gave him a murderous look.

He blanched, but didn't back down.

"I'll meet you at the fire exit," Gina whispered.

I nodded tersely.

She looked like she wanted to give me a kiss, but then she thought better of it.

As Gina and I went our separate ways, I shot the RA an eat-shit-and-die look. He looked like he wanted to make an issue of it, but then I turned to face him and *he* thought better of it as well.

A few minutes later, after climbing the fire escape stairs, Gina and I entered my suite.

"That little fucking *weasel*," I said when I realized that the phone's receiver was sitting *on top* of the phone, rather than in the cradle. I looked at T.J. and Glen's flag-draped door and thought about kicking it, just to be spiteful. Unfortunately, they were both early-risers, and were probably already stirring. So kicking their door would simply buy me *more* trouble than I already had. Reluctantly, I decided against it.

"What's the matter?" Gina asked.

"Never mind," I said as I hung up the phone. Then I picked it up and dialed Kendall's apartment.

She answered after the second ring.

"Hey," I said. "It's me."

"What's the matter?" she asked, reading the tension in my voice.

"Gina and I got into this big fight last night," I said, glancing meaningfully at Gina, who was standing right beside me. "And she met me in the lobby to apologize," I continued. "Can we do breakfast some other time?"

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine," I half-lied. "I just wanna hear what Gina has to say for herself."

For her part, Gina seemed to shrink in upon herself. She even managed to look more miserable than she had in the lobby.

"Do you want me to come over?" Kendall asked.

"No, we're fine, thanks."

"Okay," Kendall said softly. Then, "I love you."

"I love you too," I said ostentatiously. I know it was cruel, but I wasn't in the mood to cut Gina any slack.

"I'm so sorry," Gina whispered when I hung up the phone. Then she sobbed quietly.

"Come on," I said angrily. Then I unlocked my door and ushered her inside. When I closed the door and tossed my backpack to the corner, she tried to sidle into my arms, but I pushed her away. "What the fuck do you want from me?" I asked.

"I want to tell you I'm sorry," she said.

"For what? For choosing Regan over *me?* For getting me all worked up and then leaving me with blue balls? Or did you want to apologize for being a complete fucking whore?"

Instead of replying heatedly, as I expected, she simply hung her head, her shoulders wracked by silent sobs.

"So… what? Did you come here to say *anything?*" I asked.

"Please," she whispered hoarsely.

She looked so completely wretched that my fury began to cool. I was still monumentally angry with her, but flinging more barbs at her would be like beating a whipped dog. And as angry as I was, I *wasn't* a heartless bastard.

"I'm so sorry," she breathed.

"Yeah, well, so am I."

"You don't understand, Paul."

"Don't understand?! I don't understand *what?!* That you had the chance to come back here with me or to go with Regan?" I asked, my fury returning. "Well, we see how much I understand about *that*."

"But I *had* to, Paul," she sobbed. "You don't understand what it's like for me."

"Then enlighten me," I said acidly.

"Regan's the only friend I have here."

"What about *me?!* Or Kendall?"

"I know how you feel about Kendall," she said, her heartbreak visible in her posture. "And I don't get to spend any time with you. You're always with *her*."

"No I'm not," I said, though I knew she was right.

"So what was I supposed to do?" she asked. "If it weren't for Regan, I'd have *no one*."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"How do you think I got into Chi Omega?" Gina asked miserably.

"What's that got to do with anyth—"

"Do you think it's 'cause they like *me?* Ha! Not likely."

"Then why'd you join?" I asked.

"What else was I supposed to do? I don't know anyone here, and the only two people I *do* know spend all their time together, without me." She took a deep, ragged breath. "So what was I supposed to do? If Regan hadn't convinced them to give me a bid, what would've happened? Huh, what?"

"I dunno. You could've been a Tri-Delt."

"Yeah, right. I'm a charity case for them. Do you really think Bridget was being so nice to me because she *likes* me? Or was it because she wants to show how big-hearted she is?"

"It's not like that and you know—"

"What do *you* know about it?" she asked sullenly. "Sororities aren't like fraternities."

"Then why'd you join one?" I repeated.

"What else was I going to do, sit in my room with Faith the Goody-two-shoes? I mean, I never get to see you anymore, I never get to see Kendall, and all I do is go to class and come back to my dingy room with my Bible-thumping roommate. What kind of life is that? If it weren't for Regan, I wouldn't know *anyone*. And if she wanted to, she could have me kicked out of the sorority. They're the only friends that *care* about me," she said. "So what was I supposed to do last night? Huh? *What?*"

"I didn't realize," I said softly. I was still angry about being left high and dry the night before, but I was also beginning to see things from Gina's perspective. And as angry as I was, I still loved her. What was it Kara had said was the opposite of love? Indifference? Well, I was a long way from indifference as far as Gina was concerned.

"So I came here to apologize," she said with a ragged sniffle. "To beg you to understand. To do anything to make it up to you. I'm so sorry, Paul. I didn't think you'd be so angry. I mean, my life here basically sucks," she added. "I don't know why I even get up in the morning. I can't do anything right, and when I try, I just make things worse."

When I heard her utter dejection, my chest tightened.

"I'd better go," she whispered. "Maybe you can still make it to breakfast with Kendall." Then she looked up, her eyes bloodshot and puffy, her dark, exotic, lovely face streaked with tears. "I'm sorry," she said at last.

"Gina, wait," I said, my voice husky with emotion.

Without looking up, she stopped.

"Look," I said, "I… I didn't know what it was like for you."

She shrugged indifferently.

"You don't have to go if you don't want to," I said.

She shrugged again. "It's okay. You can go meet Kendall. I know that's what you want to do anyway."

Emotions warred within me. On one hand, I was still angry about the night before. But on the other hand, seeing Gina's dejection and absolute misery made my resentment pale in comparison. I loved her, more than I thought possible, and it was tearing me apart to see her in such pain.

"I'd better go," she said, her head still down.

"No, wait." Before she could reach the door, I caught her. When I pulled her into my arms, her sobs returned full-force.

"I'm so sorry," she mumbled as she buried her face in my chest.

"Shhhh," I breathed, stroking her disheveled hair as I held her close.

"I didn't know what to do. I wanted to go with you, but Regan…"

"It's okay," I said, comforting her as best I could.

"When she said '*pledge* Gina,' I knew…"

I distractedly shushed her again; as I did, I seethed at what Regan had done. Most of my anger should've been directed at *her*, instead of Gina. True, Gina had still made the choice, but Regan had put her in an untenable position. Worse, I felt like I was part of the problem.

"I'm so sorry, Paul," Gina whispered in between sobs.

I merely held her as she cried. After several long, heartbreaking minutes, she calmed down.

"Let's get you cleaned up," I said softly.

"Do I look that bad?" she asked. "I'm sorry, I guess I should've—"

"You're fine," I lied. Then, "Do you feel like taking a shower?"

She nodded. "I haven't even been back to my room. After I left Regan's, I came over here."

"Did you really get to the lobby at four this morning?"

Miserably, she nodded.

"Jeez, Gina, I'm so sorry," I said.

She shrugged.

"C'mon," I said softly. "Let's get you cleaned up. C'mon."

"Do you want to…?" she asked.

"If you want me to."

She looked up and nodded tiredly. Then she snuffled. Finally, she smiled bleakly.

Once in the shower, I directed her under the steaming spray and gently washed her hair. After I rinsed the shampoo, I worked conditioner into her hair and tried to untangle the snarled mess. As I massaged her scalp, she rewarded me with soft moans of approval. She still wasn't smiling, but it was a step in the right direction.

After she rinsed her hair, I turned her to face me and tilted her chin up with my finger. I looked into her dark, troubled eyes and held her gaze with my own.

"I love you," I said. "I always will. I'm sorry I got so angry, but…"

"It's okay," she said with a shrug. "I should've gone with you."

"Did you at least have *fun* with Regan?" I asked.

"It was kinda hard to," she said. "I mean, I was worried about *you* the whole time I was with her."

I wrapped my arms around her and pulled her close. Her water-slick body pressed against mine and she shuddered. Then she began sobbing again.

When I finally got her calmed down, she looked up at me with tired, bloodshot eyes.

"I love you," she whispered. "I love you *so* much."

"I love you too," I said, hugging her tight.

After a few moments, she pulled back. "Can I borrow your razor?"

"What for?" I asked.

She rolled her eyes, a little of the old Gina shining through.

"Yeah, I guess," I said. Then I reached into my shower basket and retrieved the razor and my shaving cream.

She squirted a dollop of cream into her palm and then began to lather the tuft of pubic hair on her mons.

"What are you doing?" I asked, even though it was obvious.

"I'm shaving for you," she said softly. "Don't you want me to?"

"But I thought you said that Regan—"

"Regan's *not* my boyfriend," she said heatedly. "Besides, I don't ever want to speak to her again."

"Hold on a second," I said. "I thought she was your friend. Yeah, she was a total bitch last night, but you said she was normally pretty cool." *Besides,* I thought, *if Gina hadn't made many friends at UT, I didn't want her ostracizing the friends she* did *have, even if the "friend" in question was a manipulative bitch.*

"I guess," Gina said after a moment.

"And if you don't have anything to do with her, she'll get you kicked out of Chi Omega, right?"

"Probably," Gina said glumly.

"So don't do that," I said. "I mean, you really like most of the other girls, right?"

Tentatively, she nodded.

"And you still like Regan, don't you?" I asked, reading her conflicting emotions.

When I pressed her, she shrugged and reluctantly nodded.

"Just don't let her come between *us*," I said.

"I won't, Paul," she swore. "Never again."

"Good. Now, you don't have to shave if you don't want to. I know you don't like having to do it every day."

"Kendall does it, doesn't she? Besides, I want to remind myself whose girlfriend I am," she said.

"Thank you," I said softly. Then I tilted her head up for a kiss. As her mouth opened and the kiss heated up, I felt my dick stiffen. The night before, I'd been too angry to jerk off. As we kissed, however, my lust returned with a vengeance.

When we broke the kiss, Gina looked up at me from under dark lashes. Then she smiled shyly and turned her attention to her pubes. With deliberate strokes, she shaved her mons. Her labia were already smooth, but she ran the razor over them as well. Finally, she looked up at me and smiled.

"Thank you," I said again.

"Do you want to…? I mean… my nose is pretty stopped up, but we could… you know…," she said apprehensively.

I nodded and then pulled her close. As we kissed, my dick reached full erection, pressing into her soft belly as we ground together. When we broke the kiss, she smiled uncertainly as she caught her breath. I smiled and kissed her again, on the forehead. A moment later, I turned off the shower. Then we dried off and padded back to my room.

I looked at my clock—it wasn't even eight thirty—and decided to skip my nine o'clock drawing class. I had more important things to do, for Gina's sake *and* my own.

"Your air conditioner works," she said as she shivered.

"Get into bed," I suggested. "I'll be in to warm you up in a sec." Then I shut the blinds and dropped my towel on the floor by my closet. My erection led the way as I walked to the side of the bed.

Gina turned back the covers to reveal her nude body.

I stared at her perfection for a moment, my eyes lingering on her dark nipples. Then my gaze wandered lower, to her clean-shaven pussy.

"Make love to me, Paul," she whispered.

With a nod, I slid into bed with her. As I held myself above her, she gazed into my eyes. Hers were still puffy and red-rimmed, but they were full of love.

Between her legs, I felt the heat and moisture of her pussy wash over my hard-on. With movements so long-practiced that they were second nature, we moved against each other and I felt my cock enter her. She whimpered as I slid all the way into her. When I bottomed out, she wrapped her arms around me and held me close.

"I'm so sorry," she whispered again.

"Me too," I said.

"I love you."

"I love you too," I said, gazing into her liquid brown eyes.

Then I began moving within her and we stopped talking. My hips rose and fell with slow, gentle strokes. I took my time, plunging all the way into her before pulling out each time.

I wanted to last longer, but a surge of love overwhelmed me and I simply couldn't keep going. After several long strokes, I buried my cock deep within her. Then I groaned and released a torrent of white-hot semen.

"Oh, God," she whispered over and over again, her lips mere inches from my ear.

I was still hard when my orgasm subsided, so after I caught my breath, I started thrusting again. Gina wrapped her legs around my thighs and ran her fingernails over my back. As I gazed down at her, I was struck by the look of tenderness and devotion in her dark eyes.

The second time, I lasted a lot longer. I really don't know how long, nor do I care. Gina and I were one, our bodies moving in perfect synchronicity. Finally, I buried myself inside her and ground my hips against her pelvis. Then I emptied myself into her, the world going white as ecstasy raced along my nerves.

When the final surge of orgasmic pleasure overwhelmed me, she clutched me tight, her legs along my flanks and her hands on my ass, as if trying to pull me deeper inside her.

Afterward, we lay panting, my slowly softening dick still buried inside her.

"Feel my heart," she said at last.

I lifted up and put my hand on her chest, over her left breast.

"You still make my heart go pitter-pat. You always will."

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"Um, Paul?" Gina said softly.

"Yeah?" I'd been dozing, and blinked my eyes to clear them.

"Do you want me to quit the sorority?"

"Why would I want that?" I asked. We'd been over this in the shower, but I guess she wanted reassurance.

"Because of Regan," she said. "I mean, I'll quit if you want me to. I mean it."

"I know you would," I said softly, cupping her face as I did. "But I don't want you to."

She tried to hide it, but her relief was almost palpable.

"You have fun with them, right?"

She nodded.

"And you really *do* like Regan, don't you?"

After a moment's hesitation, she nodded.

"So I don't see why you'd want to quit."

"But I thought…," she said. "I mean, you know… after last night…"

"Just don't let last night happen again," I said firmly. When she nodded solemnly, I stroked her cheek and then tucked an errant lock of hair behind her ear. "And I'll try to spend more time with you," I continued. "I know we haven't seen much of each other lately. And it's a little different, because Kendall and I spend time together, but you're just as important to me as Kendall. Okay?"

Once again, she nodded silently. Then a dark look crossed her face.

"What is it?" I asked.

"What do you mean?" she asked, feigning innocence.

"You just thought about something," I said. "Something that bothered you. What was it?"

"You know me too well," she said, her dark complexion darkening further as she blushed. For a moment, she gathered her courage. Then, "Um… Susan's coming tomorrow, right?"

I nodded.

"If I'm not gonna… um… you know… if I'm not gonna quit Chi O… I mean…"

"Have you got something you need to do with them?"

She looked up, her expression grateful for not having to speak the words herself.

"What is it?" I asked evenly. I don't know how I felt about her missing dinner with Susan. On one hand, I was a little peeved, because Susan was such an important part of my—our—life. But on the other hand, I could understand things from Gina's perspective: the sorority was important to her, and it seemed to be an all-or-nothing kind of organization.

"We've got a mixer with the Pikes," she said, interrupting my introspection. "I have to go. It's some 'Roast the Eagle' party or something," she said. "I wanted to tell you, but…"

"It's okay." *I shouldn't beat her up over it after I* just *told her to stay in the sorority*, I thought with a mental sigh.

"So I can't have dinner with you and Susan. And I probably can't go to the airport with you either. Is that okay?"

"We'll miss you," I said, "but yeah, I guess it's okay. I mean, I'm not real happy about it, but you've got a life too. You know?"

"I'm so sorry, Paul," she said. "I really wanna go out with you all, but…"

"I understand," I said, suppressing a pang of remorse as I thought about what *I* might have been doing if I had pledged Sigma Chi.

"I should be able to go to the game with you all, though. You were gonna hang out with Kendall's parents, right?"

I nodded.

"Regan might be with me," she said softly, tentatively. Then she looked up, her eyes pleading

with me. “She’s really not so bad most of the time. I’ve never seen her like that. I think it was ’cause she’d done so much— I mean… um… she was just horny and all, and angry with Rod. He’s her ex-boyfriend.”

“I know,” I said. “It’s cool.”

“When’s your next class?” she asked, changing the subject abruptly.

“Twelve fifteen,” I said. “Art history.” At the mention of the class, I thought about the brunette, and the blonde. I felt guilty, but my dick stirred in response.

“Mine’s a chemistry lab,” Gina said. “At twelve.” Then she looked at my alarm clock. A moment later, she reached for my stiffening penis. “We’ve got some time before then. Do you want me to…? I mean, now that I can breathe, I want to suck you.”

“That sounds like a *great* idea,” I said, trying to banish visions of the Art History girls from my imagination.

As Gina slid lower and captured my semi-hard dick, I ran my fingers through her hair and focused on the sensations she created with her lips and tongue.

She sucked me for five or ten minutes and then straddled my hips. I watched, captivated, as her labia parted when she lowered herself onto my cock. I loved the contrast between my lightly tanned dick and her dark lips.

She had just begun moving atop me—her back arched and her breasts pointed skyward—when I heard the foyer door open. A moment later, I heard the snick of a key in the lock. Time seemed to stand still as I watched the door swing open.

“*Ohmygod*,” Billy blurted.

In a flash, time resumed and I blinked in shock.

“I’m so sorry,” Billy said.

Gina tried to cover herself as I sat up at the same time, almost dumping her from my lap. Before either of us could speak, Billy bolted from the room, the door slamming shut behind him.

In spite of the tension, Gina giggled.

“Billy, wait,” I called.

My life had just gotten quite a bit more complicated. Forget that my roommate had just caught me *in flagrante delicto*; Billy knew *Kendall* as my girlfriend, but he’d just caught *Gina* and me. That was bound to cause some questions, if not outright problems.

“Go,” Gina said, as if reading my mind.

My pussy-slick cock flopped against my stomach when she threw her leg over mine. With a guilty smile of thanks, I rolled out of bed. A moment later, a towel wrapped around my waist, I pounded down the hallway. I caught Billy as he nervously waited for the elevator.

“Billy, wait,” I said again. “I can explain.”

“Sorry, man,” he said. “I had no idea…”

“I should’ve left you a note or something,” I said lamely.

We were each still apologizing profusely when the elevator arrived.

“Come on back to the room,” I said.

He shook his head. “I was just coming to pick up a book for class,” he said, glancing away nervously. “I don’t really need it, though.”

“Are you sure?”

He nodded. “I’ve gotta get to class. Bye.”

With that, he got on the elevator and the doors closed.

After staring at the silent metal of the elevator doors for a moment, I looked down at myself. Then I felt my face heat with a mixture of amusement and embarrassment; I was still hard, and the towel barely disguised the fact.

"What happened?" Gina asked when I returned to the room. After I explained, she chuckled at my predicament. Then she let her own towel drop. A moment later, she glided toward me and sank to her knees. "If your roommate's not coming back, let's see if we can make your swelling go down," she said, her eyes aglow.

I was still worried about Billy and what he must have been thinking, but I quickly forgot about him as Gina started working her magic on my dick. Soon enough, I rewarded her efforts.

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Once again, I barely made it to Art History class on time. I was just about to open the auditorium's door when the brunette and the blonde dashed up the stairs. As soon as they saw me, they stopped giggling and composed themselves.

I opened the door and held it for them with a flourish. The brunette winked at me as she walked through the doorway. The blonde merely smiled and gave me a little wave. I tossed my head in reply and then followed her into the classroom.

Because the brunette sat down first, I ended up sitting next to the blonde. She smiled at me as I stuffed my backpack under my seat and took out my notebook.

When Professor Dubois's monotone lecture threatened to put me to sleep, I pulled out my sketchpad. I closed my eyes and imagined a walled villa that I'd seen during my summer trip to Europe. Then I started drawing, the lines flowing effortlessly.

A couple of times, I caught the blonde stealing glimpses at my drawing, but I pretended not to notice. In reality, I was proud of my ability to draw any building that I'd seen, and I guess I was showing off a little.

When the bell rang at the end of class, the blonde turned and pointed at my drawing.

"Where is that?" she asked.

Instead of being tongue-tied—as I invariably was with the brunette—I answered without a stutter. "Rome," I said.

"Have you ever been there?"

I nodded.

"So you drew that from memory?"

"I've got a good memory," I said.

At that point, the brunette looked past her friend.

"So you're tall, dark, mysterious, *and* artistic?" she asked me, her eyebrow arched in challenge.

Instead of answering, I choked. *Jeez!*

"And still tongue-tied, I see," she added.

While the brunette smirked, the blonde merely smiled apologetically, her blue eyes dancing with a mixture of compassion and laughter.

As I stepped aside to let them out of the row, the blonde smiled again.

"It's a very nice drawing," she said.

"Bye, Mysterious," the brunette said, her eyes flashing with mirth.

Once again, I was reduced to a simple wave.

"I have *got* to get a grip," I muttered to myself when they had gone.

After class, I walked to the Andy Holt Apartments to meet Kendall. As I did, I mulled over the events of the past twenty-four hours. Unfortunately, my thoughts turned maudlin.

"How'd it go this morning?" Kendall asked as she ushered me into the apartment.

"Actually, it started last night," I said. "This morning was just the final act."

She arched an eyebrow.

We moved to the couch and I started to tell her the whole story. As I talked about the trip to the sex shop, she was quiet. When I mentioned Regan, however, Kendall stiffened. Then I told her about how angry I was when Gina went home with the blonde girl instead of me.

"Why were you so upset?" Kendall asked, her voice deceptively calm.

"What do you mean 'why?' I was upset because Gina and Regan got me all worked up and then left me to fend for myself. And then, to put the cherry on top of my really-shitty-day sundae, I got in a fight with my suitemate last night, but that's another story entirely."

Instead of replying, Kendall grew quiet.

"What?" I asked.

"Nothing," she said, affecting a neutral expression.

"No, not 'nothing.' I may not know people as well as you do, but I know when you're holding something back."

"It's nothing. Really."

"Tell me," I pressed.

After a drawn-out moment, she turned to face me, her expression serious. "Why were you so upset that Gina went with Regan instead of you?"

"Because I wanted Gina to go with *me*."

"Because you were horny?"

"Yeah, I guess," I said. "So?"

"So you just *expected* Gina to have sex with you?"

"Well… yeah. She's my girlfriend."

"I'm your girlfriend," Kendall said. "Do you expect me to have sex with you whenever you want?"

"That's not what I meant."

"Then what *did* you mean?"

"Well," I said. "I mean, Gina and Regan got me all worked up, and I thought—"

"You thought *what?*" she asked, the first flash of genuine anger that I'd seen from her. "You thought that since *they* got you worked up that they were somehow *obligated* to have sex with you. Is that how it works?"

"That's not what I meant and you know it," I said. The discussion was going to hell in a handbasket, and I felt like a helpless spectator.

"Then what *did* you mean?" she repeated. She seemed to be asking that a lot.

"I mean I kinda expected Gina and Regan to—"

"So you thought you were going to get lucky with Regan too?"

My guilty silence was answer enough.

"And when were you going to ask *me* what I thought about that?" she asked, her eyes welling

with tears of frustration.

"Kendall, I—"

"Don't 'Kendall' me. I want to know. I thought we were supposed to talk about it if we ever wanted to have sex with someone else. Or am I not included in that since I'm your *second* girlfriend?"

Fuck! I thought. *Not her too. God, I want the last two days of my fucking life back!*

"Well?" she asked.

"What do you want me to say?" I asked, my hands spread in supplication.

That took her by surprise.

"Do you want me to say I'm sorry? Well, I am. Do you want me to say I screwed up? Okay, I screwed up. Big time. Do you want me to say I'm a male chauvinist pig? Okay, I'm a male chauvinist pig."

"This is all Gina's fault," Kendall spat.

I blinked at her sudden change of focus. I was happy to be let off the hook, but I had *no* idea what she was talking about.

"She *always* does this, and I'm sick of it."

"Huh?"

"Lisa?" Kendall asked contemptuously. "Heather? And now Regan? You don't think it's a coincidence, do you?"

"What do you mean?"

"Gina always does this. She wants to fool around with some girl—who always fits a stereotype, by the way—and she uses you to lure them into sleeping with her."

"What?"

"Think about it, Paul," she said. "Gina goes for the same type of girl and she does the same thing each time."

"No she doesn't, it's…," I said, trailing off as I thought about what Kendall had said.

"Gina likes blonde girls with a wild personality—which doesn't explain why she ever liked *me*, but that's beside the point. She uses *you* as a lure to get the girl to start having sex. Then she can watch or play or whatever she wants. It's pathological."

"Whatever *that* means," I mumbled.

"It means that she does it over and over again. And I'm sick of it. She's always getting you to have sex with these other girls, just so *she* can have sex with them. Don't you see?"

Unfortunately, I *did* see.

"She's *using* you," she said emphatically. "You're her own personal… stud bait."

"It's not like that, Kendall," I said. I don't know if I believed it or not, though. "Besides," I said, hoping to head off trouble, "I thought you said you didn't mind that I was fooling around with Heather."

"What could I *do* about it?" she asked, her tears welling anew. "Until you came to school here, I really *was* your second girlfriend. Well, not anymore."

I was taken aback by her intensity.

"I don't like how Gina manipulates you to get what she wants. She's supposed to be your girlfriend, not your… *pimp*."

"It's not like that," I said again. "She was lonely. And besides, Regan seduced *her*, not the

other way around."

"It still fits Gina's pathology," Kendall said, unconvinced.

Unfortunately, I could see things from both Gina's and Kendall's points of view. They were both right, and both wrong.

"It really bugs me when Gina does this," Kendall said, her tone calmer. "And you're partly to blame," she added. "I mean, you *expected* to have sex with Regan."

So I'm not off the hook after all, I thought sourly.

"You might not have realized it, but you were falling into Gina's pathology too."

"I guess," I admitted after a moment. "I'm sorry."

"You should be," she said, surprising me. "You should never *expect* to have sex with a woman just because she's gotten you aroused."

"I know," I said. "I'm sorry."

"And just because a woman *wants* sex doesn't mean you have a right to demand it."

I nodded.

Then she looked down and wrung her hands.

"What?" I asked.

After a moment, she sighed deeply and then sniffled. "I've been doing a lot of thinking about something you said a while ago."

"And?" I prompted, fully expecting the *other* shoe to drop.

"Maybe I *do* have a sex drive as strong as Gina's."

I blinked at her non sequitur.

"Sometimes, all I can think about is when I'll see you next," she continued. Then she grew silent for a moment. "But if I ever thought you *expected*—"

"I *don't*," I said quickly. "Yeah, I guess I'm always *hoping* to have sex with you, but I've never expected it."

"Thank you," she said softly, still staring at her hands. Then, quietly, "I like to think I'm some strong feminist, that I don't *need* a man to validate my identity. But then sometimes, I wonder if I'm not more like my mom. I don't define myself by the man in my life, but you're a lot more important to me than I ever thought possible. I don't know what I'd do without you. But worse, I don't know what I'd do if I ever felt like you were taking me for granted."

"I won't," I said softly.

"I don't like it when Gina takes you for granted, either. And I *especially* don't like it when she uses you to get what she wants. It's not fair to you, and it's not fair to *me*."

"You're right."

At my words, she looked up, her eyes full of unshed tears. With a bleak smile, she wiped them away. More replaced them, of course.

"I'm sorry," I said. I seemed to be saying that a lot lately.

"Me too," she said. "I didn't mean to get so upset. But when Gina—"

"Shush," I said softly. "We've already been down that road. Okay?"

She nodded.

"Right now, it's just you and me."

"Right *now*," she said. "But what about next time, when Gina… oh, never mind."

"She won't. I think she was as upset about last night as I was," I said. *Although for different*

reasons, I added silently.

Kendall took my words at face value.

Then I pulled her close, enfolding her in the warmth of my embrace.

"I love you," she whispered, her voice hoarse with pent-up emotion.

"I love you too." For a few minutes, I simply held her, my physical presence banishing her worries and fears. After a moment, I inhaled the scent of her hair and then ran my hand down her back. "You're wearing your white robe," I said softly.

She nodded.

"You always look so beautiful in it," I said. "It really shows off your legs."

"Thank you," she said. Then she lifted her face and we kissed, tentatively at first, but with growing heat. "So, are you expecting to get lucky?" she asked when we broke the kiss. Her tone was light and not-quite-teasing, but it held a serious note.

"No," I said softly. "But I'm hoping…"

"Good answer," she said as she stood. Then she reached down. When I took her hand, she chuckled ruefully.

"What?"

"Maybe I *am* as horny as Gina," she said with a shy grin.

"That's a good thing," I said as she led me down the hallway. "A *very* good thing."

In her bedroom, I slowly stripped off my clothes. I was still a little worn out from my morning with Gina, but Kendall could always inspire me to more. Consequently, when I lowered my shorts and underwear, my erection sprang up.

"Is that for me?" Kendall asked.

I nodded and kicked my clothes to the side. Then I untied the belt of her robe. With a shrug, she let it slip from her shoulders. As I pulled her toward me, my erection pressed against her soft thigh.

For a few minutes, we kissed, our tongues languidly dancing with each other. I cupped her ass and held her luscious body against mine, her skin warm and silky smooth.

When we finally broke our extended kiss, I moved us toward the bed. As she lay back, I knelt between her legs and began kissing down her trim stomach. With my hands on her hips, I moved lower, planting butterfly-light kisses on her skin as I did. Finally, I settled on my stomach, my face mere inches from her clean-shaven slit.

I inhaled the fragrance of her arousal. Her thighs trembled in anticipation as I kissed the sensitive skin, my lips trailing ever closer to their ultimate goal. As she lifted her legs, I put my hands on her inner thighs and spread them.

Her labia were already plump and moist with arousal. When I parted them with my thumbs, her inner labia peeked out, swelling as well. For a moment, I simply admired her pussy. She was smaller than Gina, and instead of dark lips, hers were pale.

As I gazed at them, however, they went from pale to rosy pink, rouged by her mounting excitement. Instead of diving in, however, I took my time and kissed all around her smooth lips and mons. It drove her crazy. I could hear her breathing grow shallow and ragged as her anticipation built.

My lips caressed every piece of skin *except* the one she wanted most, and after several minutes of mounting tension, I finally gave in to her unspoken pleas. With a mischievous grin, I

gently blew on her moist sex. She shuddered in response, her thighs quivering under my palms. Then I leaned forward and planted a kiss on her blossoming labia.

"Oh, Paul," she sighed. "Don't tease me."

I grinned to myself and continued doing just that. Her hips rocked gently as I licked and kissed up and down her swollen slit, spreading her moisture and coating my cheeks. She tasted tangy and fresh, metallic but sweet. It was a taste like no other, and I relished it.

Finally, I flicked the tip of my tongue against her hooded clit. She jumped as if stung, but I knew better. Instead of shying away from the contact, she lifted her hips and tried to force her pussy against my mouth.

I pulled back, teasing her.

"Paul, please," she begged.

Once again, I smiled to myself and then kissed her pussy, my lips pursed around the swollen bud of her clit. She wanted me to do more, but I pulled back.

She moaned.

Instead of returning my lips to her pussy, I kissed the soft crease between her thigh and her ass, the heady aroma of her arousal hanging around me like an intoxicating cloud. As I switched from the right to the left, I brushed my lips over her slit. She gasped when she felt my warm breath on her swollen labia. But I continued to her other thigh, kissing and caressing it as well.

At last, I relented and moved back to her pussy. Her trim stomach fluttered as I looked up her body, past the rise of her rib cage. Her generous breasts were flattened to the side, and she was busy playing with her nipples. With an unseen grin, I lowered my head. Then I buried my tongue in her slit, lapping up her juices as I pleasured her.

She gasped and I felt her fingers twine through my hair, her nipples all but forgotten. When I circled her hooded but swollen clit, she cried out softly.

Finally, I wrapped my lips around her clit and sucked gently. Her hips bucked against me, trying to force more of my mouth against her. I rewarded her by flicking my tongue side-to-side.

Then I began licking in earnest, my tongue, lips, teeth, chin, and nose working together to pleasure her. She bucked her hips again, all but lost in ecstasy.

As I waggled my tongue through her delicate folds, I held her steady with my hands on her thighs. My neck easily absorbed the shocks as she occasionally bucked. But I also paid attention to *when* she thrust her hips at me, and what I was doing at the time. With passionate ruthlessness, I returned to the things I knew she enjoyed.

For several delectable, intense minutes, I varied my tempo, pressure, and focus. Then I felt her tense up. A moment later, I felt her hands leave my head, and I knew she was tweaking her own nipples. I put my tongue into overdrive and dived into her, circling her sensitive clit at the end of each stroke.

As her pleasure built, I gently shoved a finger into her tight opening. When I did, she moaned softly and her body quivered with pent-up emotion.

Finally, she erupted, and a gush of moisture coated my finger. Instead of crying out, she grew quiet, and I knew she was holding her breath. Sure enough, when her orgasm began to subside, she let out an explosive breath and her stomach heaved erratically.

As I raised up and crawled forward—my face still damp with her juices—she wrapped her arms around me. Then she wrapped her legs around me as well, my erection bumping against her

slippery pussy.

Instead of speaking, she kissed me, tasting her own juices on my lips. Without breaking the kiss, I lowered my hips and felt the head of my dick slide along her channel. When it reached the bottom, I eased forward and the glans entered her. She moaned into my mouth as I slowly worked my way into her super-tight pussy. When I buried myself completely—her inner muscles still rippling with aftershocks—we broke the kiss.

"That feels wonderful," she whispered. Then she gazed up at me, her blue eyes round and full of love. "Make love to me," she said softly.

I nodded and began moving within her.

As my dick slid from within her, she whimpered. I could feel her inner walls contracting around me, gently squeezing my dick and trying to hold me inside. When I reached the end of my stroke and started to ease back into her, her muscles parted reluctantly. But they parted nonetheless, and my girth spread her open.

"I love feeling you inside me," she said softly. "You're so big, so perfect."

"I'm glad you think so," I said, my breathing growing heavier.

With that, we quit talking.

Her bed squeaked beneath us as I plunged into her, but the rhythm was hypnotic. I closed my eyes and enjoyed all the sensations assaulting me—from the feeling as her snug pussy gripped me to the gentle pressure of her hands on my sides.

Since I had already come several times that day, I knew it would take me a while to work up to another orgasm. So I took my time and enjoyed myself. Kendall was magnificent to behold as I thrust into her, her eyes closed, her face a mask of ecstasy. Her eyelids had turned a dusky pink, and her face and chest were flushed as well. Beneath me, her nipples described circles in the air as her breasts bounced with each thrust.

After a few minutes of steadily pumping into her, I pulled out, my pussy-slick cock bobbing gently as I did.

"Roll over, on your hands and knees," I said. "I want to fuck you from behind."

A moment later, she rose on all fours, her flared hips and narrow waist on display before me. For a moment, I simply admired her body. Then I scooted forward, my dick aiming at her round ass. I put my left hand on her flank to steady myself. Then I gripped my shaft and eased into her. She moaned softly as I filled her. Then I put both hands on her hips and held myself motionless, simply delighting in the feel of her pussy.

Finally, I drew back and paused for a moment. At her insistent moan, I lunged into her, my hips slapping her ass. Then I began thrusting, my shiny dick sliding in and out of her. Her bed squeaked even worse than before, and I was thankful that we had the apartment to ourselves.

Those thoughts soon fled my mind, however, as we got into a rhythm. When I thrust forward, she moved back, my hips meeting her ass with a slap. When I pulled back, she rocked forward. Over and over, I plowed into her.

After a few minutes, I leaned over her back and supported myself with my left arm. With my right arm, I reached around her body and cupped one of her pendulous breasts. She moaned as I gently pinched and rolled her nipple.

"Come inside me," she gasped as I quickened my pace. "I want to see your face when you come."

I nodded and sat back on my haunches, my slippery dick pulling free of her pussy. She drew one leg forward and rolled to her back. Then she pulled the other leg up and scooted toward the center of the bed. Before she could lower her leg, I captured her ankle and held it aloft. Then I reached for her other leg and lifted it as well.

With my hands on her ankles, I spread her legs until my arm hit the wall. Then I scooted my hips forward. Her pussy spread open before me, swollen, pink, and shiny. I rocked my hips back and forth, running the underside ridge of my cock along her slit.

She gazed up at me, her eyes glassy with lust. She didn't need words to convey the fact that she liked my body. I watched as her eyes slid lower, over the thick muscles of my shoulders and chest.

With undisguised fascination, I watched as the tip of my dick eased into her channel. Her fleshy inner labia parted as I slid inside her. I've always been enthralled by the sight of my cock spreading a shaved pair of lips, and this time was no exception. Finally, my neatly trimmed pubic hair compressed against her mons as I came to rest deep inside her.

Her pussy was a vise-like sauna: tight, hot, and wet. And her labia spread around my thick member, embracing it, holding it fast, caressing it. Reluctantly, I tore my eyes away and looked up. She was watching me, her expression quizzical.

"You look so fascinated," she said softly.

"I guess I am," I admitted. "I mean, I don't think I'll ever get tired of seeing this sight," I said, nodding to where our bodies were joined.

She reached up and caressed my face, her eyes full of love. I smiled down at her and blew her a kiss.

"I love you," I whispered.

"I love you too."

With that, I started thrusting, and our conversation came to an abrupt end. She whimpered and I groaned, both of us inarticulate in our ecstasy. I put her ankles over my shoulders and leaned forward, bending her almost in half. Then she reached between her legs and caressed my face, urging me on with her silent touches.

For several minutes, I merely pounded into her, my hips rising and falling, burying my cock deep within her. As I thrust, my pelvis slapped against her upturned ass. Beneath us, the bed squeaked, adding to the symphony of sex.

Finally, blissfully, I felt the pressure build in my balls. With a low grunt, I buried myself as deep as possible. Then I clenched my buttocks and tried to bury myself deeper still. For a moment, I trembled as the rush of impending orgasm almost overwhelmed me. Then I stiffened and filled her with semen.

When my orgasm subsided, I opened my eyes. It took them a second to focus, but when they did, I gazed down at her smiling face. To either side of my ears, she wiggled her toes, her smile widening further.

"My," she said panting, "that was… wow."

I nodded, my nostrils flaring as I inhaled deeply.

"I thought you were gonna break the bed."

Instead of answering, I kissed her, my dick slowly softening within her. When we broke the kiss, I lifted my arms one at a time and let her lower her legs. Then I sat back on my haunches,

and my semi-hard member slipped from her pussy. Once again, I marveled at her sheer beauty. Freshly fucked, she seemed to glow, a sheen of sweat coating her body.

"What?" she asked, suddenly concerned.

"I was just thinking how beautiful you are," I said.

She ran her hands along my forearms and smiled in reply.

"I love you," I said.

"I love you too. Very, very much."

✧ ✧ ✧

Before dinner, I went to work out with Trip and the other guys. I smelled like sex, but I hoped they wouldn't notice. Besides, soon enough, I'd smell like sweat anyway, and no one would care.

After my marathon day of fights and heated discussions—followed by make-up sex and then *more* make-up sex—I was exhausted, both mentally and physically. I made it through my workout, but just barely. Fortunately, Luke and Jeff didn't notice. *Un*fortunately, Trip did.

"Hey, y'all," Luke said as we cooled down. "*The French Connection*'s playing at the UC tonight. Y'all wanna go?"

"What's it about?" Jeff asked.

"It's about these New York cops who're trying to stop a heroin shipment from France," Luke said.

As he explained the plot to Jeff, I zoned out.

"You okay?" Trip asked me quietly.

I looked up in surprise.

"You look… worn out," he said.

"I just worked out," I temporized.

"Yeah, but that's not it."

I shrugged. "I've just had a rough day, I guess," I said.

"Okay," he said.

"So," Luke asked, turning his attention to Trip and me, "y'all wanna go?"

"I'm gonna pass," I said. "I'm beat, and I've got reading to do for class tomorrow." Then I glanced at Trip. Since my reading was for Joska's class, Trip and I shared a knowing look. In my mind, I heard him say, *"Lesson learned, so let's move on."* I chuckled at the thought (not to mention the wisdom of his words).

"What's so funny?" Luke asked.

"Trip knows," I said. When he looked at me, I got the feeling that he *did* know what I'd been thinking.

"I'm gonna pass too," he said. "I've also got reading."

"I'll go," Jeff said. "It sounds like fun."

"Come on then, you skinny dork," Luke said.

"Fuck you, you hairy fuck," Jeff replied.

Not surprisingly, Jeff took off running, with Luke in hot pursuit.

"You know, I don't know *how* those two have the energy to chase each other," Trip said.

"A*men*, brother," I replied.

"Anyway, I'm not gonna try and keep up with 'em."

I shook my head.

"You up for dinner?" he asked.

"I'm supposed to meet Kendall and her roommate," I said. "But you're welcome to join us."

"You sure?"

"Yeah. We're just eating at Morrill. It's no big deal."

"Okay. Thanks," he said. Then, "How's the food there? I haven't tried it yet. I guess I thought it was only for upperclassmen."

I shook my head. "It's open to anyone with a meal plan. But Morrill's full of juniors and seniors, with a few sophomores. So yeah, it's *mostly* an upperclassman dining hall, but not really."

He nodded.

"Besides," I added, "the food's a lot better than Presidential."

"Really?"

"Uh-huh."

"Cool."

We walked in silence the rest of the way back to the dorm. Trip could tell that I wasn't in the mood for conversation, so he left me to my thoughts.

On a whim, I decided to call Gina's room after I got cleaned up. Faith told me that she was doing something with the sorority (*or Regan*, I thought semi-resentfully).

At dinner, I was quiet, but Kendall was in an affectionate mood. Fortunately, she seemed content to sit close to me and let me remain silent. I wasn't brooding—I was simply exhausted—so she didn't try to draw me out. As I picked at my food, however, I listened to Trip and Abby talk about music.

I knew that Trip thought Abby was cute, but he didn't flirt with her. He was polite, and he paid attention, but nothing more. Once again, I wondered what had happened with his ex-girlfriend.

A moment later, Kendall took my hand and held it. I glanced at her, glad for the distraction. I still didn't want to join the conversation, even though Trip was talking about one of my favorite bands, Blondie. I guess I was in my own little world.

After dinner, I kissed Kendall goodbye. We all had homework to do, so we headed back to our separate dorms.

"You wanna grab your book and come over?" Trip asked as we rode the elevator. "We can get our reading done and then listen to some tunes. I've got a new Pete Townshend album that I wanna listen to. It came out last year, but I hadn't bought it yet. It's called 'Empty Glass,' and it's his first solo album since he left *The Who*. So, you up for it?"

"I guess," I said.

"Okay. Grab your book and I'll see you in a sec."

I nodded and then we headed into our separate suites.

"Hey, Loverboy," T.J. called through his open door.

"What?" I answered, trying to hold my temper in check.

"You get any *phone calls?*" he asked with a snicker.

"Yeah," I said, stepping into his room, "but tell your mom to stop calling me."

In a flash, he jumped to his feet and bristled. "What did you say, faggot?" he asked.

I flexed my fingers and lowered my center of gravity, ready for him.

"*Jesus H. Christ,*" Glen said, slamming his book closed as he stood up. "Will you two *cool it?!*"

"What?" T.J. asked, the picture of falsely accused innocence.

Glen didn't say another word. He simply walked over to me. I did my best to stand my ground, but inside, my nerves thrummed. To my surprise, he gently but firmly ushered me out of the room and closed the door behind me.

I unconsciously breathed a sigh of relief. Through the door, I heard T.J. arguing, but Glen never uttered a word. With a jittery sigh, I took out my keys and unlocked my own door.

As the adrenaline rush slowly wore off, I grabbed my Architecture book and headed across the hall. Trip was strumming his guitar when I pushed the door all the way open.

"Hey, man," he said. "C'mon in. Have a seat," he added, indicating Luke's bed. Then he set down his guitar and reached over to his desk for his textbook.

Without preamble, I flopped onto Luke's bed and opened my book. For the next hour, Trip and I read in silence. Our assignment dealt with human sciences—psychology and sociology—and how they applied to design.

At first, I found it dry and boring, but before I realized it, I was devouring the material. I had always thought that being an architect meant designing a building's form, but as I read, I realized that *function* was equally important. After all, why design a building that no one could use? And I was fascinated by the study of people and their reactions, how they responded to light, space, color, texture, and more. The section on sociology and group dynamics was equally fascinating.

When I finished reading the assigned sections, I realized that Trip still had a number of pages to finish. So I flipped back to the beginning of the chapter and re-read the parts that I found most interesting. I was tempted to read ahead—the final part of the chapter was about ergonomics—but Trip finished reading before I could.

"Whatever *that* means," he muttered as he shut his book.

"What? That was the coolest thing I've read yet."

"Really?"

I nodded enthusiastically.

"I didn't get much of it. I mean, I'm normally a quick reader, but that was like pulling teeth."

"No it wasn't, man," I said. "For instance, I never thought about how people react to light, especially sunlight. I mean, I always thought light was light," I added. Then I flipped to a page in my book. "But look… this part where it talks about natural lighting improving people's mood… that's totally cool. And how about the way people perceive texture and depth? Here, where it talks about…"

For the next ten minutes, I think I bored Trip to tears. He could tell that I was excited, however, so he let me blather on. Finally, I wound down.

"Well," he said, half-sardonically, half-seriously, "now I know how to get you in a good mood."

"How?"

"Start talking about human sciences and architecture."

I felt my face heat.

"I'm just kidding, man," he said. "Mostly."

"Sorry. I guess I got carried away."

"Nah, it's cool. I wanna be an architect, but I just don't get into this psychology stuff like you do. And I pray to God that Joska doesn't ask me about it tomorrow. Anyway, let's check out that new Pete Townshend LP."

The album was actually pretty good. Trip listened to it with the same intensity that I'd had when talking about light and texture. I just listened to it for fun. I had heard "Let My Love Open the Door" before, but the other songs were completely new to me. After the second side finished playing, Trip flipped the disk over and restarted the first side. Then he turned down the volume and relaxed on his bed.

"So, what'd you think?" he asked.

"It was pretty cool," I said. "I liked the third song on the first side, the one right before 'Let My Love Open the Door.'"

"'And I Moved,'" Trip said without looking at the LP's dust jacket.

"I also like that song on the second side, the one that goes 'a little is enough.' What's that one called?"

"'A Little Is Enough,'" he said with a chuckle. "Clever, huh?"

"Yeah."

"It's a good album," he said, propping himself up on one elbow. "You can really tell that Townshend's broken away from the stuff he wrote for *The Who*. I mean, his guitar riffs are cleaner, more refined. They don't have the driving sound of *The Who*, from songs like 'Who Are You,' or 'Won't Get Fooled Again,' but they're definitely cool."

For the next ten minutes, Trip didn't exactly bore me to tears, but he talked about nuances in the music that *I* certainly hadn't noticed. It was fun listening to him, but I couldn't imagine hearing that much variation in what was basically—to me—a simple album. But Trip liked it. And since he had listened to me prattle on about something I was interested in, I listened and tried to nod at the right times.

"God," he said at last, "I wish I could play like Townshend. Or Eric Clapton, or Duane Allman, or B.B. King, or… or a lot of guys."

"I dunno," I said, "you sounded pretty good when I heard you playing before."

"Thanks," he said. "I'm okay." Then he turned wistful and looked at his guitar.

"What?" I asked.

"I was just thinking," he said, shaking his head sadly.

"About what?"

"Lori gave me that guitar," he said. "I don't know why I keep it, though," he added. Then he reached out and caressed the wood. "Actually," he said with a laugh, "I *know* why I keep it; it's a Martin D-28." When he saw my blank expression, he explained. "It's a really nice guitar. It's got a spruce top, East Indian rosewood sides and back, and a solid mahogany neck. And it has a really warm, rich sound."

"I guess I'll have to take your word for it," I said.

"Trust me," he said. Then he strummed the guitar and threatened to turn maudlin again.

"D'you mind if I ask you a personal question?" I asked.

He shrugged.

"What happened with you and Lori? I mean, if you don't wanna tell me, that's cool, but…"

"It's okay, man," he said. For a long, drawn-out moment, he sat silently. I thought he wasn't

going to tell me after all, but then he sighed and set the guitar aside. As he stared at his hands, he spoke quietly. “Lori was my girlfriend all through high school. Actually, we started going together in eighth grade.”

I nodded.

“Oh, God, how I loved her,” he said, brightening for the first time in several minutes. “I could talk to her for hours, about everything. And she was *so* beautiful. Still is, I guess. She had dark hair and these gorgeous hazel eyes, and every time I saw her smile, I felt like I was gonna burst. You know?” When he looked up, he had tears in his eyes. Somehow, I knew that he’d never let Luke or Jeff see him get so emotional.

“What happened?” I asked quietly.

He shrugged. “She said she fell out of love. I mean, how’s that work? Do you wake up one day and suddenly not love someone? Like *bam!?* Is that how it works?”

“I dunno, man.”

“Anyway,” he said, shrugging again, “that’s what she said. I tried to get her to explain, but that’s all she ever told me,” he said. Then he took a deep breath and wiped his eyes. “We were gonna go to Vanderbilt together, but…”

“Yeah.”

“She broke up with me graduation night. We were at this party, and she told me. Then she left with some other guy.”

“That’s cold, man. What’d you do?” I asked.

“Wreck my dad’s car,” he said with an embarrassed laugh.

“No shit, dude?”

“No shit,” he said.

“What, were you drunk?”

“Nope. I was stone-cold sober. Would you believe it?”

I nodded.

“I wrapped that Cadillac around a tree.”

“Were you okay?”

“Yeah,” he said. “I was fine. The car… well… the car, on the other hand, looked like a pretzel.”

“I bet your dad was *pissed off*,” I said.

“Um, yeah.”

“What’d he do?”

“He made me pay for it,” he said. “Well, not all of it, but half of the insurance value.”

“Holy shit, man! How much was it?”

“It was a *lot*. Six grand.”

My eyes flew wide. “Six *grand?!*”

“Yep. More than half of my tuition money.”

“Wait a sec,” I said. “Your dad made you give him your tuition money?”

“Well, yeah, but…”

“But what?” I asked.

“He told me he’d pay for school for the first year.”

“Is that why you’re at UT instead of Vanderbilt?”

He shook his head. “I’m at UT because Lori and what’s-his-name are at Vanderbilt. I didn’t even wanna be in the same *town* with her. And I kinda swore off women after we broke up.”

That answers a lot, I thought.

“But my dad said he’d pay for Vanderbilt. He was kinda surprised that I wanted to go to UT, but… well… I think he understood.”

I nodded.

“And besides, he knows he’ll only have to pay for one year of school.”

“Why’s that?” I asked. “Do you have a scholarship or something?”

“Uh-uh. I’m paying for my own school after this year.”

“How?”

“My last house sold,” he said.

“Your last *what?!*”

“My last house,” he said seriously. “When I was fourteen, I started my own business. My dad bought a house and I planned on fixing it up. But it was a *lot* more than I could do by myself, so my dad loaned me the money and I hired a crew to do the renovation. I still made a profit when it sold, though. So the next summer, I asked my dad to buy *two* houses, and had crews renovate both of them. When they sold, I reinvested the profit.”

I stared at him, agog.

“When I was sixteen, I used my own money to put a down payment on another house. My dad signed the loan, I managed the crew that renovated the house, and then I sold it for a healthy profit.”

“What’d the crew think about working for a sixteen-year-old?” I asked.

“At first, some of the guys thought it was a joke. But a couple of them had worked for me the summer before, and they knew me. I paid good money, I was fair, and they knew I was serious.”

“You’re *kidding*.”

“Nope. When I was seventeen, I bought two houses, managed the crews renovating them both, and reinvested my profits. I did the same thing this summer.”

“What for?” I asked.

“For the money,” he said seriously. “And for the experience. I mean, I’ve known I wanted to be an architect since I was ten.”

I envied his drive and certainty.

“And I wanted to pay for college on my own,” he continued. “So when I wrecked my dad’s car, I thought I was screwed, at least until one of my houses sold. My dad knew I’d pay him back, but that’s not why he offered to pay for college. I think he felt guilty about making me pay for half the car. But it was the right thing for him to do.”

I nodded.

“And then about a week ago,” he continued, “my dad closed escrow on the last house.”

I had no idea what “closed escrow” meant, but it sounded like a good thing.

“So now I’ve got the money for next year’s tuition, and my dad doesn’t have to pay for it.”

“Jeez,” I said. “I just asked my parents to pay for school.”

“Yeah, well, stick with me,” he said, “and we’ll have you paying for your own tuition in no time.”

“How?” I asked. Okay, sometimes I’m still a little slow on the uptake.

"What d'you think I'm gonna do *next* summer?" he asked.

"Oh. Yeah. Right."

"And I'll show you how it's done."

"That's a great idea," I said, "but I don't have the money to buy a house."

"Get your parents to loan you the money. You can buy in as a junior partner and then when we sell, you'll get a share of the profits. After you pay your parents back, you'll still have quite a bit of money, several thousand dollars, at least."

How did this go from a discussion of his *ex-girlfriend to a talk about* my *future?* I wondered.

"Reinvest some of your profits for the summer after next," he continued, "and use the rest to pay for tuition."

"Can you *really* make that much money?" I asked.

He nodded seriously. "Even after repaying all the loans, I have quite a bit of money in the bank, all from reinvesting my profits," he said. "But don't mention that to anyone else. Okay? I don't want anyone to think I'm some kind of rich snob or something."

I closed my mouth with a clomp. A moment later, still dumbfounded, I nodded.

"Anyway, I've got enough money to buy one house outright, as long as we don't get too fancy," he continued. "But we need to have the capital to renovate it, so I'll probably use our cash to put a down payment on two houses, finance the rest of the purchases, get construction loans, and keep a cash reserve for emergencies."

"Emergencies?" I asked, finally finding my voice.

"Something *always* goes wrong when you're renovating a house," he said. "So we're gonna need to have some money to deal with it."

I nodded. Then I realized with a start that he was already talking about "we" this and "we" that.

"My dad has always made good money as a partner," he continued, "so I know he'll sign for the loans. Actually, I co-signed this summer's loans—since I was eighteen—which means that I *may* be able to buy next summer's houses without my dad's help. It depends on my credit rating, though."

"Yeah," I said, nodding as if I understood what he meant.

"Anyway," he said, "that's how I'll pay for school. And I can't believe you're letting your parents pay for your tuition," he scolded gently. "I mean, we're supposed to be adults, right? And I certainly don't have some secret formula. You can do what I'm doing. Besides, it's good experience for being an architect."

I nodded, still a little astonished by it all.

"You're starting later than I did, obviously," he said, "but I think you'll be pretty happy with the first summer's profits, even as a junior partner. I mean, what *else* are you gonna do next summer," he asked, "go to summer camp?"

✧ ✧ ✧

When Billy came home from working on the *Dracula* set, he seemed tentative. I understood why, too. I think I'd be pretty embarrassed if I caught *him* in bed with his girlfriend (if he had one, that is).

Neither of us said anything about the incident earlier in the day, but it hung over us like a pall. I think he was more uncomfortable than curious, which was fine by me. I didn't want to explain

why I was in bed with a girl he knew wasn't my girlfriend. And I don't think he wanted to even *mention* the particulars, much less discuss them in detail.

We did, however, talk about how we could let each other know if one of us had a girl in the room, although he seemed *doubly* nervous about that. As long as he wasn't asking about Gina and me, though, I wasn't going to ask why he was uneasy.

In the end, neither of us could come up with a clever solution, so I simply borrowed from a story my father had told me: we decided to hang a necktie around the doorknob when one of us wanted to wave off the other.

Billy seemed relieved when we settled the matter, which laid to rest some of my anxieties as well. Finally, he took out a book and buried his nose in it. I had reading to do for American Literature (even if Professor Feller was going to give me a grade, I felt the need to *earn* a good one), so I took out my book.

A couple of times, I thought I saw Billy staring at me, but every time I looked up, he was studiously reading. Finally, we decided to turn out the lights and go to sleep.

Unfortunately, I lay awake for a long time. At first, I was thinking about Billy. He certainly hadn't reacted like I thought he would, and that piqued my curiosity. I couldn't put my finger on it, but something about his reaction just struck me as odd. For a while, I pored over our conversation in my head, but nothing jumped out at me.

Then I decided to take Trip's advice and stop worrying about the little things. When I thought about Trip, however, my mind turned to his offer for the following summer. It *did* seem like perfect experience—practical experience—for becoming an architect. And if I could make a little money at the same time, that would be even better.

In high school, I never had to get a summer job. That was partly because my family spent the summer at camp. But it was also because my parents believed that my "job" was going to school and getting good grades. Even though that was the case, my parents always had high expectations for me, and they made sure I understood my obligations. So I wasn't a stranger to hard work, but it was odd to think about getting a real job.

I was intrigued and excited by the prospect, but I was also a little scared (although I didn't like admitting that to myself). And I was beginning to see that the "real world" had little to do with my life before college. The real world was full of hard work, worries about money, and people like Professor Joska, T.J., and Regan.

But it's also full of people like Kendall, Gina, and Trip, I reminded myself. *And Susan.*

At the thought of Susan, I pictured her in my mind. I was definitely looking forward to seeing her. I also wanted to ask her about some of the problems weighing down my thoughts.

And I'm looking forward to some quality time with her and Kendall, I silently admitted to myself.

When my thoughts turned to Kendall, however, my mood turned pensive, and I began to re-analyze our afternoon conversation. Even though she hadn't really dwelt on it, I had *really* screwed up with Gina and Regan.

Kendall had mostly glossed over the fact that I *was* planning—even expecting—to have sex with Regan. Fortunately for me, she had been more upset with Gina for her role. But that didn't absolve me of my own guilt.

The more I thought about it, though, the more I realized that it *did* fit Gina's pattern, her

"pathology," as Kendall put it. True, Gina had already been having sex with her friend Lisa (from Charleston) before I had gotten involved, but Heather Wellesley had been a different story altogether. The buxom blonde was a virgin before I had sex with her. And looking back, I realized that Gina had carefully orchestrated the whole thing.

In hindsight, I also realized that Gina had manipulated things with my best friend in high school, Scott Anderson, and his girlfriend, Shannon. For our senior prom, Scott and I had swapped girlfriends, with Heather as an added bonus for Scott. Gina and Shannon had obviously talked about things beforehand. Maybe events would've gone the same way without Gina's intervention, but I had my doubts.

And finally, there was Kendall herself. If it weren't for Gina, I probably would never have invited Kendall to the quarry at camp. And I certainly wouldn't have had the temerity to actually pursue a relationship with her. I was very happy with the way things had turned out, but once again, I saw Gina's hand at the controls.

So with Regan, I understood—now—why I had simply assumed that Gina and I would have sex with her. But that still didn't make it right.

Kendall could get angry with Gina all she liked, but I knew my own culpability (even though I didn't particularly want Kendall to chide me for it). Gina might've been the impetus behind a lot of my extra-relationship sex, but I was a willing and often eager participant.

With Regan, I'd been a participant before Gina had even brought it up. That bothered me.

So as I stared at the dark ceiling, I thought about my life and the women in it. Gina did some things that frustrated me beyond words, but she was also capable of incredible kindness and understanding. She was adventuresome and wild, even if that same wildness often led me to trouble (of my own making or not). In addition, she was neither jealous nor possessive, which I was thankful for.

And where I'd always held Kendall—the Goddess Kendall—above reproach, I was beginning to see another side of her. She was more jealous than Gina, but also more forgiving. I didn't know if either of those were good things. And while she had an incredible gift for analyzing people and their motives, she sometimes couldn't understand that another person's motives might differ from her own (as was the case with Gina and the sorority).

I guess Kendall was becoming more human in my eyes, and less of a goddess. For a few minutes, I worried about it. But then I realized that Kendall and I hadn't really spent much time together, not like Gina and I had. Gina and I had been in a serious relationship for two years, practically living together at times.

I loved both girls, but I loved them for different reasons. And with the added stress of college, I was beginning to see cracks in each relationship. None of them threatened to undermine the stability of either foundation, but I didn't know what the future would bring.

After a moment, I realized that I was thinking in terms of "this, *but* that." For each thing that occurred to me, I came up with a countervailing "but."

I want a relationship without "buts," I thought with a sigh. *Do those really exist?*

"Not in the real world," I muttered darkly.

CHAPTER NINE

On Friday, the limo arrived at Kendall's apartment building promptly at four o'clock. As it pulled up, people stared at us. I liked the attention, but I was also a little embarrassed by it.

Kendall and I weren't *quite* dressed up, but we weren't wearing our everyday school clothes either. She wore a pretty off-the-shoulder dress that showed off her body, and I was dressed in khakis and a button-down Polo shirt.

"Mr. Hughes?" the limo driver asked as he walked around the vehicle. He was an older man, with dark hair going to grey at the temples.

I nodded.

"My name is Raymond," he said. "I'll be driving you and Miss…?"

"Payton," I supplied.

"Of course," he said. "Pleased to meet you Miss Payton," he added with a half-bow. Then he paused deferentially. "Will we be picking up the other young lady at a different location?" he asked, referring to Gina.

"Um… she won't be joining us tonight," I said.

"I'm sorry to hear that, sir," Raymond said.

I shrugged.

"If you're ready…?" he ventured.

When I nodded, he opened the limo's back door and ushered us inside. Then he walked around the car and slid into the driver's seat.

"Ms. MacLean's flight lands at 5:05. Is that correct, sir?" he asked through the divide.

"Uh-huh."

"Very good, sir. Would you like to make any stops along the way?"

I started to shake my head, but Kendall forestalled me with a hand on my arm.

"We should probably get some flowers," she said softly.

I nodded. "We'd like to stop by a florist," I said to Raymond.

"Very good, sir. Do you have a preference?"

"Um… do you know of a good one?" I asked.

"Might I recommend Crouch Florist?" he suggested.

"That would be fine," I said. Crouch was the same florist where I'd bought flowers before, and I mentally chided myself for not remembering it.

Raymond put the car into gear and smoothly turned onto Andy Holt Avenue. Then he drove to the Strip and pulled into the florist's parking lot.

"What should I buy?" I asked Kendall as we entered the shop.

"Roses are always nice," she said.

"I know," I said, "but I think it'd look kinda funny if we showed up with a dozen red roses. You know? I mean, that's pretty romantic."

She nodded and then turned thoughtful. "Casablancas are nice. So are Stargazers. Or *any* kind of lily, for that matter," she suggested.

"Which is your favorite?" I asked.

"Calla lilies," she said without hesitation.

Before I got to the counter, I had a brilliant idea: roses came in a variety of colors, not just red.

"Can I help you?" the clerk asked.

"Yes," I said. "I'd like a dozen pink roses, please." Then I glanced at Kendall. "And a dozen calla lilies," I added.

"Paul, no," Kendall whispered. "That's too much."

The clerk hesitated for a minute, glancing from Kendall to me.

"I'm serious," Kendall said, leaning close. "That's too expensive. Just get the roses."

"A dozen of each, please," I said to the clerk.

"Yes, sir," she replied.

"Paul," Kendall protested as soon as the clerk headed to the back. "I don't need flowers."

"But I want to get them for you."

"Can you afford it?" she asked.

"Sure," I said confidently.

With that, her face softened and she smiled at me. Blinking back tears, she kissed me. "You're so wonderful," she whispered.

"Thank you," I said, my chest swelling with pride.

When the clerk returned with the two bouquets and told me the price, however, I almost choked. They were beautiful flowers, but Kendall had been right, they *were* expensive.

Kendall and Susan are worth it, I silently convinced myself.

Earlier in the day, I had cashed a check for the exorbitant sum of one hundred dollars. I thought it would be enough to pay for everything we could possibly want—that night as well as the rest of the weekend. I tried not to blanch as I spent nearly half of my cash on flowers alone.

Kendall and Susan are worth it, I repeated.

When Kendall's eyes lit up as I presented her with the bouquet of lilies, however, I nearly forgot how much I'd just spent.

"Thank you," she said, her voice thick with emotion.

"You're welcome," I said.

Back in the limo, Raymond pulled onto the Strip and then headed toward the airport. It was a half-hour drive, so Kendall and I settled in. Her eyes were still aglow—and damp—and she kept glancing from the flowers to me and then back again.

"They're beautiful, Paul," she whispered.

"Just like you," I said. Then I pulled her close and kissed her.

Our kisses soon heated up, but a soft whining noise broke my concentration. When I looked up, I realized that Raymond had discreetly raised the opaque privacy panel in the divider.

"Have you ever had sex in a limo?" I asked Kendall. Then I waggled my eyebrows.

She blushed and her breathing quickened. Before she returned to my arms, however, she carefully set her flowers aside.

When we resumed kissing, I put her hand on the bulge at my crotch. She started massaging my swollen cock through my khakis. As our kisses heated up, I pulled down the bodice of her dress to reveal her tanned breasts and stiff nipples. While we kissed, I gently kneaded her breasts.

When we finally broke the kiss, I reached between us and unzipped my pants. As I extracted my manhood, Kendall moved between my legs. Then she practically inhaled my shaft, taking me into the back of her throat. She still couldn't swallow all of me, but she came close.

For a few minutes, I simply watched as she bobbed up and down in my lap. When she began to take me as deep as she could, I directed her movements with a hand on the back of her head.

With scenery whipping past the dark-tinted windows of the limo, I rapidly approached the point of no return. When I bucked my hips, Kendall clamped her lips around my shaft and began pumping me. I groaned as I emptied my balls into her willing mouth. Finally, my orgasm subsided and I gazed down at her.

"I think I could get used to this," I said.

She simply answered with a smile.

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Susan was one of the first passengers to debark from the plane. When she emerged from the jetway, we waved to her. Her eyes lit up when she saw us. Without setting down her carry-on bag, she hugged me tight. After greeting Kendall with another hug (and cheek-kisses, of course), Susan stepped back to look at us.

"Welcome to Knoxville," I said. Then I handed her the flowers.

"Oh, Paul, they're beautiful," she said.

"Thanks," I said, trying not to blush. "They were Kendall's idea."

"Thank you *both*," Susan said. "Very much." Then she looked around. "Where's Gina?"

"She couldn't make it," I said. "She has to do something with her sorority tonight." I tried not to sound peevish, but I don't know how successful I was.

"Oh," Susan said. "That's too bad."

"She wanted to be here," Kendall added, "but…" Her shrug spoke volumes.

"She'll hang out with us tomorrow," I said.

Susan nodded and then deftly turned us toward the main terminal. "You two look great," she said. Then she glanced at me as we walked. "Have you lost weight? Are you eating enough?"

"No, he's not," Kendall said before I could answer.

Despite what Susan and Kendall said, I *didn't* think I'd lost weight, and I was still worried about gaining the "Freshman Fifteen." Since I'd begun working out with Trip and the other guys, I wasn't *as* worried about my muscle turning to fat, but it was still one of my major concerns. I wanted to look good—for Kendall and Gina, as well as for myself—and that meant I had to exercise and watch what I ate.

"How was your flight?" I asked Susan, trying to change the subject.

She and Kendall shared a look. Evidently, they decided to let me off the hook.

"Fine," Susan said. "I flew from Austin to Dallas on a commuter plane. And from Dallas to Knoxville, we only had one stop, in Memphis. From here, the plane continues to Washington, D.C.," she said. Then she glanced at me. "I was hoping your dad might be flying, but he wasn't."

"The crew was probably based in Dallas," I said. "I don't know where my dad's flying these days, though. Last time I talked to my mom, he was in Orlando. He usually tries to get the lines with a lot of Florida trips, since he likes it down there. And ever since he transferred from the L-1011 to the 727, he doesn't fly to Dallas or the West Coast much anymore."

"Ah," Susan said. "That makes sense."

"So, tell us about your trip," Kendall said when we reached the baggage claim area. "How's Doug? How's he like his new house?"

"Doug's fine," Susan said. "And his house is very nice. It's near UT—the University of

Texas, I mean," she said, grinning at me. "His girlfriend, Olivia, also graduated in May, and she moved from Houston to Austin with him. She wants to get a job as a teacher, although she's thinking about getting her master's degree."

"So she lives with him?" Kendall asked, lifting an eyebrow as she glanced at me.

Does that mean what I think *it does?* I wondered. *When did my life get so complicated? Oh, yes,* I thought with only a trace of sarcasm, *it happened when I thought I could handle two girlfriends at once.* Before I carried that line of thought to its logical conclusion, I returned my attention to Susan.

"—met at Rice. They've been dating for two years," she was saying. "She's a wonderful girl. And she survived having me underfoot for almost a month, so at least she's patient."

"You're not that bad to have underfoot," I said with a sly grin.

Before Susan could reply, someone cleared his throat behind us.

"Excuse me," Raymond said. "I'm sorry to interrupt…"

In a fraction of a second, Susan took in his appearance and then smiled. "It's no problem. You must be Raymond."

"Yes ma'am," he said, surprised. "How did you know?"

"I asked the owner of the company for the best chauffer he had, and he told me that you were the man for me."

To his credit, Raymond *almost* managed to hide his boyish blush. "Thank you, Ms. MacLean," he said when he regained his composure.

"It's *Missus* MacLean," she told him politely. "But please, call me Susan."

"Of course, ma'am," he said. When the baggage carousel behind us clanked to life, Raymond turned businesslike. "If you'd like to give me your baggage claim stubs," he said to Susan, "I'll fetch your luggage."

"Why, thank you, Raymond," she said. Then she presented him with her entire ticket envelope. "The suitcases are dark green leather, Louis Vuitton, two bags and a trunk."

"Very good, ma'am."

"So much for calling me 'Susan,'" she said when he was out of earshot. "I didn't think he actually *would*, but it was worth a try. Anyway," she continued, "where was I? Oh, yes…"

As Raymond waited for the luggage to appear, Susan told us more about Doug, Olivia, and the house. She also filled us in on her oldest son, Kirk, who was stationed at NAS Kingsville, Texas—at the Navy's Advanced Jet Training school. There, he flew the TA-4, the training version of the same plane his father had flown.

"Kirk loves flying," Susan said, "just like his father. He and an instructor even flew up to visit us one weekend, since it's only about 200 miles from Kingsville to Austin. He looks good, although he *still* doesn't have a serious girlfriend. He's too much like his father, and worse, he knows it."

Kendall and I chuckled at Susan's rueful look.

When she sighed and stared wistfully into the distance, however, I realized that she was thinking about her husband, Jack. He and my father had flown together in Vietnam. My father had returned. Jack hadn't. He'd been shot down near the Cambodian border and officially listed as Killed In Action (after an odd twist of fate where his death was confirmed and his dog tags returned by "friendly villagers").

Susan usually didn't dwell on him, but thinking about her oldest son—who was following in his father's footsteps—must have brought back memories.

"How did Doug buy a house?" I hastily asked, changing the subject. "Did you help him pay for it?"

"Oh, no," Susan said, brightening. "Kirk and Doug have trust funds from when my father died. They've both been very careful with their money, and they've reinvested wisely." Then she blushed. "Actually, *I've* reinvested for them, but I've still done fairly well by them."

"Susan MacLean, Wall Street broker," I teased.

"Actually," she said, "I do a little better than Wall Street. Quite a bit better, in some cases. But enough about me. Tell me all about college."

Kendall and I told her about our roommates and friends. We also told her about classes and our professors. To my chagrin, I realized that I didn't know much about Kendall's classes. I'd been so caught up in my own life that I hadn't paid much attention to hers. I didn't like that about myself, and resolved to change it.

So I listened as she talked about Dr. Zeigler, who taught two of her psychology classes. Kendall had a great deal of respect for the woman, and found the courses challenging. She also talked about her Women's Studies class, which she enjoyed.

"You're taking more than three classes, aren't you?" Susan asked after a moment.

Kendall nodded. "Why?"

"Because you only mentioned Child Psychology, Social Psychology, and the Philosophy of Feminism. What else are you taking?"

"Organic Chemistry," Kendall said. "I don't like it, but I've got to take it for medical school. Actually, it's not so bad, but it's a lot of memorization."

Susan nodded.

"My other two classes are okay, I guess," Kendall continued. "I don't really like French, but I have to take *something* for my language requirement. Fortunately, I only have two more quarters of it. And last but not least, I have Literature of the English Bible."

"I thought you liked that one," I said.

"I thought I would too," she replied. "But the professor treats it more as a religion class than a literature class. I already believe in God; I don't need to be 'saved.' I want to analyze the Bible as literature, for the stories and allegories, not the religious content. So class feels more like a sermon than anything else. And I don't like the professor's brand of fundamentalist Christianity. I guess it's not what I expected."

"That's too bad," Susan said.

Before she could say anything else, Raymond returned pushing a cart loaded with Susan's luggage.

"I see what you mean about that not fitting in the Jeep," I said to Susan. In addition to her carry-on bag, she had a largish suitcase, a hanging garment bag, and a steamer trunk. "You needed all *that* for a one-month trip?"

"Oh, no," she said, "just the suitcases. The trunk is full of presents for friends."

"Oh," I said, perking up.

"And if you play your cards right," she added, "you just might get a couple of them."

"I'll fetch the car right away, ma'am," Raymond said at a break in the conversation.

"Thank you, Raymond," Susan replied with a warm smile.

Once again, he blushed.

"You can't *help* but charm defenseless old men," I said to her when he was safely out of earshot.

"I like charming the younger ones too," she said, glancing at Kendall and sharing a conspiratorial smile. "At least *one* younger one."

At that, it was *my* turn to blush.

With bright laughter, Susan and Kendall looped their arms through mine and we headed out to wait for the limo.

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At the Radisson, Raymond signaled a bellman to help with the luggage. When the young man headed into the lobby, his cart laden with Susan's bags, Raymond took off his hat and walked over to us.

"Excuse me, ma'am," he said. Then he produced a business card and handed it to Susan. "This is the phone number for the car. You can call it when you're ready for me to pick you up, or you can call the hotel's front desk. The manager is Mr. Tilley, he knows me. I'm at your disposal until midnight, but if you need me later than that, I'll be happy to drive you."

"Thank you, Raymond," Susan said graciously. Then she looked at her watch. "It's only six fifteen now," she said, "and we probably want to have a late dinner."

"Very good, ma'am," he said.

"Can you recommend someplace? A nice four-star restaurant, perhaps?"

"Of course, ma'am. I know just the place. It's American cuisine, but with continental service. Would you like me to make reservations for you?"

"Yes, thank you," Susan said. "And then if you'd please pick us up here at eight."

He nodded and started to turn, but she stopped him with a gesture.

"We probably won't need the car until then, Raymond," she said. "So if you'd like to have a bite to eat before you pick us up…"

"Why, thank you, ma'am," he said. Then he straightened his shoulders, put on his cap, and bowed slightly. "I'll pick you up at eight, ma'am."

"Thank you," she said.

With that, he walked toward the limo, and we headed inside. After Susan checked into the hotel, the bellman escorted us to a well-appointed room (which was nicer than the one my parents had stayed in). It wasn't exactly a suite, but in addition to the king-size bed, it had a separate sitting area, with a couch, two chairs, and a coffee table.

While the bellman unloaded the luggage and flowers, I surveyed the room. When he finished with Susan's bags, she asked him to have the manager send up two flower vases. Then she extended her hand and passed the bellman a folded bill. His tip must have been generous, because his eyes lit up. He promised that he'd personally deliver the vases.

"Tipping is an art form," Susan said to me when the bellman had gone. "You've got to tip enough, but not *too* much. And you've got to be discreet, but obvious enough to get their attention."

"Did Jack teach you that?" Kendall asked.

"Oh, no," Susan said with a bright laugh. "My father did," she said, waxing nostalgic. "He

taught me all about business. I think he wanted a son, but he had me instead. And instead of letting my mother turn me into a genteel Southern Lady, he made sure I had a good head for business. I started helping him manage some of his affairs when I was twelve or thirteen. Mother still taught me manners and etiquette, though; I couldn't escape that." Then she smiled warmly. "Enough about me, though. Let's open up my trunk and see what treasures we can find."

Before we could, the bellman announced his return with a knock on the door. When Susan opened it, he handed her the vases and she tipped him again.

"Before we get to the presents," Susan said as she closed the door, "Kendall and I need to put our flowers in water. And we need to talk."

I lifted my eyebrows.

"Girl talk."

"So you're not invited," Kendall added with a grin.

"Exactly," Susan said.

Without another word, the two women sequestered themselves—and their flowers—in the bathroom. They were in there for almost fifteen minutes. When they emerged, they were both grinning.

"Why do I feel like the antelope at a party of lionesses?" I asked no one in particular.

"Come to think of it," Susan said with a grin, "we *were* talking about your future."

"Oh?"

"Mmm hmm. But let's open presents first," she said, ignoring my question.

"We didn't get you anything," Kendall said.

"You got me the roses," Susan said. "And it's a big present to see both of you, although I wish Gina could've joined us."

"We'll see her tomorrow," I said.

"But in the meantime," Susan said, grinning at Kendall, "she's going to miss a fun night."

"Oh?" I asked.

"Mmm hmm." Without saying more, Susan opened her trunk and withdrew several gift-wrapped boxes. She handed a large, flat one and a smaller one to Kendall. Then she passed a box and an envelope to me. Finally, she set another two boxes aside. "These are for Gina," she said.

Kendall and I nodded.

"There's one more for you, Paul" she said, "but I had to order it. The salesman assured me that you'd receive it by next week, though."

"Thanks," I said, "but you shouldn't have."

"Nonsense," she replied. "I'm a wealthy old woman, who else am I going to spend money on, if not my friends?"

"You're *not* old," I said.

Kendall nodded in agreement.

"Okay," Susan conceded, "I'm a wealthy middle-aged woman."

"How about, 'you're a wealthy *beautiful* woman'?" I suggested without the slightest grin.

"Doesn't he say the nicest things?" Susan asked Kendall.

Kendall hugged my arm and nodded.

"Kendall, open your big box first," Susan suggested.

Kendall tore open the wrapping paper, her eyes alight with anticipation. When she lifted the

box's lid and flipped back the tissue paper, she gasped.

"What?" I asked, my curiosity overwhelming my manners. Impatiently, I cocked my head to the side to read the upside-down logo on the box: Christian Dior.

"Oh my goodness," Kendall gushed, "it's… *stunning*."

"*What?*"

With tears welling up, Kendall reached into the box and withdrew a shimmering silver dress.

"I actually got it in New York," Susan explained, "but I've been saving it until I saw you in person."

"Oh, you shouldn't have," Kendall whispered.

"Nonsense," Susan said. "It's something I knew you wouldn't buy for yourself."

Kendall sighed again, her eyes riveted to the dress.

"There's a clutch purse as well," Susan added.

Kendall withdrew a matching silver purse. At Susan's urging, she opened the smaller box as well; it contained a pair of shoes.

"I had to call your mother to find out what size you wore," Susan said.

"Oh my goodness," Kendall said again. "This is too much."

"See if the dress fits," Susan said, ignoring Kendall's protests. Then she glanced at me. "You might need to help her with the zipper, Paul."

Kendall started to head into the bathroom, but then pulled up short. "I don't know where my head is," she said. "We've all seen each other naked. Do you mind if I try it on out here?" she asked.

"I was hoping you would," I said.

She blushed prettily.

"Here," I added, "I'll hold the new dress."

She nodded and handed me the silver slip of a dress. As she slid off the outfit she was wearing, I couldn't help but admire her body. When she put on the new dress, she looked fantastic. The dress revealed a healthy expanse of tanned cleavage, and it fit like a second skin.

When she struck a model pose, Susan and I nodded approvingly. Then she looked at her rear end and frowned.

"What?" I asked.

"You can see my panty lines," she said.

"Take them off," I suggested.

She rolled her eyes but then smiled shyly.

"He's right," Susan added.

"Here," I said, dropping to my knees, "I'll help." Before Kendall could protest, I deftly reached under the dress and pulled her panties down her long legs. Then I grinned up at her. "Much better," I said.

"For whom?" she asked archly.

"For *me*, of course," I said. When I stood up, I grinned roguishly.

"Open your first present, Paul," Susan suggested after a moment. "The envelope."

"Okay."

As I did, she stood and walked to the closet. The card inside the envelope simply read "Brooks Brothers, Madison Avenue, New York." My jaw fell open. When I looked up, Susan

had retrieved a suit bag from her hanging garment bag. Then she unzipped it to reveal the dark suit inside.

"It's double-breasted," she explained. "Your mom said you like that style. She told me your measurements, and one of the salesmen helped me pick it out. I hope it fits."

"Oh, Paul," Kendall said. "It's so handsome."

I tried on the coat and it fit perfectly. The trousers looked like they were a little big in the waist, but I could cinch them in with a belt.

"I wanted to get you a tailored suit," Susan explained, "but they couldn't do that without more detailed measurements."

"This is… *great*," I said. "Thank you so much."

"You're welcome," she said, smiling warmly. "Open your next present."

The box contained a pair of shirts and ties, also from Brooks Brothers.

"Your mom said you had dress shoes," Susan said.

I nodded. "They're just black wingtips, though," I said.

"They'll look fine."

Kendall nodded in agreement.

"I thought we could get all dressed up and have a nice dinner tonight," Susan said. "How's that sound?"

Kendall and I quickly nodded.

"Good," Susan said. Then she glanced meaningfully at Kendall.

When Kendall nodded, almost imperceptibly, I began to wonder what they were up to.

"Paul?"

I turned to regard Kendall as calmly as I could. "Mmm hmm?"

"Susan and I thought maybe we could…"

"Could…?" I prompted, my eyes smiling.

"Would you two like to spend the night here?" Susan asked.

"Does that mean what I think it does?" I asked.

Kendall's eyes sparkled in anticipation.

So did Susan's. "If you'd like…," she said.

"Is this what you two were talking about in the bathroom?" I asked.

Susan nodded. "It's one of the things," she said. "I didn't want to invite you if…," she said, trailing off. Then she glanced deferentially at Kendall. "If… circumstances… had changed, that is."

When I looked at Kendall, she could barely suppress her enthusiasm.

"Oh, I don't think they've changed all that much," I said. "In other words, we'd love to spend the night."

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As the women monopolized the bathroom to put on their makeup and curl their hair, I changed into my suit pants and one of the new shirts. The sizing made it stiff and a little itchy, but I'd survive.

When Susan and Kendall emerged from the bathroom, my jaw dropped.

Susan had a deep blue dress which was similar to Kendall's, only more demure. It was sophisticated and elegant, much like Susan herself. Kendall, with her hair and makeup done,

looked gorgeous.

"Wow," I said.

"So you'll be seen in public with us?" Susan asked wryly.

"Maybe not," I said. "I mean, we might not *get* that far."

"I guess he thinks he's going to get lucky," Susan said to Kendall.

Kendall grinned at me. "He already *is* lucky."

"You're right," Susan added. "He just thinks he's going to get *laid*."

"Well?" I asked. "Aren't I?"

"No," she said. With a smirk, she glanced at Kendall. Then she looked back to me, her eyes twinkling mischievously. "You're going to do the laying, though."

"Oh, you think so?"

"Mmm hmm."

I looked at Kendall. "And what about you?" I asked with a wry grin. "Do you expect to get lucky too?"

She merely smiled.

"If you know what's good for you," Susan said to me with a grin. Then she held up a hand to forestall my reply. "Your suit looks good," she said. "How do *we* look?" With that, she and Kendall posed for me.

"You look… fan-fucking-*tastic!*"

After a few more compliments, I put on my coat, tightened my tie, and we headed out. Downstairs, Raymond was waiting for us. When he saw the women and their dresses, he swallowed hard, although he recovered his composure a lot quicker than I would have. With a flourish, he opened the limo's door and then closed it behind us.

During the short drive to my dorm—so I could change shoes—Susan, Kendall, and I made small talk. When I sped through the North Carrick lobby in my swank new suit, I got some curious looks, but I didn't stop to worry about them. Upstairs, I changed into dark socks and my dress shoes.

On a whim, I dug to the bottom of my underwear drawer and retrieved the cock ring. Gina and I hadn't tried it, but I thought it might come in handy with Susan and Kendall. In reality, I was a little nervous about using it, but I figured that Susan would know what to do. Besides, I was willing to try almost anything once. So I pocketed the nubby little ring, picked up the shoebox (which now contained my everyday shoes), and headed downstairs.

Fifteen minutes later, Raymond dropped us off at a nice restaurant a short distance from downtown. Inside, the hostess seated us at a round booth near the back of the restaurant. I sat in the middle, with Kendall to my right, and Susan on my left. The restaurant was fairly crowded with people—most of them in town for the football game the next day—but it wasn't so crowded that it was oppressive.

"Order anything you like," Susan said after the waiter brought our menus. "My treat."

"You don't have to do that," I said. Unfortunately, my words rang hollow as soon as I looked at the prices on the menu. I *wanted* to pay for dinner, but it was well out of my league.

"No, I don't," Susan said. "But I *want* to. And if either of you get to eat out very often, especially on a college student's budget, I'd be surprised. So this is my treat. No arguments, okay?"

Kendall and I nodded.

"Besides," Susan added with a glance at me, "we need to make sure you've got lots of energy for later."

"Oh, really?" I asked.

"Mmm hmm. We have plans for you. *Nefarious* plans."

"Nefarious, huh?"

Kendall nodded.

"See?" Susan asked, indicating Kendall. "My partner in crime agrees."

Before she could say anything else, the waiter returned. As he filled our water glasses, we studied our menus.

"You need to eat something," Kendall whispered, leaning close. "You look fine, so quit starving yourself."

"Yes, mother," I said sarcastically.

"I'm serious," she said.

"Okay," I said, relenting. "I'll eat."

"I'll make it worth your while," she whispered.

When I looked at her, she grinned suggestively. "Oh?" I asked.

She nodded.

I waggled my eyebrows at her in reply.

Before Kendall could whisper a reply, the waiter asked, "May I take your drink order?"

"Yes," Susan said smoothly. "We'd like a bottle of champagne—Veuve Clicquot or Moët, please."

"Certainly, ma'am," the waiter said. For a moment, he looked like he wanted to ask Kendall and me for our IDs, but then he glanced at Susan and decided against it. "Would you like to start with an appetizer?" he asked instead.

Susan glanced at Kendall and me.

"I guess," I said.

Susan consulted her menu. "We'd like an order of Oysters Bienville and a shrimp cocktail, please," she told the waiter.

For a moment, I was enraptured by her worldly confidence. I was seeing an entirely different side of Susan, although I shouldn't have been surprised that she was so poised. And while I knew she had grown up in a wealthy family, I didn't get to see her sophistication in the camp's environment. There, she was simply "Aunt Susan." Out here, in the "real world," she was an elegant, cultured lady.

But underneath it all, she was still my friend, my mentor, and my first lover. She didn't put on airs and she didn't look down on people. In fact, one of her best friends in camp, Gunny Kershaw, was as hard-bitten as they come, but she treated him like a favored uncle.

I began to realize that Susan treated people with respect—no matter who they were—and they respected her in turn. I don't think it was something she consciously did, though. She was polite and gracious, but above all, she was down-to-earth.

A few minutes later, the waiter interrupted my introspection as he returned with an ice bucket and our champagne.

"The Moët, ma'am," he said, holding the bottle up for Susan's inspection. "Réserve Impérial."

"Thank you," she said. "That will be fine."

After he poured us three glasses, he took our dinner orders. Susan ordered the lobster, and Kendall ordered a filet mignon. After a little prodding from both women, I ordered the lobster and prime rib. It was more food than I wanted to eat, but ordering it satisfied Kendall's mothering instinct.

"A toast," Susan said as soon as the waiter left. She lifted her champagne flute and then waited for us to follow suit. "Paul, would you do the honors?"

"I don't know what to say," I confessed, my face heating. A couple of corny things ran through my mind, but I eventually settled on something sappy. "To good friends," I said. Then I had an impish thought. "To good friends," I repeated, "and to beautiful women. One or the other is nice, but the luckiest men have both."

"Cheers," Susan and Kendall said at the same time, both of them smiling.

Then we clinked our glasses together and drank.

"That was so *gallant*," Kendall whispered, hugging my arm.

Then, to my surprise, she took my hand and placed it on her thigh. With a mischievous grin, she began moving my hand toward her pussy.

My eyes widened when I remembered that she wasn't wearing panties. With a sigh, she spread her legs to give me better access. A moment later, my fingers encountered her shaved slit. She was already hot and damp, and she shuddered when my fingers brushed her hooded clit. A moment later, her eyes popped open and she swallowed hard.

"You get me *so* worked up," she whispered.

When I glanced up, I realized that Susan was grinning at our semi-conspicuous antics.

"Susan's not wearing any panties either," Kendall said softly, her lips close to my ear.

"Oh, she's not?" I asked, loud enough that Susan could hear.

"Not what?" she asked.

"Kendall just told me a secret," I said.

"Oh?" Susan asked.

I nodded. Then I motioned for her to lean close. "Kendall said you're not wearing any underwear either," I said softly.

"Would you like to find out for yourself?" she asked, her eyes glittering.

I looked around to make sure no one was paying attention to us and then lowered my left hand below the level of the table. The white linen tablecloth would screen us from view, so I decided to be bold.

Susan moistened her lips in anticipation as I ran my hand along her thigh. Then she uncrossed her legs and spread them for me. Her smooth pussy wasn't as wet as Kendall's, but it was still moist.

With my fingers on each woman's pussy, I teased their clits. Both of them shut their eyes. Kendall whimpered in pleasure, while Susan merely sighed.

"I'm very sensitive," Susan said softly, after a moment. Then she pulled my hand away. "And it's been a while," she added. Finally, she opened her eyes and gazed at me. "I'm also very worked up. I'd hate to embarrass us by having an orgasm. Trust me, it *wouldn't* be quiet."

As I pulled my hand back up, I discreetly licked my finger, tasting her musk.

"Hold that thought," she said with a grin.

I nodded.

"I don't know why," Kendall whispered from my right, "but I love watching you with her. She's so sexy."

"You are too," I said. "I can't imagine two more beautiful women."

"Maybe he *will* get lucky after all," Susan said quietly.

At that point, the waiter returned and freshened our champagne. A moment later, our appetizers arrived.

"I don't know if I want to try the oysters," Kendall said.

"Actually, they're pretty good," I said.

Time spent at my grandparents' house in Florida had given me a taste for seafood, and I liked it all. Kendall, on the other hand, was an inland girl. She liked shrimp and catfish, but not much more than that. It was one of the few areas where she wouldn't even experiment.

"They're supposed to be good for your libido," Susan said, indicating the oysters. "So I think we should let Paul eat these."

"Is a half-dozen enough?" Kendall asked with a grin. "We can order more, right?"

As the women chuckled, I ate an oyster. They were topped with some kind of stuffing and then baked, but they were still delicious. True to their word, the women let me eat all six of them. For a moment, I forgot that I was trying to watch my weight. Instead, I succumbed to the sinfully delicious flavor of the Oysters Bienville.

"We saved a couple of shrimp for you," Kendall said, pushing the cocktail-sauce-filled martini glass toward me.

I hesitated for only a moment. It had been a while since I'd really eaten anything substantial, much less shrimp, so I grabbed one and dipped it in the spicy red sauce. Susan was right, we *didn't* get to eat like this on a college student's budget.

After the waiter cleared the remains of our appetizers, he brought our salads. While we ate them, the women kept me on edge with suggestive conversation and deft caresses. I returned the favor, delving between their legs and teasing them as often as I could. By the time our entrées arrived, I was ready to explode.

We drank another bottle of champagne with dinner (which was excellent). I knew I'd pay for it in pounds, but I ate the entire lobster tail *and* my prime rib. With each bite I took, however, I could smell Kendall's arousal on my hand, which only served to make my erection swell with anticipation.

After we finished our entrées, we ordered a slice of Red Velvet cake (my favorite) with three forks. Susan also convinced me to order a glass of cognac.

With a shock, I realized that it was almost eleven. The cognac was buzzing through my head—not to mention my sinuses—and I was feeling no pain.

When Susan glanced at her watch, she suggested that we return to the hotel. Then she paid the bill with her charge card and we stood up. As soon as we stepped outside, a pair of headlights pierced the night. A moment later, Raymond eased the limo to a stop in front of us. Without waiting for him, I opened the rear door and ushered the girls inside.

After a quick stop at a liquor store—to get another bottle of champagne—we returned to the Radisson. Susan thanked Raymond and arranged a time for him to meet us the next day. Then she warmly wished him a good night (which made him blush) and we headed inside.

The lobby was practically deserted when we walked through it, so once we turned into the elevator foyer, I put my hand on Kendall's ass. She was still a little tipsy—and a lot horny—so she pressed back against me and gyrated her hips. Since no one could see us, I reached down and lifted her dress. Then I cupped her bare ass.

When the elevator car arrived, it was deserted as well, so I didn't remove my hand from Kendall's derrière. On a whim, I set down the bottle of champagne and put my hand on Susan's ass as well. When I lifted her dress, she grinned at me, her eyes a little glassy.

As the elevator ascended, I continued playing with the women's asses, running my fingers between their cheeks and teasing them. When the elevator reached Susan's floor, I grabbed the champagne and we stepped into the foyer.

The wall to our right held a large mirror, so I set down the bottle, turned us as a group, and put my arms around the women. Then I looked at our reflection. At that point, I had a mischievous idea.

"What're you doing?" Kendall asked with a giggle.

"I'm taking off your dress," I said as I lowered the zipper.

"Not here, Paul," she said.

"Yes here." In the mirror, Susan and I exchanged glances.

She raised her eyebrows but then smiled in agreement.

"Take off your dress," I urged Kendall. "C'mon, I wanna see your body."

"You will," she said, holding up the bodice of her dress. "Soon."

"I want to see you *now*."

"But we're in the hallway," she said, tipsy, but not drunk enough that she automatically followed my lead.

"I want to walk to Susan's room with you naked," I said.

"But her room's at the end of the hall," Kendall protested. "What if someone comes out of their room?"

"It's almost midnight," I said. "No one's gonna be in the hall."

With a little more convincing, Kendall finally let me take off her dress. In her heels, she was an inch or two taller than me, but she looked stunning. I tweaked her nipples to bring them to full erection and then stood beside her.

When I glanced at Susan, she merely smiled and asked me to help her with her zipper. A moment later, she stepped out of her dress and stood next to me. I looked at our reflection in the mirror, me in my dark suit, two naked women flanking me, one tall, one shorter, both buxom and brunette, both clean-shaven.

Kendall wanted to hurry to Susan's room. Susan and I grinned at each other and silently agreed on a more leisurely pace. I draped the dresses over my arm and then picked up the bottle of champagne.

As we walked toward Susan's room, I could sense Kendall's nervousness; it was almost palpable. But I could also tell that she was excited. The thrill of being nude—in public—was heady and exciting. She wanted to quicken our pace, but Susan and I walked with stately, measured steps.

When we were about halfway down the hallway, a door ahead of us opened.

Kendall froze.

"Just keep walking," I said, my voice pitched low.

"Give me my dress," she pleaded.

I shook my head.

"Paul, *please*."

"No."

"They're coming out," she said, frantic.

"*Don't* cover yourself," I said. "Let 'em see."

When a man walked out of the open doorway, Kendall tensed up.

"Relax," I said quietly. "Smile and be polite. He'll think he's dreaming."

On my left, Susan grinned and ran her fingers through her hair to shake it out.

"Paul, *please*," Kendall begged again.

At that point, her pleas became academic; the man turned toward us and stopped dead in his tracks.

"Keep walking… smile," I told Kendall, sotto voce. "I'm sure he sees beautiful, naked women walking down hotel hallways all the time."

The guy, dressed in pajamas and carrying an ice bucket, simply stared as we walked toward him. When we passed him, I felt his eyes on us. Puckishly, I lowered my hand and squeezed Kendall's bare ass. Then I had to choke back a chuckle as I heard his ice bucket clatter to the floor.

Once we reached Susan's room, she withdrew her key from her purse and unlocked the door. Inside, Kendall pressed her luscious body against me and kissed me fiercely.

"Oh my goodness," she panted. "That was *so* exciting."

"Did you see his hard-on?" Susan asked the younger woman.

Kendall shook her head. "I just looked straight forward," she said. Then she glanced at Susan. "He was hard?"

"As a rock," Susan said with a smug grin.

Then I had another brilliant idea. Kendall looked at me curiously as I hurried across the room and grabbed our own ice bucket. Susan figured out what I was up to and winked at me.

"C'mon," I said to Kendall. "Let's go get some ice to chill the champagne."

She stood stock still, her exhibitionist desire warring with her conservative nature. I could tell that she *wanted* to go back out into the hall with me, but she was afraid at the same time.

"Are you coming?" I asked. Then I had to stifle another chuckle as I watched the emotions play across her face: excitement, fear, anticipation, nervousness, and more. Without waiting for her to answer, I turned her toward the door. With a gentle pressure at the small of her back, I got her moving. "We'll be back in a few minutes," I said to Susan, who merely grinned at my audacity.

Once in the hall, Kendall straightened her shoulders and tentatively looped her arm through mine.

"When we get back to the room," I said as we started walking, "I'm going to fuck you silly."

Beside me, she shuddered with pent-up desire.

"I'm going to make you go down on Susan, while I fuck you from behind. You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

After a moment's hesitation, she nodded.

"And you like the idea of that guy seeing you again, don't you?"

Another nod.

"Are you going to look for his hard-on this time?" I asked.

Guiltily, she nodded a third time.

"You like knowing how hot guys think you are, don't you?"

"Yes," she whispered after an agonized pause.

As we purposefully walked toward the vending room, where the ice machine was, our excitement mounted. When we neared the room, we heard the door open and then saw the pajama-clad man emerge.

His jaw dropped.

"Evening," I said as casually as I could.

He didn't answer.

When Kendall glanced down, I followed her gaze and realized that not only was his dick hard, it was almost protruding from his pajamas' gaping fly.

He didn't move as we stepped past him and entered the vending room. The door had a window in it, so he could see us as it closed. I set my ice bucket next to the ice machine and then turned Kendall so her back was to the door.

"God," I said, "you're so hot."

"Is he still there?" she asked.

I looked past her and then nodded.

"Oh my goodness, Paul," she practically gushed. "Make him leave."

"Why?" I asked. "I want him to watch as you suck me."

Her eyes flew wide.

"Get on your knees," I directed.

"Is he still there?"

I nodded.

"I can't," she said. "I can't let him see."

"Get on your knees," I said slowly, deliberately.

As if in a trance, she slowly knelt before me.

"Take out my cock."

She unzipped my trousers and then reached inside. For a moment, she fumbled with the fly of my briefs. Finally, she simply dragged the briefs' waistband down and pulled out my cock, ignoring the fly altogether.

"Now, suck me," I said.

"Is he still watching?"

"Uh-huh. Only now, he's playing with himself."

With a low moan, Kendall engulfed my cock. The warm wetness of her mouth almost overwhelmed me, but I managed to maintain my balance.

Outside the tiny room, the man peered at us, his fist pumping his cock.

After almost a minute, I pulled my dick from Kendall's mouth.

"Let's head back to the room," I said. "I want to fuck you."

She nodded as I helped her to her feet.

Without putting my dick back in my trousers, I half-filled the ice bucket. When we opened the

door to the hallway, the guy took his hand off his dick. It jutted through the fly, angry and red—and kind of short. He glanced at my cock, which was also sticking through my fly, but then he quickly looked away. Finally, his eyes locked on Kendall's gently swaying breasts.

With a grin that he couldn't see, I ushered Kendall into the hall and turned toward Susan's room. I could feel the guy's eyes on us as we walked. When we knocked on Susan's door, I looked back toward the vending room. The guy was still standing there, frantically jerking off. A moment later, Susan opened the door and let us in.

"That guy was jerking off as he stared at me," Kendall blurted.

"You've already gotten started, I see," Susan said with a grin, glancing at my erection for emphasis.

I nodded.

"Oh my goodness," Kendall said, "Paul made me suck him, *while that guy was watching*." Far from outraged, she sounded excited.

"Oh he did, did he?" Susan asked.

While Kendall breathlessly related the story, I put the champagne bottle into the ice bucket. When I turned back to the women, Susan was smirking at me.

"What?" I asked.

"Nothing," she said.

"No, what?"

"Oh," she said after a moment, "I was just thinking about a certain trip to the grocery store."

I felt my face heat at the mention of our memorable trip to Winn-Dixie, more than three years before.

Before Kendall could ask her to elaborate, I pulled the tall girl close and kissed her. She responded by pressing her body against me and reaching for my erection.

"Suck me off," I said to her when we broke the kiss.

Susan arched an eyebrow at me.

"You too," I said, half teasing, half serious.

"Yes, *sir*," she teased in return. "The blowjob brigade, reporting for duty, sir."

"You may proceed," I said loftily.

With that, the two women sank to their knees before me and started sucking my cock. As they did, I took off my suit coat and tossed it toward the couch. I know that wasn't the proper way to care for a fine suit, but at the moment, I didn't care.

While Kendall sucked me and Susan fondled my balls, I took off my shirt and tie. Then I kicked off my shoes and socks. Finally, I unbuckled my belt, unfastened my trousers, and lowered them. With Kendall still eagerly sucking me, Susan helped me take them off.

"What's this?" she asked as she held up the pants. Then she reached into the pocket and withdrew my cock ring. "Ooooh, nice," she purred. "But you have to be soft to put one of these on," she said. When she glanced up at me, her eyes danced with mirth. "I guess we'll just have to relieve some of your pressure."

She flashed me a shameless grin and then rejoined Kendall. With both women working on my dick, I quickly reached the point of no return. When I groaned, Kendall gripped my hips and wrapped her lips around my shaft. Then she swallowed as I filled her mouth with seed.

For a minute or two, we simply stood there, catching our breath. Then I helped the women to

their feet and we moved to the couch. With a flourish, Susan held up the nubby cock ring.

"He got that… thing… with Gina," Kendall said flatly.

"Do you know what it does?" Susan asked.

Kendall shook her head. *And I don't* care, her expression seemed to say.

"It keeps him hard longer, and prolongs his pleasure… as well as *ours*."

"Oh," Kendall said, brightening a little.

"Here," Susan said to the younger woman, "I'll show you how it works."

At first, Kendall's misgivings about the cock ring made her frown. But Susan's enthusiasm was contagious. As the older woman slid the ring over my semi-hard shaft, Kendall's inquisitiveness prevailed.

Since I routinely shaved the base of my cock, I didn't have much pubic hair to get tangled in the rubber ring. At the bottom of my shaft, Susan stretched the ring and pulled my balls through, one at a time.

At first, I was worried that the ring would be uncomfortable. To my surprise, however, it felt good.

"Now," Susan cautioned Kendall, "he shouldn't wear one of these for more than about thirty minutes at a time, because it does restrict blood flow."

Kendall nodded seriously.

"But once he gets hard, he'll *stay* hard until he comes."

"He does that anyway," Kendall said, her interest piqued.

"Not really," Susan said. "A man's normal erection cycles."

Kendall cocked her head to the side.

"Do you notice how sometimes his head is bulbous and hard, while other times, it's softer?"

The younger woman nodded.

"And sometimes, it seems like his shaft is as hard as steel, while other times, it's more pliable."

"Yes, but he's still hard."

Susan nodded. "He's hard, all right, but he's not constantly *rock* hard. That's what a cock ring does."

"Wow," Kendall said, clearly thinking about the possibilities.

"And it heightens *his* pleasure," Susan added. "Since he can have sex longer, his orgasm has more time to build."

When Susan realized that I was as hard as I was going to get, she glanced at me and smiled. Then she looked past me, to Kendall. "Do you mind if I…?" she asked, nodding at my erection.

Kendall simply nodded.

Susan slid to the floor and crawled between my legs. Once she got settled, she gripped my shaft and looked up at me, her eyes full of anticipation. Then she kissed the tip of my shaft, which had turned red-purple. The cock ring wasn't cutting off circulation, but I could definitely feel its effects; my dick seemed twice as hard as usual.

When Susan wrapped her lips around my glans, however, I stopped thinking about the cock ring. Instead, I concentrated on her supple mouth. Then I pulled Kendall close. She came willingly, her warm breasts pressing against my chest and side.

"I love you," I said softly.

"I love you too."

"You liked knowing that guy was jerking off as you sucked me, didn't you?"

After a moment's reluctance, she nodded.

"You liked sucking me in front of him, didn't you?"

Once again, she nodded. Then she kissed me, surprising me with her intensity.

"I want you to watch as I go down on Susan," she whispered. "I don't know why, but it excites me."

"You like doing it," I said.

Tentatively, she nodded. "But I want you to watch," she stressed. "I don't think about women when you're not around." Then she shrugged. "I guess it excites me to think about doing it while you're watching. I don't think I'd want to do it if it were just me and some woman."

At that point, Susan took me into the back of her throat and I groaned.

"I'm going to learn how to do that," Kendall whispered in my ear. "I want to hear you groan like that when *I* swallow you."

"I groan like that any time you're anywhere *near* my dick," I said.

"I know," she breathed. Then she started nibbling my earlobe.

I gasped in ecstasy, assaulted from two directions at once. Between my legs, Susan moaned around my cock, the vibration sending shivers up my spine. At my neck, Kendall planted soft kisses, her breasts pressed against my side as she did.

After a minute, I cupped Kendall's ass and lifted her. When her breasts swung into range, I latched onto one of them. As my tongue circled her sensitive nipple, she cried out softly and held my head in place.

Fortunately, sucking Kendall's nipple didn't take much concentration, because Susan's lips and tongue were driving me wild. I didn't feel the urge to come—yet—but I could sense the pressure building. After several blissful minutes, I gently pushed Kendall back. Then I got Susan's attention.

"Let's move to the bed," I suggested. I glanced sidelong at Kendall before looking back at Susan. "Kendall wants to go down on you," I said to the older woman.

Beside me, Kendall tensed up in anticipation.

Once on the bed, Susan lay on her back, her legs spread invitingly. Her pussy was already swollen and slick, and I could tell that she'd been playing with herself while she sucked me. When I knelt next to her head, Kendall quickly moved between her legs.

Susan recaptured my obscenely hard member as I watched Kendall settle onto the bed. After she made sure I was looking, she spread Susan's clean-shaven labia and tongued her slit.

When Susan moaned, I tore my eyes away from Kendall's darting tongue. Beneath me, Susan tried to swallow more of my shaft. I lowered my hips and rocked forward, giving her a better angle on my cock. She moaned, the vibrations coursing up my length.

As Kendall eased two fingers into Susan's pussy, the older woman tensed up. Then she grabbed my hips and tried to pull me closer. A moment later, her face turned red and she let out an explosive breath. As her orgasm seized her, I tweaked and twisted her nipples, driving her higher. Between her legs, Kendall continued tonguing her slit. Lost in ecstasy, she moaned as waves of pleasure crashed over her.

Finally, Susan released my shaft, her chest heaving as she panted from the force of her climax.

Then she gently pushed Kendall away and lay still. Kendall, her lips shiny from Susan's juices, smiled at me. Then her eyes drifted lower, to my hard-on. With the cock ring snug around my balls and the base of my shaft, I was still as hard as steel. Strangely, I felt the tingle of a building orgasm, but I knew I wasn't ready to come.

When I beckoned to Kendall, she rose on all fours and crawled forward—still between Susan's legs. Unbidden, she started licking and sucking Susan's nipples.

I moved behind Kendall and aimed my shaft at her round ass. Her pussy was drenched, and it only took me two thrusts to bury myself in her super-tight depths. When I gripped her hips to steady myself, she whimpered, the sound muffled by Susan's breast. I began thrusting, and the slapping rhythm of sex filled the room.

As I pounded into Kendall, I marveled at the cock ring's effect. I was still incredibly hard, but I didn't feel the immediate need to get off. The feeling was exquisite: a long, drawn-out buildup.

Thanks, Gina, I thought sincerely. *I'm sorry I didn't get to use it on you first.*

For the next several minutes, I simply plowed into Kendall, her pussy contracting around me every time I buried myself inside her. With each thrust, she rocked forward, but her lips never left Susan's breasts.

Finally, I started slamming into Kendall. Susan merely held the younger woman as I pounded into her from behind. Kendall cried out with each thrust, her cries eventually turning into one long, low moan. I maintained my furious pace for nearly a minute, my hips jackhammering back and forth as Kendall held on for dear life.

When I sat back on my haunches, my dick slipped from her molten pussy. I panted from the exertion, my swollen red cock jutting upward. Without words, Kendall and Susan untangled themselves. I went to move between Kendall's legs, but she stopped me with a gesture.

"Give me a second," she said, still breathing hard.

In response, Susan beckoned to me. When I glanced at Kendall, she nodded her assent.

As I moved between Susan's legs, she smiled up at me, her hands gliding along my triceps. I entered her in one smooth thrust. Her eyes danced with pleasure, although she closed them when I began thrusting.

"Oh, I've missed this," she breathed.

I increased my pace slowly, but soon enough, I was pounding into her with long, powerful strokes. As I did, I varied my thrusts, changing speed, depth, and angle. I was trying to give her as much pleasure as I could, with my cock alone. She urged me on with silent caresses, her face a mask of ecstasy.

After pounding into Susan for several minutes, I buried myself inside her and held still, my eyes clamped shut. I was getting close, and I didn't want to come yet.

"Look at Kendall," she said softly.

When I opened my eyes, I was startled to realize that Kendall was lying next to us. She was busy tugging and twisting her nipple with her left hand; her right was busy between her legs. My hard-on bobbed as I pulled out of Susan. She smiled and then scooted out from under me.

As I moved between Kendall's legs, her eyes popped open and she gazed up at me, her expression wild. I held myself above her and then eased my hips forward. My super-swollen cock slid into her with little effort. She groaned as I bottomed out. When I began thrusting, my eyes were drawn to her breasts, which heaved each time I slammed into her.

As I thrust, Susan caressed my shoulders and back. My dick felt like it was ready to burst from the pressure, and I began to fear that I'd been wearing the cock ring too long. I quickened my pace, my beet red member a blur as I pumped in and out of Kendall's clean-shaven pussy.

"Come on her stomach," Susan quietly urged.

I swallowed hard and nodded, my nostrils flaring as I sucked in deep draughts of air.

With a low groan, I felt the beginning of my orgasm. Instead of occurring all at once, however, it developed slowly. Pleasure radiated from my groin, spreading outward in a building wave of ecstasy.

In a daze, I pulled out of Kendall. My cock slapped my stomach when I did. Then I felt Susan's hand on my engorged member, stroking me, caressing me. I clamped my eyes shut and the world went white. Like an avalanche gaining speed as it plunged down a mountain, my pleasure grew.

In slow motion, seconds ticked past. With each of them, the sensations redoubled. One second. Two seconds. Five seconds. Ten. Twenty. Thirty. The pleasure seemed to last forever. Finally, with a sharp, guttural cry, I erupted. It felt like I was shooting my entire body through my cock.

I don't know when I stopped spurting, but it seemed like thirty minutes had passed (the reality was probably closer to thirty *seconds*). As I slowly became aware of my surroundings again, I felt Susan's hand on my manhood. She lovingly milked me, slowly squeezing the last of my semen onto Kendall's belly. Then, ever so gently, Susan pulled the cock ring from around my shaft. I was still semi-hard, but soft enough that she could work it loose.

When I collapsed onto the bed in near-exhaustion, Susan moved between Kendall's spread thighs. Then she planted delicate kisses on the younger girl's quivering stomach. Finally, she began licking up my semen, chasing it around with her tongue and driving Kendall wild.

As Kendall trembled, I scooted close to her. Between her legs, Susan began licking her slit. Kendall sighed in pleasure and closed her eyes. As Susan worked on her clit, I toyed with her sensitive nipples. In a few short minutes, she arched her back and clutched at the bedspread. When she finally relaxed and settled to the bed, I kissed her.

As Kendall caught her breath, I looked down her body, over her trim, fluttering stomach. Susan grinned at me.

"Mmmmm," she said, "I love doing that."

Then she crawled from between Kendall's thighs and joined us. For several minutes, we lay together in silence, simply enjoying the afterglow.

A little while later, Susan propped herself on an elbow and got my attention.

"Would you open the champagne for us, Paul?" she asked. "I'm thirsty." Then she glanced at Kendall, who was still semi-dazed. "Would you like some?"

Kendall swallowed hard and then nodded.

As the women sat up, I opened the chilled champagne and poured three glasses. Since we were all thirsty, we drained them quickly. As I refilled them, Kendall laughed.

"What?" I asked.

"My mother always told me not to sit Indian style," she said as she crossed her legs. "Well, to heck with *that*; it's comfortable. And right now, I don't care *who* sees all the way to the Promised Land."

"We're both *intimately* familiar with the view," Susan said.

Kendall blushed and tried to cover it by taking a sip of her champagne.

"My mother told me the same thing," Susan said. "She used to say, 'Sit with your knees together, dear; a lady is demure.'" Then she chuckled.

"What's so funny about that?" I asked.

"Well," she explained, "when I was older, Mother used to laugh and then follow that with, 'If you're going to show off your cunny, make sure you're properly rewarded.'"

Kendall and I looked at each other and grinned.

"I remember the first time I figured out what she meant," Susan mused with a wry smile. Then her smile turned mischievous and she crossed her legs, her still-puffy labia parting as she did. "I think I'll 'show off my cunny' as well," she said with a wink in Kendall's direction. "I'm sure we'll both be properly rewarded."

With that, the woman laughed, and I tried to cover my own embarrassment by taking a drink of champagne. As we polished off the bottle of champagne, we talked about everyday stuff. Then I playfully waved my shiny red cock at Susan.

"So," I asked, "who's ready for the next round?"

"Sorry," Susan said. "I'm bushed. It's been a long day. Besides, it's after two."

"I'm kinda sleepy too," Kendall said when I glanced at her.

"I guess I wasn't really in the mood anyway," I said.

In reality, I *had* been in the mood, but if the women were tired, I wasn't going to push the issue. So while they turned down the bed, I hung up my far-flung suit. Then I did the same for their dresses. Finally, we turned out the lights and climbed into the king-size bed. With Kendall on my right and Susan on my left—their warm, nude bodies pressing against me—we drifted off to sleep.

CHAPTER TEN

When I woke up on Saturday, early morning light filtered through the sheers. Kendall, as usual, was sprawled on one side of the large bed. Susan was curled up next to me, her arm over my chest.

Unfortunately, I had to go to the bathroom. I tried to gently extract myself, but Susan stirred when I moved her arm.

"What time is it?" she asked softly.

"Early," I said. Then, "Sorry, I gotta go to the bathroom."

She nodded and then yawned. "Me too," she said.

With that, she turned back the sheet and swung her legs over the side of the bed. Then she waited for me expectantly.

"You can go first," I said.

"Nonsense," she said, gesturing. "Come on."

"Um… okay."

I got out of bed and then padded after her. At the bathroom door, I paused, but she beckoned me inside. I'd seen women use the bathroom before, but it felt weird to accompany her, especially at her request.

"While we're both awake, more or less," she explained as she gestured for me to shut the door behind us, "I wanted to talk."

Then, without any hesitation, she lifted the toilet lid and sat down. She kept her legs demurely together, but I heard the stream of urine as it hit the porcelain bowl. I simply stood there, rooted to the spot; it seemed wrong to be in the bathroom with her, but it was somehow naughty and exciting at the same time. When she was done, she wiped herself and flushed.

"It's all yours," she said as she stood.

For an awkward moment, I waited for her to leave.

"Do you mind if I stay?" she finally asked.

"Um… no… it's no problem," I said, with as much confidence as I could muster. To my surprise, she moved to my side when I lifted the toilet seat. I glanced at her warily. When she reached down and grasped my limp penis, however, I almost jumped out of my skin.

"I used to do this with Jack sometimes," she said, unperturbed. "When I was younger, I wondered what it felt like to go to the bathroom standing up." Then she hefted my dick for emphasis. "It's kind of sexy, don't you think? And it's *very* intimate." When I hesitated, she glanced up at me. "I'm sorry, do you want me to leave?"

I shook my head. Then I concentrated on releasing a stream of urine. Normally, I didn't have to concentrate, but with Susan holding my dick, I guess I was a little nervous. Her hand was warm and soft, but it was also different. Finally, I relaxed enough to let nature take its course.

It seemed to take forever to empty my bladder. Every time Susan's hand shifted—no matter how slightly—I shivered. When the stream *finally* trickled to a stop, she gently shook my penis. Then she used a small wad of toilet paper to blot the tip.

"That was kind of fun," she said as I flushed.

Weird, I thought with a nod. *But yeah, it* was *fun.*

When I turned to face her, she arched an eyebrow, and I had the sudden urge to fuck her.

Before she could say anything else, I backed her against the counter. She hissed as her ass pressed against the cold surface, but then sighed when my hands found her breasts. While I played with her nipples, she stroked my cock.

Without words, I lifted her onto the counter and knelt between her legs. She ran her fingers through my hair as I gently tongued her labia. With my hands on her inner thighs, I spread her pussy and then licked her slit. She gasped when I gently circled her clit with my tongue.

For the next several minutes, I lavished attention on her pussy. My tongue darted into her and then drove toward her hooded clit. I kissed her. I sucked her. I slid two fingers into her and felt the heat of her arousal.

Finally, I stood, my erection aimed at her shiny slit. She sensed my urgency and gripped my shaft, guiding me to her opening. With one powerful lunge, I buried myself to the root. As I began thrusting, she leaned back and braced herself with her arms.

After barely a minute of powerful thrusts, I buried myself and bathed her insides with hot semen. My orgasm wasn't as powerful as my cock-ring-induced climax from the night before, but it was just as satisfying. When my spurts turned to gushes and then finally stopped, I held myself inside her and simply panted.

"Wow," she said. "Where did that come from?"

"Sorry."

"Oh, don't be. Sometimes I like a fast, hard fuck," she added.

I felt bad that I'd only worried about my own orgasm, so I apologized again. "Um… give me a few minutes," I said sheepishly, "and I can go again."

"I don't doubt it," she said. "But I'm fine for now. I really *do* want to talk to you."

"You were serious about that?"

She nodded.

I swallowed to get some moisture back in my mouth and then pulled my pussy-slick cock from within her. Unbidden, she reached for a washcloth. Then she gently dried my cock and cleaned herself. It seemed like she was using the task as an excuse to gather her thoughts.

"Is everything okay with you and Gina?" she finally asked.

I shrugged noncommittally.

"Have you talked to her about it?"

Once again, I shrugged.

She waited patiently for a better answer.

"Not really," I said at last. "I mean, we hardly ever see each other anymore." Then I explained about our conflicting class schedules. "And lately," I added, "she's always got something to do with Chi Omega. So even if she *does* have any free time, it's taken up by her sorority."

Susan nodded in understanding.

"And she's got a new friend," I continued sourly. "Regan."

"You don't like her, I take it?"

"She's all right, I guess. I mean, *Gina* likes her. But…"

"But what?"

I explained about the trip to the sex shop, and the aftermath.

"It sounds like you had your hopes up, and didn't like not getting your way," she said evenly.

My jaw dropped. That *wasn't* the reaction of sympathy that I'd expected.

"It sounds like Regan put Gina in an awkward position," Susan continued, "but that still doesn't mean you should've *expected* to get lucky."

"That's what Kendall said," I grumbled.

"Mmm hmm. And while I don't think Gina made the right decision, I can't fault her for it."

"Huh?" I blurted, a little bewildered. I also hoped I didn't look as betrayed as I felt.

"Women are under a lot of pressure to conform," she said gently. Then she sat up straight, her expression sober. "Be seen, not heard," she said, almost lecturing. "Get married. Be a good wife. Have children. Be a good mother. Defer to your husband. And so on," she said. Then she softened her tone and continued. "When a man goes against society, he's an innovator… or a maverick. When a woman does it, she's obviously misguided, or worse, a bitch. So you need to understand that Gina's under a lot of pressure to conform."

"Not from me," I said defensively.

"*You* might not think so, but I'd bet that she does."

"I bet she *doesn't*."

She held up a soothing hand. "You don't mean to, I know, but you still put pressure on her. It's not the only pressure, though. Think about your own life. What kind of pressure are *you* under?"

"None, really," I said with a shrug.

"What about your Design professor?" Before I could answer, she continued. "And what about your other classes? How about your parents? Do they expect you to do well in college?"

I nodded.

"Are you working out regularly? Why? Because you want to keep up your physique. How about your friends? You hang out with them, and you play sports, right?"

"Yes, but…"

"You wanted to join a fraternity. Why? Because you liked the guys? But did you also want *them* to like *you?*"

"I guess," I said.

"Do you spend time with Gina? With Kendall? How much? When? Do you know if they want you to spend *more* time with them?"

I reluctantly nodded. Even though I already spent a lot of time with Kendall, I knew she'd be happy to spend even *more* time with me. And Gina hardly got to see me at all, a fact that she had pointed out (rather miserably).

"So you're under a lot of pressure too," Susan said earnestly. "It's pressure to do well in school, from your professors, your parents, and yourself. It's pressure from your friends and peers, to play sports, join a fraternity, and other things. It's pressure from Gina and Kendall, to spend more time with them, to give a part of yourself and to share a part of them in return. And finally, it's pressure from yourself, to work out, to watch your weight, to have friends and do things that interest you."

"Yeah, I guess."

"Gina's under the *same* pressures," she said. "Pressure from her family, her professors, her friends, her sorority sisters, herself, and you."

"I guess I hadn't thought about it that way," I said.

"But for Gina, it's probably worse. She's under pressure from society as a whole. If she wants

to be a doctor, she's entering a man's world. Trust me, I know what it's like to be a woman in a man's world. Gina's going to have to be twice as good as any of them if she wants to succeed. It's the same with Kendall, but she's older. And…"

"And what?"

"She's more… mature," Susan said quietly. "She thinks about things instead of simply reacting. Gina's impulsive. And with the pressure she's under—the same pressure you're all under—she might not make the best decisions."

"So what am I supposed to do? Should I let her off the hook simply because society is putting a lot of pressure on her?"

"No, not at all. But you need to understand that she *is* under a lot of pressure. You adapt to new situations easily. She doesn't. I'm surprised Kendall hasn't told you that about Gina."

"She has," I said.

To my surprise, Susan's eyes widened.

"What?" I asked apprehensively.

For a moment, she was silent, lost in thought. Finally, she looked up. "Do Gina and Kendall talk to each other?" she asked.

"Why?"

"Do they?"

"Of course they do," I said, although I didn't know for sure. As I thought about it, however, I couldn't recall Kendall mentioning any conversations she'd had with Gina. Nor had Gina said anything about talking to Kendall. "Maybe they don't," I said after a moment.

Susan nodded in disappointment. "I always wondered about that," she said. "But I didn't want to bring it up, because you three seemed so happy."

"Wondered about what?" I asked.

"I wondered if Gina and Kendall shared a real connection, or if they were simply connected through you."

"Huh?"

"Think about your mom and me, and our relationship," she said.

"What about it?"

"We love each other—we're like sisters. As a matter of fact, in many ways, I'm *closer* to your mom than her sister is. Your mom and I share a bond. Our husbands had the same job, and shared the same dangers, but she and I have always been close."

"And…?"

"Do Gina and Kendall have that same kind of relationship?" Susan asked.

"I guess."

"Do they *really?*"

"Maybe not," I reluctantly admitted. "I mean, except for both wanting to be doctors, they don't really have much in common. Other than me, I mean."

Susan nodded and remained silent, letting me work through my confused thoughts.

"Gina joined a sorority," I said after a moment. "But Kendall detests Greeks. Gina's impulsive; Kendall's thoughtful. Gina's wild and fun; Kendall's more reserved. She's just as fun, though," I hastily added. "It's just… different with her. Gina knows me… *really* well. But sometimes I get the feeling that Kendall doesn't understand why I do certain things."

"Mmm hmm. They're different young women."

I nodded.

"And it worries me that they don't talk to each other."

"No kidding," I agreed.

"I had hoped their relationship went beyond their love for you, but…" Her shrug spoke volumes.

"Why does my life have to be so complicated?" I complained.

"Their lives are pretty complicated too," Susan said gently.

"Yeah, I guess you're right," I said. Then I looked up hopefully. "What should I do? I mean, I always thought Kendall and Gina really cared for each other."

"I'm sure they do. But I think each of them cares more about her relationship with *you*."

"So what should I do?" I asked again.

"I don't know," Susan said after a moment.

All of a sudden, I felt my chest tighten. I wasn't used to hearing those words, especially from Susan. For years, she'd been my source of wisdom. If I had a problem, I knew that she would know the solution. If I were in doubt, I could always talk to her. With three little words, I was in uncharted territory.

"You can't *make* two people love each other," she said softly.

"No," I said. With that admission, I had a much clearer picture of my relationships with the two girls. And worse, I had a *crystal* clear picture of their relationship with each other.

With the realization, however, things started to fall into place: Kendall's reaction when Gina wanted to join a sorority; Gina's resentment about the time I spent with Kendall; Kendall's lack of enthusiasm about the cock ring (which I'd bought with *Gina*); Gina's desire for friendship with Regan; and more. Individually, none of those things gave me cause to worry. Taken together, however, they were disturbing.

"Why does my life have to be so complicated?" I repeated.

"It's all right," Susan said, stroking my face. Then, softly, "Do you remember the conversation we had about committed relationships?"

I shrugged noncommittally.

"It's difficult to have a committed relationship with two people. At some point, only *one* of them can be the most important person in your life. 'Most important' is one of those dreaded superlatives—two people can't both be 'most.' When you were at camp, it wasn't such an issue, because the three of you only spent a couple of weeks a year together. Now, however…"

"So… what? Does this mean the end of my relationship with one of them?"

"It doesn't have to," she said. "You just need to be aware of the dynamics, and to make sure you maintain your relationship with *both* women. It sounds like you haven't been spending as much time with Gina as you possibly could."

I silently agreed.

"That may be one of the reasons she's investing so much time in her friendship with Regan. Don't you think?"

"I guess."

"No, you *know*."

After a moment, I nodded. "But what can I do if *Kendall and Gina* don't have a relationship

with each other?"

"Not much," she admitted after a moment. "They're friends, and they're sometimes lovers, but not without you. You're…"

"The keystone," I finished. "Without me, the whole thing falls apart." Then I turned sullen. "Man, I don't *need* this kind of pressure."

"But it's what you have," she said. "You wanted a relationship with both of them, and you got it. Relationships take *work* to hold together. The effort is worthwhile, but no one ever said this was going to be easy."

"TANSTAAFL," I said.

"Excuse me?"

"Sorry," I said. "There Ain't No Such Thing As A Free Lunch."

She nodded.

Then I laughed darkly.

"What's so funny?" she asked.

"I was just thinking about one of my friends. You'll meet him later today. I think my tuition free lunch is about to go away too."

"Oh?"

I nodded. "My friend Trip has this business, and he's already co-opted me as his partner. What he does is…"

Telling Susan about Trip's summer job took my mind off my problems—my *looming* problems—with Kendall and Gina. Susan must have understood that, because she let me talk. I think it was the first time I realized that she *didn't* have all the answers. As wise and experienced as she was, she wasn't omniscient. And this was one problem I was going to have to solve for myself.

She knew it, and I knew it.

I just didn't *like* it.

✧ ✧ ✧

After a late breakfast, Susan, Kendall, and I got dressed and headed downstairs to meet Raymond. When he dropped us off at my dorm, Susan gave him the rest of the day off—with pay. With the pre-game traffic, it would be quicker to simply walk around campus anyway.

Upstairs, I gave Susan a tour of my room. Billy wasn't there, and neither were T.J. and Glen, so we had the suite to ourselves. Kendall told Susan about the rooms in Clement as I changed into a pair of shorts and an Izod shirt.

"Were the rooms like this when you were in college?" Kendall asked.

"More or less," Susan said. "Although I didn't live in a dorm."

"Oh?"

"Well," Susan explained, "like you, I started college when I was seventeen. That was pretty uncommon in those days, 1957. Since I wasn't eighteen yet, I lived with some friends of the family."

"What was that like?" Kendall asked.

"It wasn't bad. They had a daughter a year older than me who was also at the College of Charleston. And, that's when I met Jack."

"Was he also at the College of Charleston?"

"No," Susan said with a grin at the memory, "he was a student at the Citadel, a military college nearby. The family I lived with had a son at the Citadel as well, and he brought Jack home for Thanksgiving dinner, since his parents were in Europe."

"Was it love at first sight?" Kendall asked.

"Not at all," Susan said. "At first, I thought he was too serious, too brooding." Then she nodded at me. "He was a lot like Paul, a sourpuss."

"I'm *not* a sourpuss," I said as I tied my shoes.

"But Jack grew on me," Susan continued, ignoring me. "He had such drive and ambition."

"Like Paul," Kendall said.

Susan winked at me and then nodded.

"I'm going across the hall to find Trip," I interrupted. I knew the rest of the story, and I knew that Susan was only going to tease me more. Any time she talked about Jack, she teased me. I think it was her way of warding off grief.

In a nutshell, Jack had invited Susan on several dates, all of which she refused. Finally, she agreed to go with him to a formal Christmas dance at the Citadel. Much to her surprise, she thoroughly enjoyed herself. She liked the gala of a military ball, with all the pomp and ceremony. And, more importantly, she discovered that she liked Jack.

"He was thoughtful and intense," she had once told me. "Smart, and very focused. He knew what he wanted, and he was determined to have it. Luckily, he wanted *me*."

By February of 1958, she and Jack were an item. Shortly after her eighteenth birthday, in April, she found out she was pregnant (those were the days before the birth control pill, she explained). It didn't matter that she and Jack weren't married; she knew they were destined to be together. The day she told him she was pregnant, he proposed. Since Citadel men couldn't marry, they had to wait two weeks until he graduated and received his commission as an Ensign in the Navy. Three days after that, however, they were married.

"And the rest," Susan had recalled with a wistful grin, "is history."

✧ ✧ ✧

When I returned to my room with Trip in tow, Susan was reminiscing fondly. Not surprisingly, Kendall was caught up in the story.

"So that's how I ended up getting my first ride in a Navy plane," Susan finished with a laugh. "I don't know if Jack was more worried about *me*, or the mess in the plane and what his instructor would do when he found out," she added.

"Oh, bless your heart," Kendall said. "But Jack should've known better than to fly a loop with a pregnant woman in the plane."

"Probably," Susan agreed, "but I think he was having too much fun." With that, she smoothly turned and looked at me expectantly.

"Trip," I said, "this is my aunt, Susan. Susan, this is Trip."

Susan smiled warmly as they shook hands and exchanged pleasantries.

"Trip?" Susan asked. "Are you a third?"

"Yes, ma'am," he said. Then he drew himself up to his full height. "Franklin Davis Whitman, III, at your service."

"Please, call me Susan," she said.

"Of course… Susan," Trip said.

"'*Franklin*'?" I asked him. I guess I'd always thought that "Trip" was his given name.

He merely nodded.

"When Cary called you that… I mean, I thought you were *from* Franklin."

"I *am*," he said, grinning. "Although my father never saw the irony in the name."

"Your father sounds like an interesting man," Susan said, smoothly diverting the conversation.

As we headed downstairs and then toward Kendall's apartment—so she could change clothes as well—Susan extracted the brief version of Trip's life story. When the subject turned to his home renovation business, however, he really became animated.

"Are you really gonna be Trip's partner next summer?" Kendall whispered.

"Probably," I said.

"I'm so proud of you," she gushed, hugging herself to my arm. Then she frowned.

"What?"

"If you do that, will you still come to camp?" she asked.

"I don't know," I said after a moment's thought.

For a split second, she looked upset. Then she glanced toward Trip and Susan. When she looked back, she hugged me again. Finally, she gave me a kiss on the cheek.

"What was that for?" I asked.

"Because I love you."

"I love you too," I said, a little bewildered.

✧ ✧ ✧

Kendall's parents had parked their Winnebago in the usual location, along with several other Chattanooga and Knoxville police officers' RVs. When we arrived, I introduced Trip to Adam, Melissa, and Drew. Then Kendall introduced Susan and Trip to her parents' friends.

While the women chatted, Drew, Trip, and I hung out by the grill with the rest of the men. Even though UT was a dry campus, the guys all had cups of beer (someone always brought a keg, although they discreetly kept it *inside* one of the RVs). As long as everyone drank out of cups, no one was the wiser.

Besides, I thought, *they're* cops. *Who's going to hassle them about having beer?*

"Exactly," Drew said, as if reading my mind. "Sometimes, it's *nice* to be a cop's kid. Unfortunately, as my dad says, 'there are rules, and then there are *laws*.' Since none of us are nineteen, we get to drink Cokes instead. Can I get y'all some?"

Trip and I nodded.

"So," Trip said when Drew returned with the drinks, "Paul tells me you play football. Linebacker, right?"

Drew glanced at me and then nodded. "Do you play?" he asked Trip.

"Not anymore, but I played for six years—quarterback."

Drew's grin was feral. Then he laughed good-naturedly and clapped Trip on the shoulder. "Quarterback, huh?"

As they talked about football, I zoned out. After my early-morning conversation with Susan, I was worried about Gina. I realized how utterly *alone* she must have felt during our first weeks at school, and I felt guilty. So I was looking forward to seeing her before the game, if only to tell her that I missed her.

The game was scheduled to start at three o'clock, and as I checked my watch, the minutes

seemed to drag by. Finally, around two thirty, Gina, Regan, and another girl arrived. They were dressed alike: white shorts and a Chi Omega t-shirt with the Greek letters in orange plaid.

Gina introduced the other girl as Margot. Like Regan, Margot was slim, blue-eyed, and blonde, with small, firm breasts and nice legs. Her face didn't have Regan's Nordic angles, but she was very pretty.

We made small talk for a minute or two, but as soon as I could, I pulled Gina aside. Regan and Margot were talking to Trip and Drew, and Kendall was talking to Susan—as well as keeping her distance from the sorority girls—so I didn't think anyone saw Gina and me slip into the Paytons' Winnebago. I didn't want anyone to overhear us, either, so I ushered Gina into the RV's tiny bathroom.

"What's going on?" she asked.

"I just wanted to talk to you for a few minutes. Alone."

"Sure," she said with a nod. "But I can't stay long. We have to meet some of the other pledges in about fifteen minutes. I'm sorry, but—"

"That's cool," I said, interrupting her. "What are you doing after the game, though?"

"After the game? Why?"

"Because Susan wanted to take us to dinner, and I think you should be there… no, I *want* you to be there. Afterward, we were probably going to spend the night in Susan's hotel room," I said. Then I pulled her into my arms. "We missed you last night. *I* missed you last night."

"Oh, Paul," she said, "I wanted to be there, but I had to go to that dumb mixer."

I lifted my eyebrows in question.

"Regan and her boyfriend got back together last night," she explained. "So I had to fend off drunk Pikes all night, by myself."

I tried not to bristle, but Gina knew me too well.

"Don't worry," she said. "I may play around with Regan, but *you're* the only guy I want in my life."

"Even though we haven't seen each other much lately?" I asked rhetorically. "We need to change that. You and Kendall are the most important people in the world to me; I don't want to lose you. And… well…"

"I miss you too," Gina said, echoing my thoughts.

As she tilted her head up, I lowered my own and our lips met. I pulled her body against mine and cupped her ass through her thin shorts. When we finally broke the kiss, we both grinned breathlessly.

"I'm supposed to go to this party tonight," she said, "but… I'll skip it if you want me to."

"Will you get in trouble?" I asked.

"Regan probably won't be happy," she said with a shrug. "But Rod's got her totally wrapped around his finger, so she probably won't even notice. And my big sister— oh my God, have I told you about her yet?" When I shook my head, she continued. "You'll like her. Her name's Jessica Roedeffer. She's really cool. Anyway, I'll tell Jessica that I can't come to the party, and she'll cover for me."

"Good," I said, "because I really want you with *us* tonight."

"Oh?"

"Mmm hmm," I said as I lowered my lips to hers. When we broke the kiss, I turned her

around to face the bathroom's small mirror. Then I hugged her from behind and pressed the lump of my erection into her ass. "I think you're going to like the cock ring," I whispered, my lips close to her ear.

She sighed and closed her eyes as I nuzzled her ear and neck.

When she practically melted into my arms, I ran my hands along her trim stomach. Then I popped the button on her shorts. She whimpered softly as my hand slid under the waistband of her panties. My fingers found her smooth slit and I gently teased the base of her clit.

"Oh, God," she moaned softly, "you make me so hot."

"Good," I said. Then, in a husky whisper, I described the cock ring's effects.

She moaned again as I told her how hard I came when I *did* finally climax. Then she suddenly turned and reached for my belt. After she extracted my burgeoning manhood, she knelt in front of me.

When she wrapped her lips around my glans, I had to steady myself with a hand on the wall. Just as she began sucking in earnest, however, someone knocked on the door.

Gina didn't stop sucking.

"Occupied," I said to whoever was on the other side of the door.

"Paul?" Kendall called softly.

"Yes," I said, trying to modulate my voice so she wouldn't realize I was getting a blowjob. I don't know why I didn't want Kendall to know that Gina and I were fooling around at the moment, but I didn't.

"Regan's asking about Gina," Kendall said.

So Kendall knows Gina's in here after all, I thought. *No wonder she doesn't sound all that happy.* "Okay," I said at last. Then I gritted my teeth in frustration; Gina's lips and tongue felt *incredibly* good. "Tell her we'll be right out," I said.

"Okay," Kendall said.

I was tempted to let my dick do the thinking, but I knew that would only cause more problems than the one it would solve. Gina had heard the message as well, but she didn't want to stop any more than I did. Unfortunately, we both knew we'd have to. All too soon, she let my erection slip from her lips. Then she kissed the tip and smiled up at me.

"To be continued," she said softly.

I nodded and then helped her to her feet. As I tucked my saliva-slick manhood into my shorts, she re-buttoned her own shorts. Then we made sure we were presentable.

"I'm really looking forward to spending time with *you* tonight," she said as she glided into my arms. "Susan and Kendall are just icing on the cake."

"And if you're lucky," I said with a roguish grin, "they'll be icing on the *cock* too." Then I lowered my lips to hers. Our kiss was tender, but passionate and full of promise.

"I'll meet you back here after the game," she said. "Okay?"

I nodded.

We kissed again, neither of us wanting the moment to end.

Ultimately, however, it did. I opened the bathroom door and we stepped into the RVs narrow aisle.

"I love you," I whispered.

"I love you too."

✧ ✧ ✧

Susan stayed with the Paytons and their friends and listened to the game on the radio. Abby arrived about fifteen minutes before the game started—she, Kendall, Trip, Drew, and I watched the game from the stadium. The game was hard-fought, but UT beat Auburn, 10–7. As we made our way back to the RVs, the slow-moving crowd was rowdy and jubilant.

Once we got to the Winnebago, we discovered that the Paytons and their friends were in high spirits as well. Most of them were feeling no pain, including Adam and Melissa. Susan had a beer in her hand, but she seemed entirely sober.

At the game, Drew had met up with some of his friends from high school (guys my age who were students at UT). They had invited him to a party at the SAE house, and he took off as soon as he told his parents where he was going.

Trip knew that we had plans with Susan, so he offered to walk Abby back to her apartment. After they said goodbye to Susan, they thanked Adam and Melissa for the hospitality. Then they headed out.

At that point, I started checking the time and praying that Gina would show up. I didn't want Regan to derail our plans in a fit of pique, for my own sake as well as Gina's. When I looked up after checking my watch for the fifth or sixth time, Kendall frowned.

"She's not coming," she said softly, her tone full of reproach. "She's going to do something with her sorority friends." She didn't need to say "again"; I heard it in her tone.

"She'll be here," I said, with as much optimism as I could muster.

"We'll see."

When my eyes narrowed, Kendall let the subject drop.

Unfortunately, I began to worry that she might be right. Every time I saw a black-haired girl, I looked to see if she was Gina. After twenty minutes, I was ready to give up. Kendall hadn't said anything else, but her silence spoke volumes.

Suddenly, however, someone covered my eyes from behind.

"Surprise," Gina said brightly.

In a flash, I turned and swept her into my arms.

"Sorry I'm late," she said. "I had to find Jessica to tell her I wasn't going to be at the party tonight."

"Is everything cool?" I asked.

"Regan's not happy, but that's too bad. She's not my boyfriend," she said. Then she leaned close. "And she's not my girlfriend, either," she added with a glance at Kendall.

"Are we ready to go?" Susan asked a moment later. "I'm starving."

"I thought Adam and the other guys grilled steaks," I said as I set Gina back on her own feet.

"Oh, they did," Susan said. "But I knew we'd be having dinner later, so I didn't eat much."

"Oh, okay."

"So, let's thank them for their hospitality and head out."

I nodded.

Goodbyes took longer than I wanted, but we needed to be polite. I was still horny from my interrupted blowjob before the game, and I couldn't wait to get back to Susan's hotel.

After a football game—especially a game when UT won—the streets and sidewalks around campus teemed with revelers. People honked their car horns; they shouted and whooped; they

raved about the game to anyone who would listen; and they generally celebrated.

To make matters worse, we had to contend with the World's Fair construction site. (A couple of powerful bankers and a group of local businessmen had somehow convinced the powers-that-be to hold the 1982 World's Fair in Knoxville. The construction site was massive—not to mention incredibly interesting, especially for an architecture student. Knoxville wasn't exactly a big city, but it certainly had lofty goals.)

It seemed like every square foot of real estate from Neyland Stadium to the Radisson was under construction. Consequently, the walk took about thirty minutes. When we finally arrived, Susan suggested that we simply eat dinner at the hotel's restaurant.

Once again, I ate more than I wanted to. It felt good not to count every bite, but I knew I'd pay for it sooner or later.

"What do you all want to do tonight?" Susan asked with a bit too much innocence.

Gina and I merely grinned at each other. Then she reached for my hand under the table. Not to be left out, Kendall did the same.

"Paul said you had champagne last night," Gina said. "Can we do that again?" she asked.

"Sounds good to me," Susan said.

With that, Susan paid the check and we headed upstairs. Once there, she ordered several bottles of champagne from room service. When she hung up the phone, she picked up Gina's gift-wrapped boxes.

I was pretty sure I knew what was in them. After all, they were the same size as Kendall's presents.

"These are for you," Susan said as she handed the boxes to Gina. "Happy first month at college… or something like that."

"Oh, you shouldn't have," Gina said as her eyes lit up.

"Nonsense," Susan said. Then, "Open the large one first."

"Thank you very much," Gina said. Then she carefully unwrapped the bigger box. Predictably, the top was stamped with the Christian Dior logo.

"I got it in New York," Susan explained when Gina held up the dress. "I wanted to give it to you for graduation, but I decided to wait until I could give Kendall hers as well."

Unlike Kendall's silver dress, Gina's was black. And where Kendall's was snug and form-fitting, Gina's was slinky and backless. It was also gauzy enough that it would cling to her curves when she moved.

"Oh, wow," Gina said when she looked down at the open box, "a matching purse. Thank you."

"You're welcome," Susan said. Then she grinned in anticipation. "Open the other box."

When Gina did, she smiled graciously and held up a pair of black silk shoes.

"Do you want to try on the dress?" I asked her. I could already imagine her wearing it, and I felt my penis stir in response. "Why don't you put yours on too," I suggested to Kendall.

Before either girl moved, however, someone knocked on the door.

"Would you mind getting that, Paul?" Susan asked. Then she reached for her purse. She extracted a five-dollar bill and handed it to me. "This is for the waiter," she said.

After he left, Gina slipped out of her clothes and into the black dress. A moment later, I helped Kendall with the zipper on her sheath-like silver dress.

The girls looked stunning. Gina's dress swooshed as she moved, revealing and then hiding her figure. After I simply gawked for several seconds, Susan suggested that I open the champagne and make a toast. I poured four glasses and then cleared my throat. Unfortunately, I didn't know what to say.

"Okay," I said at last. "I'd like to make a toast… to me."

Susan arched an eyebrow.

Kendall merely looked a little surprised.

Gina, however, seemed to know what I was going to say, and she smiled indulgently.

"Yes, that's right," I said, "a toast to *me*. After all, I'm the luckiest guy in the world. I have three beautiful women in my life," I added, lifting my glass to each of them. "You're smart, you're sexy, and you love me. I don't know what I did to deserve each of you, but I'm gonna try to figure it out… so I can keep doing it."

"Just keep being yourself," Susan said softly. "Cheers."

We clinked our glasses and drank. Then I picked up the bottle and we moved to the sitting area. We were all feeling horny, so our conversation quickly turned to sex. A few minutes later, Gina and Kendall shed their dresses (at my suggestion, of course).

When we started to fool around, I made sure to pay special attention to Gina, even though I could tell that Kendall was a little miffed. Fortunately, Susan came to my rescue and distracted her.

As Susan played with Kendall's pussy, Gina and I moved to the bed. I showed her how to put on the cock ring and she sucked me to erection. Then I pulled her into a sixty-nine and teased her pussy until she was practically dripping. When her moaning grew more insistent, I rolled her onto her back. She spread her legs and her dark labia parted to reveal her pink inner folds.

As I entered her, she gazed into my eyes, her expression eager and full of desire. For thirty minutes, we fucked each other in a dozen different positions: missionary, doggie, her on top, on our sides, and more. She sucked me; I licked her; we went at it like long-lost lovers (which, in a way, we were). She came at least three times, but the cock ring and my own control held back my orgasm.

Finally, I straddled her chest and stroked myself. With a hungry moan, she wrapped her lips around my glans. My orgasm built slowly and then surged like a tidal wave. I squirted so much come that Gina had to swallow twice. In spite of that, pearly rivulets ran down her cheeks. When I sat back on my haunches, she gathered the escaped semen and licked her fingers clean.

Afterward, we held each other and caught our breath. As we did, we watched Susan and Kendall. The two women were in a sixty-nine on the couch, with Susan on the bottom. As she licked and sucked Kendall's clit, she thrust two fingers into the younger woman's pussy.

When Kendall climaxed, she shuddered and almost fell off the couch. As soon as Gina saw Kendall's predicament, she gave me a quick kiss and then practically leapt off the bed. Gina lowered Kendall to the floor and held her, gently brushing her damp hair away from her face.

As I watched the two of them together, I began to wonder how much Gina really cared for the other girl. When Susan and I had our talk, I simply assumed that *both* girls cared more for me than for each other. Watching Gina with Kendall, however, I realized that I was wrong.

Gina was *in love* with me, but she clearly loved Kendall as well. Unfortunately, I don't think her love was reciprocated. Kendall *liked* Gina, and she certainly had fun with the darker girl, but

I don't think her feelings went any deeper than that.

Why can't people be simple? I silently lamented. *In a perfect world, I'd love both girls, they'd love me,* and *they'd love each other. But that's not how the real world works,* I told myself with a sigh.

Several minutes later, when Gina and Kendall went to the bathroom together, Susan glanced at me.

"Are you thinking what I think you're thinking?" she asked, observant as ever.

"Probably," I said. "But I don't want to talk about it. Okay?"

She nodded. Then she moved to the bed and settled beside me, her head resting on my chest. "I wish I could tell you what to do," she said softly, "but I'm afraid you're going to have to work through this on your own."

I nodded, still deep in thought.

"I hate to see you going through this, but…" When I didn't respond, she realized that I wasn't in the mood to be drawn out, so she grew quiet. Instead, she simply reassured me with her presence. Unfortunately, she couldn't do anything more than that. We both knew she was right, I *would* have to work through this on my own.

Although I have no *idea how,* I thought morosely.

"Do you want to talk about it when the girls come out of the bathroom?" Susan asked softly.

I shook my head.

"Well," she said, glancing up at me, "we'd better take your mind off it if you don't want to talk about it."

I looked a question at her.

"Kendall's bound to figure out you're in a pensive mood," she said. "And Gina's pretty observant too. So…"

I reluctantly nodded in agreement.

"I think I know how to take your mind off your troubles," she said with a half-wry, half-compassionate smile.

"I'm sure you do," I said, speaking for the first time in several minutes.

When the girls emerged from the bathroom, Susan was gently sucking my dick back to life.

I'm in the doldrums and Susan solves the problem with a blowjob, I thought, although that wasn't really her solution. It was simply a diversion. I knew as well as she did that Kendall was bound to pick up on my mood. And since I wasn't ready to discuss my poorly defined misgivings about our three-way relationship, I relaxed and tried to enjoy myself. Then I grinned at the absurdity of the situation.

"What's so funny?" Gina asked, upon seeing my expression.

"Nothing," I said, pasting on my warmest smile. "I was just thinking how lucky I am. Again."

With that, I gestured for the girls to join us on the bed. Gina crawled between my legs to join Susan, but I motioned for Kendall to kneel beside me.

"Are you having fun?" I whispered to her.

After a moment, she nodded.

"Good. 'Cause you're one of the most important people in the world, as far as I'm concerned."

"One of," she muttered.

"One of," I said firmly. "But you're tied for first."

"So? It's a three-way tie."

I shook my head. When she arched her eyebrows, I explained. "I love Susan, yes. But I'm *in love* with you and Gina." Then I pulled her close. "Susan was my first lover, and she's still my friend. But you're my girlfriend."

"I'm not your only girlfriend, though."

"I've only ever had *two*." *Three, counting Amy*, I mentally corrected, although I didn't think it was the right time to quibble over details.

Kendall nodded.

Instead of saying anything else, I pulled her close and kissed her. As our kiss heated up, she heated up as well. I was shamelessly playing on her body's reactions, but I wasn't the least bit sorry.

My life had turned into a series of balancing acts. I loved both girls, but our relationship was becoming more and more complicated. With an act of will, however, I shoved those thoughts out of my mind and simply concentrated on sucking Kendall's nipples.

Soon, she was panting and grinding her pussy against me. Between my legs, Susan and Gina were taking turns sucking me, but I focused on Kendall and her breasts.

My life may be complicated, but at least the sex is good, I thought with a breast-muffled chuckle.

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When we finally decided to go to sleep, it was well after one in the morning. We were all exhausted, but thoroughly sated. I had come four times, and I'd lost track of how many orgasms the women had. The three bottles of champagne were empty and the room looked like it had been ravaged by a tornado.

With Kendall snuggled behind me, I wrapped my arms around Gina. Susan turned out the bedside light and settled into her pillow on the other side of Gina.

Sometime during the night, I awoke. I didn't have to go to the bathroom, so I wondered what had woken me up. Then I figured it out. Kendall shifted—again—and elbowed me in the back. Finally, however, she rolled toward the edge of the bed (but not before bumping me again).

Gina, on the other hand, was still nestled in my arms. I could tell by her breathing that she had been jostled awake as well. When I cupped her breast, her nipple hardened. Once she realized I was awake, she reached for my dick.

After gently stroking me for several minutes, she reached between her legs and guided the tip of my erection to her opening. We made love quietly, tenderly. Neither of us moved much—we didn't want to disturb Susan or Kendall—but we didn't need to.

Finally, I buried myself as deep as I could and erupted inside her. Afterward, she kissed my hand and sighed softly. Then, with my slowly shrinking erection still buried inside her, we drifted back to sleep.

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When I woke up again, I *did* have to go to the bathroom. After relieving my bladder, I crawled back into bed and fell asleep within minutes.

Later, after we all got up and moving, we ordered brunch from room service. The women

disappeared into the bathroom while I slipped on my shorts and admitted the waiter and his food-laden cart. I tipped him and then knocked on the bathroom door when he left.

Both Kendall and Gina were in a good mood, so I thoroughly enjoyed the meal (including Susan's teasing, thank you very much). I ate too much, of course, but I'd already decided to double my workouts for the next couple of weeks.

When we finished eating, we took showers and then helped Susan repack her belongings. Her flight left at twelve twenty, so we had to leave the hotel by eleven fifteen.

Raymond was waiting for us downstairs, and directed the bellman as he loaded the luggage into the limo's trunk. Kendall and Gina also had their dress boxes, but we put them in the limo's passenger compartment (along with my backpack with our clothes and things from the day before).

During the drive to the airport, we chatted about all sorts of things. Once again, the mood was light and fun, in spite of Susan's impending departure. I think she was making an effort to *keep* the conversation light, and I silently thanked her for that.

After a half-hour's ride, we reached the airport's Departures ramp. When Raymond came to a stop in front of the airline's baggage kiosk, I opened the limo door and helped the women out. Susan handed her ticket to the porter as Raymond unloaded the luggage. Finally, Raymond told us where he'd be parked, for when we were ready to return to campus.

In the waiting area at the gate, while Kendall and Gina were in the bathroom, Susan handed me two fifty-dollar bills.

"What's this for?" I asked.

"It's Raymond's tip," she said.

"*A hundred dollars?!*"

She nodded calmly. "He gave us good service and he was on call most of the weekend."

"Jeez."

"When you give it to him, be discreet," Susan said, ignoring my astonished remark. "Fold it like this," she added, demonstrating, "and hold it in the palm of your hand, like this."

I nodded, still a little dumbfounded. *And I thought I could pay for the whole* weekend *with a hundred dollars,* I thought. *Boy, do* I *have a lot to learn!*

"Whatever you do," Susan said, "*don't* give it to him in a handshake. It's okay to shake his hand, but this is a tip, not a bribe. Okay?"

"Okay."

"Good," she said. Then she stepped close. "I'm glad I got to see you this weekend. I had fun."

"Me too," I said.

"Call me—collect—if you ever want to talk."

"I will."

"Take care of yourself, too. You look too thin."

I snorted. In my opinion, I needed to *lose* a few pounds.

"Take care of Gina and Kendall as well," she said. "Gina relies on you; you're a good influence on her. Kendall is more self-contained."

I nodded.

"And finally," she said as we spotted Kendall and Gina walking toward us, "I love you."

"I love you too."

"I'm proud of you, too," she said.

I felt my face heating.

"And," she added with a whimsical chuckle, "Gina and Kendall are lucky I'm not eighteen."

"No kidding," Gina said as she and Kendall joined us. Then she turned to the taller girl. "Can you imagine sharing him with *two* other women?"

Kendall's eyes hardened momentarily but then she smiled and shook her head.

Fortunately, the rest of the conversation was as good-natured as the conversation in the limo had been.

When the gate agent announced boarding for first class passengers, Susan gave us each a hug. She gave me a chaste kiss on the cheek, but I could sense the deep affection in her embrace. When she pulled back, her eyes spoke the words her lips couldn't. I nodded in understanding and then she hugged me again.

"I'll miss you," she said softly.

"Me too," I whispered.

After another kiss, we separated and she shouldered her carry-on bag.

"Well," she said to us, "this is it. Thank you for having me. You can call me anytime, collect of course." Then she gave us a stern look. "And call your mothers."

Kendall, Gina, and I answered at the same time, and then grinned at each other.

"Take care," Susan said.

"You too," I said.

After three more quick hugs, she turned and headed toward the gate agent. Once she presented her boarding pass, she turned and waved a final time. Then she walked down the jetway and was gone.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

On Monday, life returned to normal, more or less. I ate breakfast with Kendall and then we walked up the Hill together for our first classes. In my Calculus class, Professor Tow was in a good mood, so he peppered his lesson with math jokes. (*What do you call a percolator that makes coffee on an airplane? A high pot in use. Hypotenuse… get it?* Groan.)

In my Intro to Architecture class, Professor Spielman lectured about the Greek orders. I already knew how to distinguish Doric from Ionic from Corinthian, so I simply doodled in my sketchpad (drawing column capitals and entablatures, of course).

In American Literature class, Professor Feller discussed the Civil War and its effect on authors of the time.

Finally, I met Kendall for lunch. To my surprise, the Art History girls were only two tables away. The brunette smiled coquettishly when I glanced in her direction. The blonde rolled her eyes at her friend's antics, but smiled as well, her blue eyes sparkling warmly.

"Aren't those the girls from your class?" Kendall asked, noticing my glance.

I nodded.

"Why don't you say hello to them?"

"Because I don't know them all that well," I temporized. "I mean, I don't even know their names," I added, which was the truth.

Kendall seemed satisfied by my answer, so she changed the subject. Unfortunately, she changed the subject to what I was eating. Or, more to the point, to what I *wasn't* eating.

"Look," I said at last, "I ate too much this weekend. I probably gained ten pounds. And worse, I didn't work out at all."

"Paul, you look *fine*," she said.

"Can we change the subject?" I asked moodily.

"Sorry," she said. "I worry about you."

"I know," I said, softening. "I just don't wanna talk about it. Okay?"

"Okay."

"How were your classes this morning?" I asked, hoping to steer the conversation to a more comfortable—and innocuous—subject.

For the rest of our meal, we talked about everyday things. Afterward, I kissed her goodbye and headed to the A&A building. I needed to do some work on my Design project, and I could use one of the drafting boards in the student design lab. Samantha Poole was there when I arrived, so I grabbed a board next to hers.

"Are you working on the project?" she asked.

"Yep. You?"

"Mmm hmm. But I think I'm hopeless."

I looked over her shoulder—her drawing was a mess. The assignment was to create floor plan and elevation drawings of our homes (our parents' homes, really). Her drawing was out of scale and weirdly skewed. It looked like a house from the other side of the Looking Glass.

"Design isn't even my concentration," she said in resignation.

"What is?"

"Urban Planning. And I can't draw to save my life."

"You don't have to," I explained. "Here, let's start over. Okay, now think about your house. Walk through it in your head," I suggested. "Just *sketch* the basic plan. Once you do that, you can use a T-square and straightedge to do the floor plan. So you don't have to be able to draw *or* do design. You just have to know how to use a straightedge. And you have to remember what your house looks like, of course."

"You make it sound so easy," she said.

"It *is* easy," I said. "Here, you start sketching on a new piece of paper and then I'll help you lay out the floor plan. Okay?"

Fortunately, my assurance was contagious—as intended—and she flipped to a new piece of drafting paper with a bit of enthusiasm. We spent the next thirty minutes laying out the basics of her house. Once she finished the floor plan, she would be able to use it as a basis to create the elevation drawing.

By the time one o'clock rolled around, Samantha had a workable sketch. She would need to clean it up quite a bit, but she was well on her way to a final drawing. Unfortunately, I hadn't gotten a thing done on *my* drawings. As we rolled up our drawings and stuffed them in our carrying tubes, I made plans to come back to the lab later that afternoon.

With that, we headed to Design class. We were late, but not *too* late—we walked through the door right after Professor Joska did. We didn't want to face his wrath, though, so we kept our heads down and scurried to our desks.

"I'd ask if you had a good excuse for being late, Mr. Hughes and Miss Poole," Joska said to our backs, "but I saw you in the design lab. At least I know you were working on your projects," he added. "In the future, however, if you can't make it to class before I get here, don't bother showing up at all."

I felt my face heating with anger.

Joska ignored me and started grilling us on our reading assignment. I had read the remainder of the human sciences chapter over the weekend, so I answered his questions whenever he leveled his basilisk gaze at me. He still seemed to be mocking me, but I tried not to let my simmering anger affect my expression. When the bell finally rang, I felt like I'd just finished a hard workout.

"Thanks for all your help, Paul," Samantha said as she gathered up her things.

"Any time."

"What was that about?" Trip asked after she'd gone.

"We were working on our Home Project together in the lab," I explained. "Well, we were working on *her* drawings. I didn't get squat done on mine."

"You know," Trip said, "I think that may be why Joska put her in our group."

"In *your* group," I said. When he grew silent, I felt guilty and tried to cover my sour grapes by changing the subject. "She's an Urban Planning major," I said. "Although she really *can't* draw."

"She can draw," Trip said, "but not like you. Or even like *me*, for that matter. She wouldn't be in the Architecture program if she couldn't. Although you're right, she's not the greatest draftsman. But dude, she's a whiz at planning and scheduling."

"No kidding," I said.

After that, Trip changed the subject to our floor's intramural football team. We had our first game on Thursday—versus the Reese Hall Ground Floor team. Consequently, Trip wanted to get

in an afternoon practice. I still had to return to the design lab to work on my project, but I agreed to spend a couple of hours at the practice field.

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After dinner, Trip knocked on my door.

"Luke smuggled a girl up to our room," he said as he flopped onto Billy's bed. "D'you mind if I hang out here for a while?"

"Luke's got a girl in your room?" I asked.

"Yeah, some girl he met this weekend. He claims they're gonna 'study,' but… well… you know."

"Sure," I said, nodding in understanding. "But I wasn't gonna stick around. I gotta go work on my project for Design class."

"That's cool," he said. "I'll go to the lab with you. I need to finish mine too."

With that, he headed back to his room to get his drafting set and carrying tube. A few minutes later, we headed out.

Since Architecture was such a demanding major, the student design labs were always open. Neither Trip nor I had pulled an all-nighter yet, but from talking to other students, we knew it was inevitable. As we progressed in our education, round-the-clock work on a design project would become more common.

When we got to the lab, it was mostly empty, so we chose two drafting boards near the windows. For the next two hours, we worked on our drawings.

After we returned from the lab, Luke and the girl were gone, so Trip said goodnight and headed to his room. In my own room, I tossed my stuff on my bed and then called Gina.

"So," I asked, "did Regan give you a hard time about missing the party on Saturday?"

"Yeah, but I don't care," she said. "I mean, you're more important than her."

"Thank you," I said. For a few minutes, we talked about our classes and everyday things. Then I decided to broach a subject that had been nagging me since Saturday morning. "Hey," I asked, "do you ever call Kendall?"

For a moment, Gina was silent. Then, "I used to. But…" I could hear the shrug in her voice.

"What do you mean you 'used to'?" I asked.

"When we first got here, I used to call her," Gina said. "But she was never home, or she was too busy to talk, or something. Why?"

"I was just curious," I said as lightheartedly as I could.

"I mean, I still love her," Gina said, "but I guess it's different now that we're living in the same city."

"Yeah," I agreed. "Anyway, that wasn't why I was calling. I've got some reading to do for class," I said. "I know it's late, but I thought maybe we could get together in the lobby. I mean, if you need to do some reading too."

"Yeah," she said immediately. "I've gotta finish a Western Civ. chapter. We're studying Rome. Even though I already know the stuff, it wouldn't hurt to go over it again. And it'd be cool just hanging out," she added. "Do you wanna invite Kendall too?"

"Sure."

"Okay. My lobby or yours?"

"Yours," I said.

"Cool. I'll see you in a few minutes."

When I called Kendall to ask if she wanted to join us, she declined. She said she had a Child Psychology paper to write, and she needed the quiet of her apartment. So I told her I loved her and hung up. Then I headed down to meet Gina.

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When I checked my mailbox on Wednesday, I had a card from Susan and a note telling me I had a package.

The card read, *Thanks for a wonderful weekend. I enjoyed seeing you. And I especially liked your new "ring."*

At that point, I'm sure I turned six shades of purple.

The note continued, *Hopefully, you've gotten your printer by now. Doug said you'd need it for printing out term papers. I hope you enjoy it. Take care of yourself. Love, Susan. P.S. – Call your mother.*

With a chuckle at her final admonishment, I took the package notice to the post office counter. I showed them my student ID and they handed me a large box. Sure enough, it was an Okidata dot-matrix printer. Back in my room, I put the box on my bed and headed across the hall to Trip's room.

"What's going on?" I asked as he opened the door.

"Just listening to some music," he said as he gestured toward his headphones.

"Oh? What?"

"John Coltrane," he said. "Actually, it's the Miles Davis Quartet, but Coltrane was a sideman for Miles in '58." At my blank stare, he chuckled. "It's jazz, man," he explained.

"Oh, okay."

"Lemme put on something you'll recognize," he said. "How about the Yardbirds?"

I shrugged.

"You'd know 'em if you heard 'em. But I'll put on something else. You up for the Beatles?"

"Yeah," I said with a laugh, "I've heard of them."

"The Beatles it is," he said. Then he carefully removed the jazz LP from his turntable and put on "Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band."

When the music started playing, he turned down the volume and invited me to sit. Luke was at the library with his girlfriend, Tara (the girl from Monday night), so we had the room to ourselves.

I don't know why, but talking with Trip was relaxing. We talked until dinnertime, about everything from science fiction to music and movies. I chuckled at the thought of a Hemingway book that I'd read in high school, *Men Without Women*. I don't know if Hemingway had a good idea or not, but I certainly enjoyed not having to worry about Kendall, Gina, or any of my problems.

✧ ✧ ✧

The next morning, Kendall and I ate breakfast together, as usual.

"I was thinking…," she said. "Since you've got to finish your project this afternoon, and you've got your football game this evening, maybe we could hang out after your class this morning."

"That'd be cool," I said.

"I could meet you in the A&A building after my Child Psych. class," she suggested. "We can spend the day together. Until you need to do your project, that is."

"I've still got Art History at twelve fifteen," I said. "But we can hang out till then."

"Oh, okay."

With that, we made our plans.

✧ ✧ ✧

When I walked out of my Drawing class, Kendall was waiting for me.

"What're you grinning about?" I asked suspiciously.

"Oh, nothing," she said, a little too quickly.

"Uh-*huh*."

"You know the bulletin board in the main atrium?" she asked.

I nodded.

"Well, I was reading some of the notices while I waited for you."

"And…?" I prompted. The board was full of all sorts of things: exhibit schedules, seminar announcements, roommate-wanted notices, party flyers, and even the odd lost-dog poster.

"There was one about models."

"Cool," I said. "We haven't had to build any yet. I mean, I'm gonna have to, but probably not till next quarter."

"Not those kinds of models," she said with a grin. "People models."

"People models? Why would I make a model of a person?"

"No," she said, rolling her eyes. "*Figure* models," she explained. Then she practically shoved a flyer in my face.

It read, *Models Wanted. Male and Female. Must be willing to pose nude. See Siobhan O'Riordan, Studio 6A, or call 974-…*

"What do you think?" she asked when I finished reading.

"Are you kidding?"

"No, I thought it'd be fun. We could be models."

"*Nude* models," I said, pointing to the paper.

"Paul," she said with tolerant exasperation, "we're nudists."

"That doesn't mean I want to get naked in front of a bunch of art students."

"It'll be fun," she pleaded.

Did I really want to pose nude? Did I want *Kendall* to pose nude? I know it probably sounds crazy, but there's a big difference between being a nudist and posing nude. And while I wasn't averse to flashing in the grocery store, or walking down a hotel hallway with a pair of nude women, those were one-time, anonymous events. Nude modeling would be different altogether.

"Please, Paul. It'll be something we can do together. Don't you think it's exciting?"

"I guess," I said.

"Let's go find Studio 6A!"

With that, she practically dragged me along. A few minutes later, we found Studio 6. It was a large room full of easels, sculpting tables, and other art paraphernalia. At the back of the room, three doors led to smaller studio/offices: 6A, 6B, and 6C.

The door to 6A was open, but the office was empty. I was ready to turn around and leave, but

Kendall immediately headed toward 6B's open door.

"Excuse me," she said to an auburn-haired woman inside. "We're looking for Professor O'Riordan."

"You've found her," the woman said. "Although please, call me Siobhan."

(She pronounced her name "shi-vawn." I was glad she did; I would've mangled it horribly.)

"How can I help you?" she asked. Her brogue was slight, but noticeable, and she seemed uncommonly cheerful for a woman holding a pneumatic chisel.

"We've come about the modeling positions," Kendall said, holding up the flyer.

"Oh, grand," Siobhan said. "Come in, come in." Then she set down her chisel and took off her heavy work gloves.

Kendall and I introduced ourselves.

"Were you both wanting to model?" Siobhan asked.

Kendall nodded. A half-second later, I followed suit.

"The pay isn't much, and it's nude modeling," Siobhan cautioned. "You can't be shy about taking your clothes off."

"That won't be a problem," Kendall said.

"Well then," Siobhan said, smiling, "we could use both of you for a sculpture class—it meets at ten o'clock, Monday, Wednesday, and Friday."

At that, Kendall sighed. (We both had class on those days.)

"And we could use a male model for a Drawing class at three o'clock," Siobhan added, "also on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday."

"You don't need a female model for the three o'clock class?" Kendall asked.

"I'm sorry," Siobhan said, "we don't. We really only *need* the one male model, since we had a cancellation. But I'm never one to turn away models," she added. Then she glanced at me. "Are you still willing to do it?"

I was ready to graciously back out, since we couldn't model together, but then I felt Kendall's eyes upon me.

"What do you think?" I asked her. I got the distinct impression that she wanted me to do it.

"We can sign you both up to model for a class next quarter," Siobhan suggested. "You can see if you like it, Paul, and then decide whether or not you want to do it again."

"I dunno," I hedged.

"We really could use you," Siobhan said. "We haven't had any luck finding a male model to replace the man who cancelled. And as long as you don't have any problem posing nude, you'll be fine. I'd really appreciate it if you decide to do it."

"What do you think?" I asked Kendall again.

"I think you should," she said, an excited glint in her eye.

In a flash of insight, I wondered if this was a fantasy of hers. When her eyes pleaded with me, I decided that it probably was. I didn't really want to do it, since my days were already full—more than full—of things to do, but if it would make Kendall happy…

"Okay," I said at last. "I'll do it."

"Splendid," Siobhan said.

"Oh, Paul," Kendall said, "thank you."

"I realize it's short notice," Siobhan asked, "but can you start next Monday?"

I nodded.

"The class begins at three o'clock, in the main studio," she said with a nod toward the larger Studio 6. "Although you should probably get here a few minutes early. Let me have you fill out a model release, and you'll be all set."

Kendall looked on eagerly as I printed my name, address, and phone number on the form. Then I scanned the rest of the release. Basically, I was giving my permission for students to recreate my likeness in any visual medium. And once I posed, the students would have all rights to the work they created. It looked fine to me, so I signed it.

"You need to bring a robe," Siobhan said as I handed her the form. "And a pair of sandals would be helpful."

"So I'll be nude the first day?" I asked, a little surprised. I guess I thought I'd start off modeling with my clothes on, and *then* model nude.

"It's a Life Drawing class," Siobhan said with a chuckle. "So all our models are nude."

"You mean there'll be other models?" I asked.

"Yes, but not next week," she said. "We've already done the female figure, so now we do the male figure. Finally, we do combined figure for the rest of the quarter. For combined, we have both a female and a male model present. Will that be a problem?"

Kendall shook her head when I glanced at her.

"No," I said. "That shouldn't be a problem"

"Is there anything else you need to know?" Siobhan asked.

Kendall and I shook our heads. Siobhan thanked us and then we said goodbye.

Once we got back to Kendall's apartment, she practically dragged me into her room. More than an hour later, after two rounds of passionate, almost frantic sex, I had to go to class. Even if I didn't eat lunch, I knew that I'd still be late. And I probably smelled like sex, but I didn't have time for a shower either. Sated, Kendall donned her white robe and walked me to the door.

"Thank you, Paul," she said, her blue eyes soft and round. Then, "I love you."

"I love you too," I said with a kiss. "Sorry, though, I gotta run." After another kiss, I took off down the hall.

"I love you," she called after me.

Still running, I waved over my shoulder.

Even though I ran all the way to the A&A building, Professor Dubois was already lecturing when I arrived. I took a moment to catch my breath and then spotted the brunette and the blonde in the back row. The brunette arched an eyebrow when our eyes met.

Unfazed, I took a seat next to her.

"Hello, Mysterious," she whispered.

"Hello, Beautiful," I replied coolly. In my head, however, I was cheering. That was the *first* coherent thing I'd said to her.

"Not feeling tongue-tied today?" she asked.

"Nope," I said, holding her gaze.

As she calmly stared at me, her nostrils flared. A moment later, when the scent hit her brain, her eyes widened.

I tried to keep my expression neutral, but I simply couldn't—I grinned like the cat that ate the canary. For the rest of the class, I paid attention to the droning professor. Out of the corner of my

eye, however, I saw the brunette glance at me a couple of times. Each time she did, I simply smiled.

✧ ✧ ✧

Both Kendall and Gina came to the intramural field for our game versus the Reese team. Luke's new girlfriend, Tara, was there as well. She was a cute blonde, and was pledging Kappa Kappa Gamma, so she and Gina had lots to talk about. The few times I looked at Kendall, she appeared to be avoiding conversation with the two sorority girls. I wish I could say I understood why, but she seemed completely irrational when it came to most Greeks.

The game itself was rough, but a lot of fun. Even though it was flag football—by University rules—everyone tacitly agreed to play tackle football. Accordingly, we tied our flags to the flimsy belts. The Intramural refs didn't object, and as long as no one was seriously injured, I suspected that no one *else* would object, either.

Our team had thirteen players, so we could actually substitute a few guys. T.J. and I had come to an unspoken agreement—he didn't snipe at me, and I didn't try to snap his neck. And even if I didn't like him, I had to admire his skill as a football player. He and Luke relentlessly hounded the other team's receivers, breaking up pass plays and even making two interceptions. Not surprisingly, Glen was a force to be reckoned with on the line. I even had a couple of good runs, as well as a few solid tackles.

Trip ran the offense like a seasoned veteran: he called plays, dodged rushers, and passed with uncanny accuracy (he *was* a star baseball player, after all). He connected with a guy named Phil for two long-yardage passes that ended with quarterback sneak touchdowns.

Jeff was as gangly and uncoordinated as ever, but he shocked us all when Trip dumped off a screen pass and—wonder of wonders—Jeff managed to catch it. I think he was more shocked than *we* were, but he sprinted the length of the field to score our final touchdown.

We won, 21–7.

Afterward, we headed back to the dorms and hung out in the courtyard and enjoyed the cooling autumn air. The post-win adrenaline made us all giddy, and an RA from North Carrick had to come out and warn us to quiet down—twice—but we had a blast.

✧ ✧ ✧

On Friday, Trip and I went over our Home Project drawings one final time. I had done my best to make the floor plan and elevation drawings perfect. I had also neatly written my critiques (since I still hadn't set up my new printer).

When I looked at my teammates' drawings the night before, I hadn't found much to criticize. I guess I didn't want to disparage anyone else's work. So I came up with some superficial things to note about each set of drawings, but nothing more.

At twelve forty-five, we headed to the A&A building. Right after the bell rang, Joska strode into the classroom.

"Well," he said, before we even had a chance to completely quiet down, "I presume you all have your projects ready to turn in." Then he scanned the class. "I see that Mr. Fekete is no longer with us, which is probably a smart move on his part. And who else is missing? Ah, yes, Miss Gilbert and Mr. Purvis. Hopefully, they will enjoy a fulfilling life in the fast food industry."

We all chuckled nervously. I wasn't proud that I felt a sense of relief that Joska was deriding

them and not me, but I wasn't about to invite his scorn.

"The grading for this project will be different," Joska continued. "The technical quality of your drawings themselves will be fifty percent of your grade. Your peer critiques will be an additional ten percent. The remaining forty percent of your grade will consist entirely of bonus points, based on your artistic execution and attention to detail."

Trip and I looked at each other nervously.

"You are in competition with each of your teammates for bonus points: first place, second place, and so on," Joska said. "First place will receive the full forty points. Second place will receive twenty points. Third place will receive ten points, and fourth place will receive *no* bonus points. Hopefully, most of you can do simple math, and you've realized that if your drawing comes in fourth, your chance for a passing grade rests entirely on the quality of your drawings and critiques."

Samantha looked panicked.

"For those of you lucky enough to be on a team with only three members," Joska continued, "you already know who came in last: they're no longer with us. Architecture is about competition, and you'd better learn this now. If you don't like it, too bad. There's the door." Then he gazed at us, his expression flinty and uncompromising.

In the edgy silence that followed, I simmered. *What a prick,* I thought. *What an unmitigated* prick*!* Then a guy two rows over cursed viciously, which startled me out of my silent fulmination.

"Man, fuck you, and fuck *this* shit," he spat. "I'm outta here."

Instead of replying heatedly, Joska simply stepped back and gestured toward the door. The guy snatched up his things and stormed out, loudly muttering about "lisping Nazis," as he passed Professor Joska.

"Anyone else?" Joska asked evenly. "No?"

I think we were all too shocked to move.

"All right, turn in your projects."

Like cattle, we shuffled to the front of the class to pile our drawings and critiques on his desk. When we all returned to our seats, Joska turned to the blackboard and picked up a piece of chalk.

"Today, we'll be discussing human needs…"

✧ ✧ ✧

Since the Regan Incident and its aftermath, I'd made a conscious effort to call Gina more often, and to spend more time with her. So after dinner, I called her room. Faith answered on the second ring.

"Hi, Faith," I said. "This is Paul. May I please speak to Gina?"

"One moment, please," she said.

Faith and I had finally met each other—in person—a few days before. She seemed nice enough, but Gina still didn't like her very much. The two of them were different in almost every way.

Where Gina made an effort to dress up, use makeup, and look nice, Faith didn't wear makeup at all, and her clothes were usually prudish (she dressed like an eighteen-year-old Nancy Reagan). She was pretty, and she had a nice body, but she didn't do anything to make herself look more attractive.

And according to Gina, she was *very* religious. Normally, I didn't mind religious people—after all, Kendall went to church on a semi-regular basis. But Faith just exuded a judgmental air, as if she were condemning everyone around her for not living up to some higher, more Godly standard. She didn't drink, she didn't have sex, and she didn't even like to hear *talk* about either. Gina called her "Goody-two-shoes," and I reluctantly had to agree with that assessment.

"Hi," Gina said.

"Hi yourself," I said, unconsciously echoing one of Kendall's phrases.

"What's up?"

"What're you doing tonight?" I asked.

"I've got to go to a party later. Why?"

"I thought maybe we could get together."

"Um… hold on a second," she said. Then she covered the mouthpiece. When she uncovered it, a moment later, she kept her voice low. "Faith's going home for the weekend. Her brother's picking her up in a little while. Do you want to come over when she's gone?"

"Yeah," I said.

"Naomi and Iris are gone too. I think they've got a concert tonight. So we'll have the suite to ourselves."

"That sounds great," I said.

"Okay, I'll give you a call when Faith is gone."

✧ ✧ ✧

Forty-five minutes later, I met Gina in the South Carrick lobby. As soon as we got to her room, she shut and locked the door. Then she pressed her body against mine and tilted her head up for a kiss.

"God, I've missed you," she said when we came up for air.

"Me too."

"I hate that our schedules are so different," she said. "I mean, even if I *wanted* to spend Thursday afternoons with you and Kendall, I couldn't."

"Hold on a second," I said. "What do you mean 'even if you wanted to'?"

"You saw how Kendall treated me yesterday at your football game," she said with a flash of genuine anger. "I mean, she barely even said hello. And don't think I didn't see how irked she was on Saturday, when you were paying attention to *me* instead of her."

"It's not like that, sweetie," I said.

"Then what *is* it like?" she asked bitterly. "I don't know what's up with her, but she's changed. I mean, we used to get along great, but now it's like I'm a leper or something. I wish she'd just come right out and tell me what's wrong. I'm not some fire-breathing monster. And I'm not going to tell you not to see her or anything. That wouldn't be fair to *you* either. You told me that it'd be for real, when we first talked about asking her to join us. And that's how it's been ever since. So… what? Does she not like sharing you anymore?"

Taken aback, I merely blinked at her vehemence.

"Sorry," she said when she saw my expression. "I guess I just had to get that off my chest."

"It's okay," I said. It was an empty phrase, though. I simply didn't know what *else* to say. I knew what part of the problem was—that Gina was in a sorority—but I couldn't tell *her* that. Kendall seemed to lump Gina in with everything that was wrong with the Greek system. And

Kendall was being unfair, as far as I was concerned. I think she was also asserting her "right" to me and my time, which was bound to cause conflict.

"I guess I just want things the way they used to be," Gina said. "But that's not gonna happen, 'cause we're *here*. God, I hate this place."

"Why?" I asked.

"'Why?'" she repeated resentfully. "My room is a dump, my roommate's a sanctimonious Bible-thumper— Oh, did I tell you her latest thing? She gets down on her knees and prays. Every night. *Out loud*. But that's not the part that pisses me off. Lately, she's started praying for me, *when I'm in the room*. She doesn't pray for me by name, but I *know* she's talking about me. She prays that I'll 'amend my sinful ways and be reborn in the glory of Jesus Christ.' God, can you *believe* that?!"

"Really?"

She nodded. "If I'd told her you were coming over tonight, she'd've probably stuck around and tried to save me from my 'sinful ways,' or something equally self-righteous. God, that girl drives me *crazy*."

"Why don't you get a new roommate?"

"Don't you think I've tried?" she asked, her eyes flashing with anger. "The head resident just tells me that 'college is about celebrating diversity,' and I 'just need to work harder to get along' with Faith. God, it's no wonder this whole dorm is a pigsty. An idiot hippie love-child runs the place! I bet whatever commune she used to run was a shambles too.

"Anyway, where was I? Oh, yeah, why do I hate this place? I live in a dump, my roommate is Torquemada in a training bra, most of my professors are idiots, and my boyfriend spends more time with his *second* girlfriend, whom I thought was my friend, but now seems to hate me."

"She doesn't hate you," I said.

"You could've fooled me," Gina replied sarcastically. "I think Regan's a better friend than Kendall is. At least Regan *talks* to me. That's more than Kendall's done for the past couple of weeks," she spat. Then she looked up at me, her eyes full of anguish. "What's wrong? What did I do?"

"You didn't do anything," I said, enfolding her in my arms as tears filled her eyes.

I started to silently lament that my life had gotten so complicated, but then I remembered Susan's words. I was going to have to figure this out for myself. Lamenting was one step away from whining. And if whining never solved anything, lamenting wouldn't either. Instead, I simply held Gina as she cried, her frustration, hurt, and anger flowing away with her tears.

I didn't like how Kendall was treating Gina—they were supposed to be friends. And I knew I'd have to confront Kendall about it, but I *really* didn't want to. What had Susan said? Maintaining a relationship is work. I had *two* relationships, so I had twice the work. Sometimes, the thought of letting it all slip away was blissfully appealing. But I owed it to Kendall and Gina to try to make it work. More importantly, I owed it to myself.

With that, I turned my attention back to Gina. I held her as she sobbed, giving her as much comfort as I could. Whenever I was angry or frustrated, I exercised. With Gina, she cried.

Finally, her tears slowed and she simply held me tight, sniffling occasionally. I smiled as warmly as I could when she looked up at me.

"I must look like a mess," she said.

In spite of myself, I chuckled. “No,” I said softly. “You look like a girl who’s had a rough couple of weeks.”

She snorted in agreement and then wiped her cheeks.

“I’ll tell you what,” I said, “since we’ve got the suite to ourselves, let’s take a shower and get you cleaned up. We can stay in there as long as we like, and we don’t have to worry about running out of hot water. And then we can relax and do whatever we want. If you’d like, I could spend the night…”

“That sounds *wonderful*,” she said, her party all but forgotten. Then she smiled sadly. “I’m sorry I got all weepy. It’s just…”

“It’s okay,” I said. “I get the same way sometimes. Only I lift weights, or jump rope, or something like that. You cry. It all works out the same,” I added with a shrug. Then I tilted her head up. “I love you, though. And that’s really all that matters.”

“I love you too,” she said with another sniffle.

“Good. Now, let’s get cleaned up,” I said.

In the shower, I turned so my back was to the showerhead. The hot water washed over my shoulders and down my chest, the mist wetting Gina’s ebony hair. After a moment, I pulled her under the water as well.

Once we were both wet, I washed her hair, gently massaging the shampoo into her scalp. She moaned softly in appreciation. After she rinsed, I squirted conditioner into my hand and then ran my fingers through her hair. Once again, I massaged her scalp, eliciting whimpers of approval.

Finally, I lathered a washcloth. I tried not to be overtly sexual, but it’s difficult to wash another person without *some* degree of intimate contact. Gina and I had taken more showers together than I could count, however, and she knew when I had more on my mind than simple cleanliness.

She arched an eyebrow when I began to wash her stomach and breasts. I looked a question at her. Without words, we decided that we both wanted more. So I dropped the washcloth and used my hands to finish lathering her. As I did, she stroked my slowly stiffening manhood.

After she rinsed, I pulled her into my arms. She came willingly, her head tilted up for a kiss. Unfortunately, her nose was still stuffed up, so she quickly ran out of breath. When she pulled back, she snuffled and looked up at me dejectedly.

“So much for what I *really* wanted to do,” she said.

“There are *other* things we can do,” I said.

At that, her eyes lit up.

“What?” I asked.

Then she made a moue.

“*What?*”

“Can I tell you about something without you getting upset?”

“Sure,” I said immediately. “You know you can tell me anything.”

“It’s about Regan,” she said.

I felt my face harden, but then I made an effort to relax.

“She’s really not that bad,” Gina said. “I mean, yeah, she’s kinda stuck up sometimes, but she’s really a nice person.”

I shrugged noncommittally.

"She *is*," Gina said. "She's just an only child, and she's kinda spoiled, so…"

"I guess," I said at last.

"She's a lot of fun. I think you'd like her if you got to know her. She really likes you."

I looked a question at her.

"She says you've got a nice body. And I told her about how much fun you are… and how good you are in bed."

Once again, I found myself shocked that girls actually *talk* about that sort of thing.

"Anyway," Gina said, "that's not what I wanted to talk about."

"Oh?"

"Mmm hmm," she said, stroking my flagging erection for emphasis. "I wanted to tell you about something Regan did."

"And…?"

"Promise you won't get angry?"

"I promise," I said.

"Well, you know that she and I still… you know." Before I could answer, she continued. "You said you didn't mind. Remember?"

"I remember," I said evenly.

"Anyway, the other night, Regan and I were in her room and Valerie—that's her roommate—was out. So we started fooling around, and Regan put on her strap-on dildo. You remember? The one I told you about?"

"I remember." For a moment, I felt a little annoyed. After all, my memory was as good as Gina's; I didn't need her asking if I remembered or not.

"Well, she got me really worked up, and she wanted to do it from behind. You know how much I like that," she said. Then she squeezed my resurgent erection and grinned. "I was really enjoying it, but you know what?"

"What?"

"I couldn't come," she said matter-of-factly.

My eyebrows rose in disbelief. Gina almost always got off when I fucked her from behind. My dick hit her inner spot—her G-spot, I reminded myself—and drove her wild.

"Exactly," Gina said, reading my surprise. "It wasn't the same. It felt good, but it wasn't… well, it wasn't *you*. And to make matters worse, the dildo can't come."

"Nope."

"I love feeling you shoot inside me. That's part of what gets me so worked up. Anyway, do you know what I did?" she asked, her lips quirked up in a half-smile.

"What?"

"I faked it."

"You *what?*"

"I faked an orgasm," she said conspiratorially. "I mean, Regan just kept going and going, and I was getting kinda sore. Yeah, it felt really good, but… well… I knew I wasn't gonna come. So I faked it."

At that, I laughed out loud.

"Exactly," she said. Then she shrugged. "I mean, *Regan* wasn't going to know the difference. Not when she was screwing me with a dildo."

"Yeah," I said, shaking my head in wonder, "I guess you're right."

"Mmm hmm. I mean, *you* would've known immediately. I know you can feel it when I clench up inside."

I nodded.

"But with the dildo…"

"No kidding."

"Anyway," she said, looking up at me slyly. "I was thinking…"

"Uh-huh?"

"Maybe you could bend me over the sink and do it *right*. Besides, I think the steam from the shower has cleared up my nose" she added. Then she inhaled to prove her point. "So we can start things off right."

"That sounds like a really good plan," I said.

"I thought you'd see it my way."

"Mmm hmm."

"And you're not upset about Regan and me?"

"No," I said softly.

"She's fun, but she's *not* my boyfriend."

With that, we shut off the water (we were already *beyond* wrinkled). Then we dried off and returned to her room. Gina ran her comb through her glossy hair. As she waited for me to comb mine, she dropped her towel and posed for me.

Her tan was fading, but her skin was still a mellow café au lait. Her dark nipples were already hard, and she tweaked them as I looked on. My eyes drifted lower, to her pussy. She was letting the pubic hair on her mons grow back, so she had a darker triangle of week-old growth. Her labia were clean-shaven, however, and they had already begun to plump with arousal.

With an eager grin, she sank to her knees and reached for me. For several minutes, she lavished attention on my dick, sucking as much as she could into her mouth and holding me there with hands on my hips. Then she rubbed my saliva-slick manhood over her face. Finally, she tilted her head to the side and gently sucked my balls.

"Stand up," I said quietly, my voice husky with desire. "I want to fuck you."

Her dark eyes glittered in anticipation as she stood and then bent over the vanity. When she looked over her shoulder at me, I stepped forward, my erection aimed at her pussy. I slid into her smoothly, her heat and moisture washing over me.

"God," she moaned, closing her eyes in ecstasy, "that feels incredible."

"Better than Regan's dildo?"

"A million times better," she said.

I groaned in reply and gripped her hips. Then I started thrusting, slowly at first, but with building speed. As I did, I watched her face in the mirror. Her eyelids were already darkened with arousal. A moment later, she furrowed her brow and concentrated on my pumping cock.

"Oh, God… you feel so good," she said between thrusts.

I could already feel the first twinges of her building orgasm. I simply smiled to myself and kept thrusting. After only a few minutes, she tensed up and I felt her pussy flutter around my shaft.

With a long, low moan, she arched her back. Her pussy gripped me tightly, and I had to force

myself inside her. I fucked her as she climaxed, slamming into her and battering through her gripping internal muscles. As her orgasm subsided, she panted to catch her breath, but I never stopped thrusting.

"Oh, God, yes," she cried out softly.

I fucked her through two more small orgasms. Soft slapping noises filled the room as I pumped into her. I concentrated on angling my thrusts so I hit her G-spot, building her up to a major climax.

I tried to time things so I would come when she did, but she beat me to it. Her pussy rippled and gripped me, but I plowed through the contractions. Then she cried out sharply and collapsed onto the counter. I felt a gush of heat and moisture surround my cock as she half-screamed again.

She shuddered in the throes of a powerful orgasm, moaning as I continued to pound into her. I felt her pussy going wild around my dick, but I ignored it and concentrated on my own orgasm. A moment later, I felt the first rush of ecstasy. With a grunt, I buried myself inside her and let loose.

Still quivering from aftershocks, Gina moaned when she felt me spurting within her. Then she reached between her legs and massaged my balls as I emptied them into her. Finally, I collapsed on top of her, my chest heaving as I sucked in oxygen.

"Oh, God," I gasped.

"Better than a dildo *any* day," she said, breathing heavily herself.

"A*men*."

✧ ✧ ✧

Later, we relaxed on her bed. Neither of us had bothered to get dressed. Instead, we indolently sprawled atop her bedspread, nude. With my arm around her, she snuggled against my side, her finger idly tracing circles on my chest.

"You still don't have any chest hair," she said softly, curiously.

I shook my head.

"I thought you'd grow more when you got older."

I shrugged.

"I mean, your dad has chest hair."

"I never really thought about it," I said. "Although I can barely grow a beard," I added. "I mean, I could go a couple of days without shaving and you'd never notice."

"Well," she said slyly, "it'd depend on what you were doing."

"No kidding," I said with a laugh.

"After all, my skin's sensitive."

"Mmm hmm. Although you should probably put some lotion on it to keep it soft."

"Did you have a certain lotion in mind?" she asked, lifting her head and arching an eyebrow.

I nodded.

"Silly boy," she teased, "*that* kind of lotion dries your skin."

"Really?"

"Mmm hmm. I'd better swallow it instead."

"To keep your throat soft, right?" I asked facetiously.

"*Exactly*."

As she slid lower and curled up between my legs, I laced my fingers behind my head and

blissfully stared at the ceiling. Gina might not be completely happy at UT, but she seemed to be returning to her old self. Her deteriorating relationship with Kendall bothered me, though. To make matters worse, I didn't know what to do about it.

I fervently hoped that everything would work itself out, but I knew that the odds of *that* happening were poor. With a sigh, I started thinking about what I could say to Kendall. I wanted to broach the subject diplomatically, but I didn't want to beat around the bush. What I *really* wanted to do was…

"What happened?" Gina asked, interrupting my train of thought.

With a start, I realized that I'd lost my erection. "Um… sorry," I said, chagrined. I didn't want to tell her what I was really thinking, so I fibbed. "I was getting a leg cramp."

"Do you want me to rub it?" she asked, her voice full of concern.

"It's easing off."

"Are you sure? I mean, if you're in pain…"

"I'm fine," I said, propping myself up on my elbows so I could look down at her. "What I really want," I said with a suggestive grin, "is for you to keep doing what you're doing."

Her eyes glittered as she moistened her lips. Instead of answering, she cocked her head to the side. When I nodded in reply, she wrapped her lips around my flaccid member and began sucking me back to life.

As I lay back, I brushed aside thoughts of Kendall and concentrated on the sensations in my dick. I'd still have to figure out what I could do to improve Kendall and Gina's worsening relationship, but at the moment, I had better things to focus on. With a sigh, I closed my eyes and tried to simply enjoy myself.

✧ ✧ ✧

"What time did your party start?" I asked Gina later. We were still in her bed, and still nude. After sucking me back to life, she had ridden me to another small climax. Then she had knelt between my legs and finished me off with her mouth, moaning as my semen gushed over her tongue.

"We were supposed to meet at Panhellenic at nine," she said.

"What time is it now?" My watch was somewhere in my pile of clothes. The sturdy Breitling was waterproof, but I took it off when I showered, out of habit.

"It's ten," Gina said, glancing at the bedside clock that only she could see.

"Ten o'clock," I mused. *Ten o'clock, nine central.* "Uh-oh," I said.

"What?"

"I'm supposed to meet someone," I said. Then I explained about Luke and his *Dallas* addiction as I gathered up my clothes.

Gina simply laughed.

"What's so funny?"

"You," she said, her eyes full of mirth. They were also full of love. "You're so worried about letting somebody watch some dumb TV show," she said. Then she smiled affectionately. "You always were a good guy, even when we were thirteen."

I felt my face heating.

"D'you mind if I come with you? I could use something mindless to take my mind off… well… you know."

"C'mon," I said immediately.

"Just gimme a minute to brush my hair and put on *some* makeup," she said, vaulting out of bed.

Ten minutes later, we burst out of the elevator, laughing like teenagers (which we were, but it was nice to actually *act* like one). I grabbed Gina's hand as we ran toward Trip and Luke's suite.

"Sorry I'm late," I said as soon as Trip opened the door.

Gina giggled.

Trip merely blinked in surprise.

"What the fuck's going on out here?" Jeff asked, sticking his head out of his room.

"Sorry I'm late," I repeated. As Trip stepped out of the doorway, I saw Luke getting up from his bed. Tara was with him.

"What's going on?" Trip asked.

"*Dallas,*" I said breathlessly, mimicking Luke's enthusiasm. "Friday nights? CBS? Ten o'clock, nine central?"

"Dude," Luke said, "the season doesn't start till *next* Friday. Although," he mused, "they're probably running last season's final episode tonight." Then he turned serious. "You know, it's a good thing you brought this to my attention." He couldn't *remain* serious, however. "*Mais,* maybe he a good ol' boy after all," he said in his Cajun patois, referring to me. Then he turned to Tara. "What you say, *mon chèr?*" he asked her. "You wanna watch mean ol' J.R.? Don't you worry none, I'll protect you."

Tara was clearly taken aback, but she was also charmed. She nodded.

"All right, then, y'all," Luke said. "Let's get a move on. They ain't waitin' on *us*."

As a group, we trooped over to my room. Jeff and Trip came along as well, bringing chairs with them.

"Man," Jeff said as soon as he saw my seldom-used TV and VIC-20, "I can't fucking believe you don't use your computer."

"*Jeff,*" Trip said sharply. When he rolled his eyes, I caught his meaning: *Watch the language in front of the girls.*

Jeff Got It too, and nodded apologetically. "Sorry, man," he said. "But still… if I had a fu— I mean, if I had a cool computer like that, I'd be playing with it all the time."

"Dude, I barely even know how to turn it on," I said. "And I just got a printer for it, but it's still in the box," I added, nodding at the Okidata box peeking out from under my bed.

"That's fuckin' crazy," Jeff said. Then he nervously glanced at Gina and Tara. "Sorry."

"It's all right," Gina said.

"If you want," Jeff said, brightening, "I could show you how to use it."

"Sure," I said. "That'd be cool."

"All right you nerds, hush," Luke said as the commercial ended.

With that, he turned his entire attention to the TV. I didn't know any of the characters, but I recognized Larry Hagman (from *I Dream of Jeannie*, of course). Fortunately, Luke used the next commercial break to explain what was happening. By the time the show started again, my head was swimming with names like J.R., Sue Ellen, Bobby, Pam, Jock, and Miss Ellie.

I didn't think I'd enjoy the show, but I was surprised. When it ended, I had to silently laugh: I was caught up in whether or not J.R. would lose control of Ewing Oil; and I was *dying* to know

who was the dead woman in the Southfork pool. Talk about cliffhangers! I mentally cursed the scriptwriter for leaving us hanging like that.

There ain't no justice.

After the show was over, we hung around my room and talked. Billy returned around eleven thirty. He was surprised to find so many people in our room, but he didn't seem to mind.

A little before midnight, Trip and Jeff returned to their suite. Luke and I escorted the girls back downstairs. Gina and I said goodbye to Luke and Tara and then headed over to South Carrick.

"Do you still want to spend the night with me?" Gina asked.

"Of course."

"I had fun tonight," she said. "Luke's funny. And Jeff was cute, trying to watch his language."

I nodded.

"What's up with Trip, though? Does he have a girlfriend?"

"No. It's a long story."

"Oh," she said. "That's too bad. He seems like a really nice guy. And he's cute," she added. "Maybe I could introduce him to someone."

"I don't know if he's really looking," I cautioned.

"Okay," she said. Then she looked at her watch. "We'd better get upstairs before midnight," she suggested. "I don't wanna have to sneak up six flights of stairs."

"Let's go," I said, lacing my fingers through hers.

When we got back to her suite, Naomi and Iris were home, so we chatted with them for a while. Their quartet had given a concert that night, and they were both still wound up.

Eventually, Gina and I headed back to her room. After we shut the door and turned out the lights, she flowed into my arms. We undressed each other in the dark, taking our time and enjoying ourselves. I don't know what time we got to sleep, but I didn't really care—I was happy and Gina was happy. That was all that mattered.

✧ ✧ ✧

On Saturday, I met Kendall for lunch. Gina was on the planning committee for a Chi O-ATO mixer, so she was at Panhellenic with several of her sorority sisters.

"Where were you last night?" Kendall asked as we sat down with our food. "I tried calling you, but…"

"I was at Gina's," I said.

"Oh."

She tried to sound nonchalant, but she didn't quite succeed. I didn't need her insight to figure out that she wasn't happy. Worse, I wasn't really in the mood to deal with her resentment.

Kendall and Gina had gotten along just fine before we came to UT. Gina was still the same person now that she was pledging a sorority. Kendall even had friends—Bridget and Toni—who were in a sorority. She liked *them* just fine. What was different about Gina?

Me, I thought sullenly. *That's what.*

"What're you doing this afternoon?" Kendall asked, changing the subject as she sensed my dark thoughts.

"Trip and I are gonna work out. As usual," I said. I tried not to sound curt, but she *knew* what my schedule was.

"Oh. Okay."

We finished our meal in silence. I just didn't feel like talking, and she undoubtedly realized that.

"Well," I said at last, "I'd better get back to my room. I've got an Am. Lit. paper to finish before Trip and I work out."

"What's the paper about?" she asked.

"Steven Crane."

When I didn't volunteer any more information, she smiled tentatively. "Do you want my notes from last year?" she asked.

"No thanks. I remember this stuff from high school. I'm cool. I'll call you later."

"O-okay. I love you."

"I love you too," I said. Then I kissed her and turned to go.

Why was I being such an asshole? I wondered as I walked up the hill to my dorm. I really *did* need to work on the paper, but it could wait. I guess I didn't want to spend time with Kendall. Oddly enough, I didn't really want to spend time with Gina, either.

I don't know why, but I felt an uneasy sense of frustration and malaise. My relationships were starting to come apart at the seams, and I certainly wasn't helping matters.

Gina hated UT. Kendall was peevish about the time I spent with Gina. I had a belligerent weasel for a suitemate. And Professor Joska was on my ass about *every*thing. Worse, I'd only been at college *a month*. I had to survive *five more years*.

"How in the *hell* am I going to do that?" I wondered aloud.

✧ ✧ ✧

When Trip and I worked out, I drove myself hard. Luke and Jeff had given up working out with us; they had things to do with their fraternities (which was *another* sore point with me).

"Let's go run," I suggested when we finished our last set. I hated running, but I wanted the time to clear my head.

"Sure," Trip said without missing a beat.

With that, we jogged from the Sports Bubble to the track.

"Okay," Trip asked after four laps, "what's eating you?"

"Nothing."

Instead of responding, he merely looked at me sidelong.

In reality, my thoughts were a confused mess. I was angry with Kendall for how she treated Gina. I was angry with Gina for spending so much time with Regan. I was angry with Susan for not immediately providing a solution to my problems. I was angry with Professor Joska simply for being Professor Joska. I was angry with T.J. for being a redneck asshole. I was angry with…

"Look," Trip said after another couple of laps, "if you're going to run us to death, give it up. I've got longer legs than you, and I'm used to running. I don't know what's got you so pissed off, but running till we collapse isn't going to make things better."

"I've just got a lot on my mind right now," I said tersely.

"I can tell. D'you wanna talk about it?"

"You wouldn't understand."

"Try me," he said.

"My whole life's falling apart," I said bitterly. "What would you know about that?"

To my surprise, he grabbed my arm and pulled me up short. “What would I know about it?” he asked hotly. “Lemme tell you. When I was ten years old, my mother was diagnosed with leukemia. She died six months later. And when it comes to having your whole life fall apart, I think I know a thing or two about it. So don’t *ever* tell me I don’t know what it’s like,” he said. Still breathing hard from our run, he paused and took a deep, calming breath.

“If you wanna talk about what’s bothering you,” he continued, “then I’m all ears. If not… well… then I guess you’re not the friend I thought you were. You know where to find me when you figure it out,” he said. With that, he turned and walked off.

I felt like a cold dose of reality had punched me in the gut. Hard. Then I felt a surge of anger. Why should I tell him *anything?!* He didn’t know me, and he didn’t know about my problems. I was sorry that his mother had died, but how did that give him some insight into my life?

It doesn’t, I thought heatedly.

As I watched him leave the track, I started running again. Three or four laps later, my legs felt leaden. And I’d begun to feel ashamed for snapping at Trip. He was just trying to help, and he didn’t deserve my anger. Unfortunately, I didn’t know how to apologize. What would Susan tell me to do? What would my dad suggest?

“Fuck,” I said out loud. I couldn’t even work up the enthusiasm to say it vehemently.

With that, I slowed and came to a stop. I don’t know if it was runner’s high or delirium brought on by too much exercise, but I suddenly realized that it didn’t *matter* what Susan would tell me to do. She wasn’t *here*. My parents weren’t here either. *I* had to decide what to do. And *I* would have to live with the consequences, bitter though they might be.

“Polonius was a pompous windbag,” I muttered.

Then I ran my fingers through my sweaty hair and headed back to my dorm on legs already beginning to go rubbery. When I got out of the elevator on the fourth floor, I thought about going directly to Trip’s room. I knew I’d have to apologize sooner or later, but I decided to get cleaned up first.

After a shower, I walked across the hall and tentatively knocked on his door. A moment later, I knocked again, louder.

“It’s open,” he called through the door. When I stepped into the room, he took off his headphones and looked at me calmly.

“Um… about earlier,” I said, staring at the floor. “I mean… um… well…”

“Me too,” he said.

When I looked up, he held my gaze. I felt my chest grow tight, and I swallowed hard.

“I’m sorry I snapped at you,” he said.

“You were only trying to help. I’m sorry I was such a jerk.”

“You’ve got a lot on your mind.”

I nodded.

“Me too,” he said.

By unspoken agreement, we changed the subject. I think both of us were still a little tense about earlier.

“What’re you listening to?” I asked, pointing at his headphones.

“You won’t laugh?”

I shook my head.

"Patsy Cline," he said. Then he turned introspective. "My mom used to love listening to her." At that, he took a deep breath and then blinked several times. "Listen," he said at last, "don't tell the guys about my mom. Okay?"

I nodded immediately.

"I don't tell people about it, because I don't want them to feel sorry for me."

"I understand," I said.

"I told you 'cause… well… I guess I told you 'cause I was thinking about her," he said softly. "She died today. Well, October 3rd, 1973. But you know what I mean." When I nodded, he continued. "I guess I told you 'cause I know you won't feel sorry for me."

"No," I said softly.

"Listen," he said, "let's grab a burger or something. And then let's go down to the Strip. I feel like getting drunk. It's not gonna solve our problems, but at least we don't have to deal with them for a night. Are you up for it?"

"Abso-fucking-lutely," I said. I was bone tired, sore, and still upset about life in general, but at the moment, Trip's plan seemed like a phenomenal idea.

✧ ✧ ✧

Even though the drinking age was nineteen, we simply had to show our UT IDs at the door to a bar called the Old College Inn. We got lucky and found a booth in the back just as two older students left it.

Trip and I slid into the dim alcove and ordered a pitcher of Long Island Iced Tea. When it arrived, with two plastic cups, Trip poured us each a drink and then immediately drained his. After he poured himself another, he stared at it for a long, painful moment. Then he began to speak.

He told me about his mother, and what it was like during the last six months of her life. Surprisingly, his parents didn't tell him that she was sick. His father took a leave of absence from work and they simply went on a summer vacation, as a family, just the three of them (Trip was an only child at that point). They went to Mexico and saw the Mayan pyramids. From there, they went to the Caribbean, where they sailed from island to island on a boat Trip's father rented. After that, they went to Disney World.

When they finally returned home, nearly three months after they'd left, their life returned to normal. Trip's mother only told him about her illness in the weeks before she died. She didn't want him to worry about her, he told me. Then he recounted how she even helped him with his schoolwork the week before she went into the hospital.

I couldn't imagine how I'd feel if my own mother were sick, much less if she were dying. And it seemed petty to compare my experience to his. I simply had to deal with a fraying relationship (or two), not the loss of my entire existence.

"I was with her before she died," he said after a long pause. "She told me she loved me, and that she'd always watch over me. I think she knew it was time. She died later that night, in her sleep."

"I'm so sorry, man," I said. What else *could* I say?

"Thanks," he said quietly. After we poured the last of our current pitcher of drinks, he looked up and smiled wanly. "She wanted me to be an architect," he said. "I'm doing it because I want to, but I'm also doing it for *her*."

"That's a pretty good reason," I said.

"Yeah," he said. Then he raised his cup. "To becoming an architect!"

I raised my own cup and we drank.

Neither of us was feeling any pain, and my face had started to go numb, but we ordered another pitcher anyway.

"Did your dad ever get remarried?" I asked.

"Yeah," he said, brightening. "He started dating a backup singer from the Grand Ole Opry, when I was twelve. She's a really great woman. They got married about a year later. Did you know I've got two half-brothers?" he asked, slurring his words a bit.

"Really?"

He set down his drink and told me about his young brothers, Dale and Josh. Listening to him talk, I realized that he loved them very much. He also loved his step-mother. She hadn't taken the place of his mother—no one could, and she didn't try—but she loved his father, and she obviously loved him.

"So that's my story," he said at last. "Now, what makes you think your life's fallin' a-a-apart?"

I felt embarrassed telling him about my problems with Kendall and her attitude toward Gina.

"Wait a minute," he said. "Let's get somethin' straight."

I nodded.

"Gina's *not* just your 'best friend,'" he said.

"What makes you think that?" I asked cautiously. I'd had as much to drink as he had, but I was suddenly on edge.

"Oh, c'mon," he said. "I saw how you two acted last night. You had your arm around her as we watched *Dallas*—which is incredibly cap-cap-cap... fuck it, cap-ti-vating," he said deliberately. "But I saw you two, holding hands and acting all lovey-dovey. If she's not your girlfriend, then I'm a monkey's uncle. But wha' I can't figure out, is wha's up with Kendall?"

"I've got two girlfriends," I said simply. I was too drunk to lie. And in reality, I was a little proud of myself.

"I *knew* it," he said. Then he leaned in conspiratorially. "Do they know about each other?"

Once again, my pride rode roughshod over my good judgment. "Yep," I said.

"Man," he said. "You're good."

"Not as good as you think," I said ruefully, my thoughts returning to my problems.

He listened—albeit with a half-focused stare—as I told him about Gina and "a new friend she's spending lots of time with." Then I told him about Kendall and her growing hostility toward Gina, not to mention all things Greek.

"Then it's a good thing the Sigma Chis never called you," he said. "When they called me and told me, I asked about you."

It took me a moment to work through his statement, but when I did, my eyes flew wide. "What do you mean 'when they called you'?" I asked.

"They called to offer me a bid," he slurred. "But when they tol' me they weren't gonna offer one to you, I turned 'em down. They were pretty pissed off, too. I told 'em I wouldn't tell anybody, though. So shhhhh, don't tell a-a-anyone," he said sloppily, his finger held to his lips.

"Did they say *why* they weren't gonna offer me a bid?" I asked, my throat tight.

"'Cause you ditched the party, man," he said. "Ah, fuck 'em. Anyway, that's not what we were talkin' about. You were tellin' me about Kendall an' her ha-ha-hatred of Greeks."

I resumed my story, but my heart wasn't really in it. Trip dragged out a few additional morsels of information, but I was preoccupied with his revelation about the Sigma Chis. The irony was that *Gina* had wanted me to join the fraternity, but she was also the reason that I didn't get a bid.

That's fucking poetic, I thought sourly.

By the time the bartenders announced last call, Trip and I were completely shit-faced. We were both so drunk that our conversation had devolved into bad jokes and worse observations about life in general. I suppose we both thought we were being witty and profound, but we were probably just being idiots.

As we staggered up the hill to our dorm, he stopped suddenly. I thought he might be sick or something, but he looked at me with a silly grin.

"Wha'?" I asked.

"I jus' thought of somethin'."

"Wha'?"

"If Kendall an' Gina know about each other, do they… you know… do it… together?"

My goofy smile was answer enough.

"You're fuckin' *kiddin'* me!"

I shook my head. A small part of me realized that I probably shouldn't be telling *anyone* about my three-way relationship, but I knew that if I couldn't trust Trip, I probably couldn't trust anyone.

"Tha's too cool," he said, interrupting my deep train of thought. "You're one for-for-for… lucky guy," he added.

"Thanks, man," I said.

With that, we started back up the hill. Before we reached the dorms, however, he stopped again.

"Y'know wha' you need to do?" he asked.

"'Bout what?"

"'Bout you, Ken'all, an' Gina, dude," he said, rolling his eyes. "You been together for a coupla years, right?"

I nodded.

"Then you gotta get them to start talkin' t' each other a-a-again. Get together, jus' the three of you, and talk it out. Pro'lems don' solve themselves, Paul," he said with drunken wisdom. "You gotta work t' solve 'em. An' sittin' on your ass doin' nothin' ain't gonna do a thing."

"I'll keep that in mind," I said. "Now, let's get home. I'm ready to fall over."

"You're the one who wanted t' run twen'y miles," he groused good-naturedly.

With that, we helped each other up the hill.

"I'm serious 'bout talkin' t' your girlfriend… I mean, girl*friends*," he said as we reached the dorm. "And don' worry… I won't tell anyone."

In the hall outside our suites, we turned to each other, both of us unsteady on our feet.

"Thanks for tonight, man," he said. "I guess I really needed t' talk. You know?"

I nodded.

"And thanks for trustin' me enough t' tell me 'bout you an' Gina. Y'know I'm solid, right?"

Once again, I nodded. When he extended his hand, I shook it.

"I know we've only known each other for a month," he said softly, "but…" As his voice trailed off, he blinked to clear his eyes. Then he swallowed hard. "I just wanted to say that I…"

"Me too, man," I said softly. "Me too." With that, I pulled him toward me and we embraced.

"Thanks, man," he whispered.

I nodded.

When we separated, we both smiled diffidently.

"Man," he said, shaking his head to clear it. "I haven't been *this* drunk in a long time." Then he looked at me, the depth and wisdom returning to his eyes. "I meant wha' I said, though."

"Me too, Trip."

For a long moment, we simply held each other's gaze.

"We'd better get to sleep," I said at last.

"Yeah."

"Have a nice night, Trip."

"You too, man. G'night."

With that, I headed into my room. Billy was asleep, so I tried not to wake him as I fumbled around in the dark. In the end, I simply kicked off my shoes and flopped onto my bed.

Even though I was incredibly drunk, I felt like the weight of the world had been lifted from my shoulders. Without a doubt, I knew that Trip and I would be lifelong friends. That gave me a sense of peace and security that I hadn't felt in a long time.

CHAPTER TWELVE

The world was coming to an end. A giant, malevolent god was inside my head, going at it hammer and tongs. When I opened my eyes, pain lanced through my skull. Even though I clamped my eyes shut, the pain didn't stop. Neither did the ringing hammerblows.

As I slowly became aware of my surroundings, I realized that someone was pounding on my door. I silently prayed that Billy would answer it, but when I cracked an eyelid and peered at his side of the room, his bed was empty. I sat up, but immediately regretted it.

"I'm coming!" I shouted, my mouth cottony.

The knocking didn't let up, and my head sadistically throbbed along with it. I lurched to my feet and staggered across the room. When I finally reached the door, I had to brace myself against the wall to keep from falling over (the room was spinning).

"What?!" I snarled, jerking the door open.

"Woo-hoo, lookee here," T.J. said. "Somebody had a big night."

"What d'you want, T.J.?"

"Call your girlfriend, Loverboy," he said. "She's called here a dozen times. I told her you were passed out, but she wanted me to bust down the door." Then he sized me up. "Damn," he added without heat, "you city boys sure can't hold your liquor."

"Anything else?" I asked. Then I grimaced as the jackhammering in my head redoubled.

"Yeah," he said, "drink lotsa water. It'll help your head." For a moment, he looked like he took pity on me. Then he shook his head angrily and turned away.

Before I could close the door, the phone rang. T.J. looked at it, looked at me, and then swore. With a withering glare, he snatched the receiver from the cradle.

"Hello? Why yes," he said in a sickly sweet voice, "you *may* speak to Paul. He's right here. Hold on a second." Then he held out the phone. When I took it, he snorted contemptuously and then returned to his room.

"Hello?" I croaked, gingerly holding the receiver to my ear.

"Oh my goodness, Paul, are you okay?" Kendall asked in a rush. "I've been calling all morning. T.J. told me you were passed out. I was about to call an ambulance. What happened?"

"I'm fine," I said. "I just had a late night last night. I guess I had a little too much to drink."

Silence.

"Hello?"

"You were out with Gina, weren't you?"

When I heard the disdain in her voice, something inside me snapped. "Is that all you fucking think about?" I asked.

"Paul, I—"

"I was out with Trip last night. It was just the two of us. And you know what?" I asked spitefully. "It was the best fucking night I've had in a long time. I didn't have to worry about *you*, I didn't have to worry about Gina, I didn't have to worry about any-fucking-thing," I said. My head was still pounding, and it hurt to shout, so I took a deep breath. "Look," I said, a little calmer, "I'm not in the mood for this shit. So I'm gonna take some aspirin and then go back to bed. I'll call you later."

With that, I hung up. Kendall was saying something as I did, but I didn't care. Gina might

have her problems, but at least she wasn't jealous. Kendall usually wasn't jealous either, but lately, when it came to Gina, all bets were off.

And I was sick of it.

I went back to my room and hunted through my medicine cabinet for a bottle of aspirin. I shook four tablets into my palm and washed them down with a swig of water. Then I closed the blinds, plunging the room into merciful dimness. My clothes stank, but I didn't have the energy to take them off, so I simply collapsed onto my bed and tried not to puke.

✧ ✧ ✧

Later—although I don't know how *much* later—someone knocked on my door.

"Go away," I yelled, even though I immediately regretted it (because my head hurt, not because my mood had improved).

Instead of going away, the person opened the door. Evidently, I'd forgotten to lock it.

"Paul?"

It was Kendall.

"Paul?" she called again. Her nose was stuffed up, and she'd obviously been crying.

"What?"

Instead of answering, she stepped inside and shut the door.

"Look," I said, "I'm sorry about earlier. My head hurt, I felt like I was gonna throw up, and I wasn't in the mood for an anti-Gina lecture."

Kendall sniffled softly.

My head *still* hurt, I *still* felt like I was going to throw up, and I *still* wasn't in the mood for her jealousy. But I wasn't a completely insensitive jerk.

"Do you want me to leave?" she asked, her voice unsteady.

"No," I said. (It's a lot easier to be angry with someone when she's not in the room with you.) Then, "Hold on … how'd you get up here without an escort?"

"T.J. offered to come down and escort me," she said. Then she laughed nervously. "I guess he was tired of me calling."

I hadn't heard the phone ring at all. Had I really been *that* dead to the world?

"Can I come sit down?" she asked.

"I guess," I said. Then I sat up and swung my feet to the floor. "I'll be right back, though."

"Are you…?"

"I'm just going to the bathroom," I explained.

After I returned, I brushed my teeth. It didn't *completely* help with the taste in my mouth, but it got the fuzz off my teeth and tongue. When I finished brushing, I gulped a cupful of water. Then I downed two more in rapid succession.

My head still felt like it was being pounded by a trip-hammer, but my stomach had settled down. At least I *thought* it had. Then I got a whiff of my clothes. I smelled like smoke from the bar, but I also reeked of alcohol. My stomach lurched at the thought of another drink, so I quickly stripped. Instead of showering, which I *really* wanted to do, I searched around for some not-so-dirty shorts and a pullover.

"I'm sorry you're angry," Kendall said softly. "Is that why you went out last night?"

"It's part of the reason," I said. At her mention of the night before, I thought about all that Trip and I had talked about. I had probably told him too much, but if I couldn't trust him, then I

couldn't trust anyone. He probably told *me* too much as well—especially about the Sigma Chi bid—but at the moment, I didn't have the energy to get upset about *that* humiliation.

"What was Gina—"

"Will you *forget* about Gina?! It's not about her; don't you get that? You wanna know why I wanted to go out with just Trip last night? It's because of shit like this. Gina's *not* your enemy. As a matter of fact, if it weren't for *her*, you and I never would've gotten together."

"That's just because she wanted to—"

"No… it's… *not*," I snapped. "For Christ's sake, is this one of your blind spots? Do you think Gina's a shallow bitch whose brain is between her legs? Is that it?" Without waiting for an answer, I continued. "Yeah, part of it is that Gina was attracted to you, but she also saw how much *I* cared about you. And she wanted me to be happy. Hell, for *that* matter, she wanted *you* to be happy too. That's hardly the hallmark of a shallow bitch, don't you think?

"And while I'm on the subject," I continued, "this whole 'treating her differently because she's in a sorority' thing is for the birds, and it'd better *stop*. She's the same girl you've always known, only now she needs us more than ever, because she's out of her comfort zone, as you put it."

"I don't treat her differently," Kendall protested weakly.

"Yes you do. Don't you realize it? *I* sure do. And so does Gina. How do you think *she* feels, when one of her best friends treats her like a leper? She actually used the word 'leper,' by the way. Leper!"

Instead of answering, Kendall frowned as she thought about what I'd just said (and about her own actions, hopefully).

"With the way you treat her, it puts *me* in an awkward position too. I don't want to have to choose between you two," I said, leaving the remainder unspoken.

It was the worst thing I could say. It was also the best. I honestly didn't know which girl I'd choose if I *had* to make the choice. I loved both of them, very much. But I also wanted Kendall to know that while she and I were perfectly matched in many ways, *Gina* and I were well-matched as well, and we had more history than Kendall and I did.

"How do you think *you'd* react, if you thought Gina was trying to alienate you and me?" I asked. When Kendall's expression turned defensive and hard, I nodded. "Exactly. I don't know if you're *trying* to alienate Gina and me, but it sure seems that way."

"I'm not," she said softly, wiping her cheeks.

"Then what *are* you doing?" I asked, moving to sit beside her. "When Gina calls you, you don't have time to talk to her. When you see her, you treat her like she's not there. Why?"

"Do you really want to know?" she asked.

I nodded.

"I don't trust her," Kendall said flatly. "I see how she treats you. You're just a convenient… *penis*. She doesn't love you," she spat. "Not like *I* do."

At that, my stomach dropped. Did Kendall *honestly* believe that? How could she think that Gina didn't love me? Didn't she see all that Gina and I had together? We had our ups and downs, like any couple, but we had a connection—a deep connection—that had survived three years. For an eighteen-year-old, three years is almost an eternity.

"She uses you to get what she wants," Kendall continued. "When have *I* ever used you? And

now that she's a *sorority girl*," she added with dripping scorn, "it's only going to get worse."

"Is *that* what this is about?" I asked, semi-incredulous. "Is it because Gina joined Chi Omega?"

"No, of course not," Kendall said unconvincingly.

"Yes, it is," I countered. "You didn't have any problems with her before she decided to join a sorority."

"Oh yes I did, Paul," she said coldly. "She's *always* used you, and I've always seen it. I've waited patiently for two years, hoping you'd see what she was doing. But I'm not going to hold my tongue anymore."

I cradled my head in my hands and took a deep breath.

How many aspirin is it safe to take at one time? I wondered. *Two? Four? A dozen? When had my life become so complicated? Oh yes, when I thought I could juggle two girlfriends. What the fuck had I been thinking?* With a derisive mental snort, I realized that my problem wasn't *what* I'd been thinking, but what body part I'd been thinking with.

"I'm sorry," Kendall said softly. "I know you don't want to hear this, but it's how I feel. I'm tired of hiding it. And I'm tired of playing *second* girlfriend. When do I get *my* turn?"

"I don't know, Kendall," I said, my head still in my hands. The trip-hammer had started up again, with a vengeance. *So this is what the downfall of a goddess is like,* I thought glumly. *I'm dating a human girl after all.* Two *of them. And that's the problem.* Finally, I looked up and took a deep breath. "Listen," I said, "I need some time to think. My head is killing me, and right now, I don't know *what* I want." Then I stood up. I suddenly had the urge to work out. "I think I'm gonna go to the Bubble," I said.

"You don't want to…?"

I shook my head. I don't know *what* she wanted to do, but I wasn't in the mood for company.

"Oh," she said in a small voice.

With that, I began hunting for my shoes and socks. After I put them on, I grabbed my little stereo and headphones. I just wanted to go lift weights and drown out the world.

"I'll walk you down," I said, holding my hand out to her.

She looked like she'd been slapped.

I know I probably should've said something to make her feel better, but all of a sudden, I wasn't feeling very charitable. Besides, my head was still throbbing, which made it difficult to concentrate.

Kendall and I rode the elevator in silence. In the breezeway, I stepped close and kissed her cheek.

"Paul?" she asked, a little bewildered.

"I'll call you later," I said. Then, "I love you."

"I love you too," she whispered.

"I'll call you," I repeated.

She started crying as I turned away. With a suppressed pang of remorse, I pushed the Play button on the little stereo and then jogged down the hill.

✧ ✧ ✧

At the Sports Bubble, I concentrated on my arms and upper body. Normally, I wasn't very thirsty during my workouts, but I made several trips to the water fountain, gulping down fresh,

cool water.

Fortunately, my headache began to ease off. *Un*fortunately, I didn't resolve any of my problems. My best solution was to hope things would fix themselves, but that wasn't really a solution at all.

When I got back to my room, I showered, got dressed, and then walked across the hall to Trip's room. He looked about as bad as I'd felt. Luckily, my workout and shower had gone a long way toward making me feel human again.

"C'mon in," he said. Then he lifted the turntable needle and turned off the stereo.

"What were you listening to?" I asked.

"You've probably never heard of him."

"Oh?"

"Erik Satie," he said. When I shook my head, he shrugged. "I think you'd like it. It's relaxing stuff. Anyway, how're you, man?"

"I'll survive," I said. "You?"

"I don't *want* to survive," he said with a rueful chuckle, "but I will."

We talked for a few more minutes about our general misery. Then he turned serious.

"How much of last night do you remember?" he asked.

"Most of it," I answered cautiously.

"Sorry about the Sigma Chi thing," he said. "I promised myself I'd never tell you, but…," he added with a shrug. "Do you hate me?"

I immediately shook my head. "I'm a little disappointed—because I didn't get a bid—but I'm not angry with *you*. I mean, it wasn't your fault. And you certainly didn't have to turn down your bid on my account."

"Nah, it wouldn't've been any fun without you, man."

"Aw, shucks," I joked. Then I turned serious. "Um… how much do *you* remember about last night?" I asked evasively. I was referring to my relationship with Kendall and Gina, of course.

"Pretty much everything."

"Oh."

"Don't worry, I won't tell anyone."

I breathed a sigh of relief.

"I'm still jealous, though."

"I thought you'd sworn off women, after Lori."

"I *have*—for the time being, at least. But that doesn't mean I can't be jealous."

"Well," I said soberly, "I don't know how much you *should* be jealous."

"Things're still bad, huh?" he asked.

"No, they're just peachy," I lied facetiously.

"I'm sorry, man."

I shrugged.

"If you ever wanna talk about it, you know you can, right? I mean, except for one long-term relationship that inexplicably went poof, I haven't had a single bad experience with women."

"Yeah, thanks," I said, laughing. Then I turned thoughtful. "Right now, I need to figure out what I want to do. Kendall's got her claws out, and Gina's noticed. Since she was my girlfriend first, well… I dunno… it complicates things."

"Do you really love both of them? Equally? You don't have a favorite?"

"Not really. I mean, I love different things about each of them. And… different things about each of them bug the hell out of me. Anyway, let's talk about something else."

"No problem, man. Let me put Satie back on. I think you'll like it. These are his *Gymnopédies*."

I lay on Luke's bed and stared at the ceiling as Trip started the record. Gentle, lulling piano music filled the room when he unplugged his headphones.

He was right, it *was* relaxing.

✧ ✧ ✧

After dinner, I called Gina and chatted for a few minutes. I didn't mention anything about my conversation with Kendall, of course, but I told her that I was probably going to spend some time with the older girl that evening.

"That's cool," Gina said. "Miss Goody-two-shoes is back from her parents'. So I think I'm gonna go hang out in Regan's room."

"Okay."

"I love you," she said.

"I love you too."

With that, we said goodbye and hung up. Then I called Kendall's apartment. Abby answered the phone.

"Hey, Abby," I said. "It's Paul. May I please speak to Kendall?"

"I'll see if she wants to talk to you," she said coolly.

Super, I thought. *Now I've got a protective roommate to deal with as well.*

"Hi," Kendall said a few moments later. Her voice was hoarse; she'd obviously been crying.

"Hey," I said. "How's it going?"

"I don't know," she answered honestly. "Do you still love me?"

"Of course I still love you," I said. "What kind of question is that?"

"When you left this afternoon…"

"When I left this afternoon," I explained, "I was upset, frustrated, and hung over."

"And now?"

"Well, my hangover's better. I'm still a little upset, though. Can I come down so we can talk?"

"Sure," she said immediately.

"Okay. I'll be right there."

Five minutes later, I knocked on Kendall's apartment door. Abby answered.

"Come in," she said, although she didn't look very happy with me.

"Is Kendall okay?" I asked her quietly.

"What do *you* think? She's been crying all afternoon."

"Is that Paul?" Kendall called from the bathroom. Then she stuck her head out. When she saw me, she ran down the hall and practically leapt into my arms.

"I'm gonna get my things," Abby said, flashing me a "you'd better be nice to her" look.

"She's going to the library to study," Kendall said softly.

"Where are Vivian and Phoebe?" I asked.

"They're on a camping trip. They won't be home till later."

"Okay," Abby said as she emerged from the study cubicle. Then she looked at Kendall. "Are you sure about this?" she asked. "I can stay if you want me to."

"I'll be fine, Abby," Kendall said.

Abby shot me another meaningful look and then nodded to Kendall.

"Thanks, Abby," Kendall said. "I really appreciate it."

"You're welcome," the blonde girl said. "I'll be back by ten," she added. She was *looking* at Kendall, but she was obviously talking to me.

Kendall thanked her again and then walked her to the door.

When Kendall returned, she smiled shyly. I gestured toward the living room couch. When we sat down, she tucked her feet underneath her and then tentatively leaned against me. I put my arm around her and we sat in silence for a few minutes.

Then we started talking: about her feelings toward Gina, me, and the world in general. I ended up defending Gina a lot of the time, but I think Kendall began to see a little of what *I* saw in Gina. I think she also realized that if I were forced to choose between the two of them, the choice wouldn't be simple or clear-cut. Nor would it be friendly.

I also gleaned a little more insight into her hatred of sororities. She wouldn't tell me the whole story, but it had to do with Big Mistake Guy and two girls she'd *thought* were her friends. To make matters worse, her ex-friends had been in Chi Omega. One of them had graduated, but the other—a girl named Hayley—was still at UT.

We talked for more than an hour. I don't know if we resolved anything, but we certainly got a lot of things out in the open. I also got the feeling that Kendall had hoped Gina would go to UCLA. Deep down, I think Kendall resented Gina for choosing *me* over California.

In the end, though, she promised to try to be more understanding about Gina and her sorority. She also promised to be more tolerant of Gina's personality in general. To a degree, I didn't care what she did—I just wanted things the way they used to be, with the three of us happy.

✧ ✧ ✧

Monday morning, Kendall and I met for breakfast, as usual. I looked around for the brunette and the blonde, but didn't see them. We did see Trip, however, so we invited him to join us.

"I thought I'd try this place for breakfast," he said as he sat down. "The food *is* better."

While we ate, we talked about our classes. Afterward, we walked down Andy Holt Avenue together. At the Humanities building, Trip said goodbye and headed to his English class. Then Kendall and I continued toward the Hill.

"I really like him," she said.

"Me too."

"He doesn't have a girlfriend, does he?"

I shook my head.

"Do you think he likes Abby?"

I looked at her sidelong.

"Well, she's not seeing anyone right now, and…"

"I dunno," I hedged. "I thought she'd wanna date a guy her age."

"Why?" Kendall asked with a grin. "I don't."

I laughed.

"Besides, I think she kinda likes him."

"Oh?"

She nodded. "I can tell. She's said little things." Then, "Hey, I've got a great idea! She and I can fix dinner for you two."

For a moment, I waffled; I didn't know how I felt about Kendall playing matchmaker. I wanted to tell her that Trip wasn't really interested in a girlfriend right now, but I'd promised that I wouldn't say anything about his reasons why. Besides, I didn't want to make the decision for him.

"What do you think?" Kendall asked, interrupting my train of thought.

"When?" I asked.

"How about Friday? Vivian and her boyfriend usually do something on Fridays, and I think Phoebe and her boyfriend are visiting his parents this weekend. So we'll have the apartment to ourselves."

"I'll ask Trip," I said.

"Oh, Paul, thank you! It'll be just like we're a real couple."

"We *are* a real couple," I said.

"You know what I mean."

"Yeah, I do. Anyway, I'll ask him," I said, as we reached Ayers Hall and the top of the Hill.

"Okay, thanks. Oh, and don't forget, you've got your modeling this afternoon," she said, leaning close. Then she kissed me, with a lot more heat than I'd expected. "I can't believe I'm dating a *model*," she said with a grin. Then she pouted. "I wish I could do it with you."

"Me too," I said. "But at least this way, you don't have to stop shaving. You know?"

"I thought of that too," she said. Then her expression grew sultry. "Why don't you meet me at my apartment after modeling? Before you get there, I can take a hot bath and get ready for you," she whispered. "My pussy will be nice and smooth…"

I felt my dick stiffen at the thought. Unfortunately, we were in a public quad, with lots of other students around. No one was paying attention to us—at the moment—but if we started…

"You're thinking about it, aren't you?" she asked.

"How can you tell?"

"You get this look on your face when you're in the mood," she said. "And it's *very* arousing."

"Oh?"

With a grin, she nodded.

"Good," I said. "But now, I'd better get to class, before I have to *limp* up the stairs."

With a promising smile, she kissed me goodbye and we went our separate ways.

✧ ✧ ✧

After lunch, I stopped by my dorm room and stuffed a bathrobe into my backpack. The art professor, Siobhan, had suggested sandals as well, but I decided to forego them.

Then I went across the hall and knocked on Trip's door. No one answered, so I headed to the A&A building. Luckily, Trip was already there.

"Hey, man, what're you up to this Friday?" I asked as I slid into my desk.

"Nothing. Why?"

"Um… well… Kendall kinda wanted to know if you wanna come over to her apartment, for dinner."

He lifted his eyebrows.

"She's playing matchmaker," I admitted.

"With Abby?" he asked.

I nodded.

"She's cute, and I like her, but…," he trailed off with a shrug. "I guess I'm not really interested. In *anyone*," he added hastily. "I mean, not after Lori. Not now, at least."

"That's what I figured," I said.

"But that doesn't mean I can't show up and be polite. So yeah, I'd love to come."

"Cool. It'll make Kendall happy." I didn't know how it would make *Abby* feel, but I guess that was Kendall's problem.

"We've gotta be back in your room for *Dallas*, though. Remember?"

"Ten o'clock, nine central," I joked. "Yeah, I'd forgotten about that." Then, "Hey, maybe we could watch it at Kendall's. They've got a TV."

Before I could say anything else, Professor Joska walked into the room and we all grew quiet. Then I mentally chuckled at how well trained we were. I still didn't like the man, but he *did* know how to handle a class of freshman architecture students.

"Midterm exams," he said solemnly. "Two words guaranteed to strike fear into the heart of any student."

I glanced at Trip and rolled my eyes at Joska's melodrama.

"I see that some of you are panicked," Joska continued. "And rightfully so. But some of you seem to enjoy a sanguine self-confidence that scares me, frankly," he said.

With a start, I realized that he was looking at me.

"Make no mistake," he said, still looking at me, "some of you will *not* pass this exam."

I felt my face heating with anger. What was he trying to say? Did he think *I* wouldn't pass? If he did, he'd better think again. I'd study as long as it took if it meant proving him wrong.

"This week, we'll finish up the section on human needs," he said, ignoring my defiant expression. "This Friday, I'll return your Home Project drawings and critiques. Next week, we'll spend Monday and Wednesday reviewing the sections on the history of design and the application of the human sciences. Next Friday, you will sit for the midterm."

Samantha Poole took out her calendar. Not surprisingly, she already had a big red "Exam" written on Friday, October 16th.

"Mark your calendars," Joska said, grinning perversely as he spotted Samantha. Then he addressed the class as a whole, "The midterm will be the beginning of the end for several of you. The class is already down to twenty students. I expect fewer than fifteen of you pass the final exam and continue to Design II, next quarter."

Prick, I thought sullenly.

"For now, however, some of you still think you have a chance. So, by all means, let's continue your instruction." With that, he turned to Curtis Giles. "Mr. Giles, what are the basic human needs required for comfort?"

"Um… breathing… eating… drinking…"

As I followed the lecture with only half of my attention, I mentally scheduled time for studying. I also had midterm exams in Calculus and Art History, but I wasn't worried about them. I had a paper due in American Literature (on William Faulkner), which I'd have to begin writing soon, but I wanted to do well on the Design exam. *That* would show Joska that I wasn't a

candidate for the fast food industry.

✧ ✧ ✧

"Okay, so where were we?" Trip asked after class.

"Ten o'clock, nine central," I said with a grin.

"CBS."

"*Dallas*," I joked. Then I turned serious. "Yeah, I guess we could invite Luke and Tara down to Kendall's apartment. I'll ask her about it."

"Sounds good," Trip said. Then, "So, you wanna go shoot some hoops?"

"I'd love to, man," I said, "but I can't."

"Oh? What's up?"

"I've got this… thing… I need to do," I said. I felt my cheeks heating in embarrassment. I had promised to model, and I wasn't going to back out now. I *wanted* to cancel, but my own sense of duty wouldn't let me.

"No problem, man," Trip said.

"As a matter of fact, I probably better get going."

"Okay. Catch you later."

"Later."

I made a show of walking toward the library, but as soon as Trip was out of sight, I turned back toward the A&A building. Once there, I headed for Studio 6, where I discovered a sculpture class in progress. I decided to wait in the hall. After a moment's indecision, I pulled out my sketchpad, leaned against the wall, and slid to the floor. Then I closed my eyes.

During my whirlwind trip to Rome, I'd seen the *Tempietto di San Pietro*, the Little Temple of Saint Peter. The building had been designed by Bramante, a famous Italian Renaissance architect. It was surprisingly small, but the stateliness of its dome and colonnade made it seem much more substantial. At the time, I'd been impressed by how Bramante had created such an extraordinary building in such a small area. Even in my memory, the building still seemed larger than life.

Once I had the image fixed in my mind, I opened my eyes and began to sketch. My pencil flew over the paper, laying out the regular columns and the arch of the dome. I cross-hatched the deep recesses of the colonnade and then lightly shaded the columns themselves, giving them shape and depth. Then I added details to the frieze above the columns, and to the pilasters supporting the dome.

Finally, I lifted my pencil and looked at my drawing.

"Are you always this quiet when you draw?" a soft voice asked.

I blinked in surprise. Then I turned and gazed into the bright blue eyes of the blonde from my Art History class.

When I didn't answer, she gifted me with a warm smile. "Is that Rome?" she asked, turning her eyes back to my drawing.

"Uh-huh."

"It's very good."

"Thank you," I said.

"Are you an Art major?"

I shook my head. "Architecture."

"Ah. That explains the buildings."

I nodded. Before I could say anything else, though, the bell rang. A moment later, students began streaming into the hallway. The blonde and I stood up.

"I haven't seen you here before," she said. "Are you waiting for someone?"

"I'm here for a class," I said vaguely, nodding toward the studio.

"Oh? Which one?"

"Um… Life Drawing."

Her eyes flew wide.

A half-second later, Siobhan emerged from the studio.

"Ah, Christy," the professor said, "I see you've met our figure model."

The blonde and I—*Christy* and I—simply stared at each other, speechless.

"Paul, meet Christy, one of my most promising students," Siobhan said. "Christy, meet Paul, our male model for the rest of the quarter."

I think you could've knocked us over with a feather.

✧ ✧ ✧

"You can change in here," Siobhan said, leading me toward her studio office.

I looked over my shoulder and met the eyes of the blonde. *Of Christy*, I reminded myself.

"Is there anything you need?" Siobhan asked.

For a moment longer, Christy and I gazed at each other.

"Paul?" Siobhan prompted.

"Huh? What? Oh, sorry," I said. Then I shook my head. "I don't think I need anything else."

When Siobhan shut the door behind her, I stood there for a moment. Believe it or not, I was nervous. I'd been nude in front of people before, but never on *display*. That's what I'd be doing, putting my body on display. I wasn't worried about looking fat, or the size of my dick, or even getting a hard-on. I *was* worried about Christy seeing me.

"Why her?" I asked myself as I unbuttoned my shirt. "Of all the girls in the world, why does *she* have to be in this class?"

At least it wasn't the brunette. I could actually *talk* to Christy without sounding like an idiot.

I finished taking off my clothes and hung them on a rack Siobhan had indicated. Then I put on my robe and cinched the belt around my waist.

Butterflies flip-flopped through my stomach, but I knew I had to leave the safety of the office and venture into the main studio. Unfortunately, I hadn't paid attention to the other students filing into the room, so I had no idea who else I'd have to face.

Would there be any guys? Would they look at me *like that?* What if they were gay? And what about the girls? How would *they* look at me? Would they get excited? Would they be bored? Would they…?

I shook my head to focus my thoughts. And then with a deep breath to steel my resolve, I opened the door to the main studio.

A dozen pairs of eyes looked up when I did, but I only cared about *one* pair. When Christy and I looked at each other, she smiled. I don't know why, but her smile made me relax. With a bashful smile of my own, I stepped forward.

"All right, everyone," Siobhan said. "I'd like you to meet Paul, who was kind enough to fill in when Rock had to cancel."

Rock?! I thought with an inner lurch. *I'm filling in for a guy named "Rock"? Jeez, how can I compete with that?*

Siobhan glanced at me expectantly. When I didn't respond, she subtly nodded toward the stool in the center of the circle of easels.

"Just sit comfortably," she said softly, as I drew near. "Don't worry about posing or sitting absolutely still. Just act natural. This is a life drawing class, not a statue drawing class," she added with a smile. "And if you think you're going to become excited… think about the last time you saw your grandmother."

I looked at her and tried to decide whether to blush or to laugh.

"This class is about the human body, but there *are* several young ladies present," she said. Then she flashed me a disarming grin. "And I don't think I could restrain them all," she finished. With that, she chuckled and then smiled reassuringly. "You'll do fine," she said. "Are you ready?"

"As ready as I'll ever be, I guess."

With that, I took a deep breath and unbelted my robe. The cool air of the studio washed over my body, and I suppressed a shiver. I handed my robe to Siobhan and took a seat on the stool. Then I got comfortable and tried not to think about sex.

To keep my mind safely occupied, I closed my eyes and mentally went through the pre-flight checklist for my family's Cessna. When I opened them again, I glanced at Christy, who smiled. Since she was almost directly in front of me, I simply watched her draw.

She moved her hand with sure strokes, and worked with an intensity that I completely understood. For a few minutes, I watched as her eyes flicked from me to her drawing and then back again. A couple of times, her eyes met mine and we shared a smile.

Then I worked up the courage to look around. Siobhan walked along the periphery of the class, studying the students' work and offering advice or praise. After watching her for another minute or two, I turned my gaze to the students themselves.

In addition to Christy, there were ten others: seven girls and three guys. I checked out the guys first. They were all average looking, but none of them met my eyes when I looked their way. Then I let my eyes wander over the girls. They ranged from homely to very attractive. Most of them wouldn't meet my gaze, but a couple of them smiled in reply.

As I looked around the studio, however, my eyes kept drifting back to Christy. She was petite, perhaps an inch or two over five feet. And even though she was slender, she had an attractive body. Her breasts weren't as large as Gina's, but they were round and firm. Then, in a moment of weakness, I wondered what she'd look like without her clothes.

Uh-oh!

As I felt my dick swell, I quickly thought about the most un-sexy thing I could: Professor Dubois. Sure enough, as soon as I pictured her in my mind's eye, I felt my nascent erection shrink. Then I looked around the room to see if anyone had noticed.

None of the guys were acting out of the ordinary, so I figured none of them had seen. One of the girls—an attractive brunette—was smirking. When I looked at her, she arched an eyebrow. I glanced away as my face heated in embarrassment. Then I looked up in shock, my eyes seeking Christy.

She wasn't looking at me, but her face had turned a shade darker. And she was paying an

inordinate amount of attention to her drawing. I surreptitiously watched her for almost a minute, but she never looked up.

For the rest of the class, I kept my mind firmly on the mundane. Instead of thinking about Christy (not to mention her round, firm breasts), I mentally wrote part of my Faulkner paper for American Literature

"All right, everyone," Siobhan said at last. "That's enough for today." Then she fetched my robe. "Remember," she said to her students, "you've got sketchbooks due next Friday. If you need inspiration, come see me during office hours."

As I put on my robe, I watched Christy. I was worried that she wouldn't want to talk to me after seeing my semi-erection (no matter how short-lived it had been).

She glanced at me a few more times, putting some finishing touches on her drawing, but she didn't look upset. Then she smiled and set down her charcoal. Finally, she took a step back and appraised her work.

Reluctantly, I tore my eyes away from her and headed into the office to get dressed. A few minutes later, I emerged. The large studio was empty except for the auburn-haired professor and—you guessed it—her star pupil, a certain blonde with bright blue eyes. I was still worried about Christy's reaction to my hard-on, but I decided that I couldn't do anything about it. So I slung my pack over my shoulder and walked over to them.

"Would you like to see?" Siobhan asked me, indicating Christy's drawing.

The blonde's eyes widened.

"Sure," I said. I know it sounds crazy, but I wanted to see how she'd drawn my dick. (Yes, I'm in love with my penis. Find a guy who's not. But I digress…)

When I saw the charcoal sketch, I quickly forgot about my manhood.

As I looked at the drawing, I simply marveled at Christy's talent. She had drawn me from the neck up, faithfully reproducing my features and expression. But the eyes—*my* eyes—drew my attention like lodestones. They were warm and inviting, but they also showed an intensity that I didn't realize was there. Strangely, I wanted to get to know the person in the drawing. I wanted to get to know the *me* that Christy had drawn.

"Why didn't you draw the rest of me?" I asked.

"I wasn't *looking* at the rest of you," she said, a little too quickly.

For a long moment, I looked at the drawing. Christy seemed both proud and nervous.

"I told you she was one of my best students," Siobhan said.

"Oh, Siobhan," Christy said, "you're embarrassing me."

"It really *is* good," I said.

"Thank you," Christy said.

"Thank you for modeling for us today," Siobhan said to me. "Did you enjoy it?"

"It wasn't as bad as I thought it'd be," I said. "I guess I enjoyed myself."

Christy's eyelashes fluttered and her cheeks turned rosy.

"Then we'll see you on Wednesday?" Siobhan asked.

I nodded.

"Good, good," she said. Then she looked at the studio's clock. "Oh, gosh, I must be off. Christy, I'll see you tomorrow."

"Okay," Christy said. "Bye, Siobhan."

"Goodbye. And thank you again, Paul."

"Yes, thank you," Christy said as the older woman hurried off.

"Do you have class again tomorrow?" I asked as the blonde gathered her things.

"Siobhan lets me use her studio on Tuesday and Thursday," she said. "I'm working on my portfolio."

"Portfolio?"

"Mmm hmm. We have to do a portfolio for review, for the BFA program. I… I missed most of spring quarter," she said, her voice full of emotion. Then she blinked several times and cleared her throat. "I need to catch up," she finished, her voice a little steadier.

"So you're a sophomore?" I asked. I *wanted* to ask why she'd gotten all choked up, but I thought it would be rude.

"Not officially—I still need twelve more quarter-hours—but this is my second year at UT," she said.

"So you're nineteen?" I asked. We walked out of the studio and fell into step together. I didn't know where we were going, but I guess I didn't care.

"I'm still only eighteen," she said. "I graduated from high school early."

"Oh, cool. So did my girlfriend."

"Is she the tall brunette you eat breakfast with?"

I nodded.

"She's very pretty," she said.

"Thank you. I think so too."

"She's… statuesque."

I nodded.

"What's her name?"

"Kendall."

"That's a pretty name," she said softly.

I almost told her that "Christy" was a pretty name too, but I didn't want to sound like I was flirting.

"Have you two been dating very long?" she asked.

"Two years," I said.

"So you're… a junior? A senior?"

I laughed. "No, I'm a lowly freshman. So, do you still want to be seen with me?"

"I don't see why not," she said, rewarding me with a warm smile. Then her expression turned thoughtful.

"What?" I asked.

"I guess I thought you were older," she said. "You remind me of… someone. And you're so serious."

"You're not the first person to tell me that," I said with a chuckle.

"Well, you are. Your eyes are older. And you don't *act* like a freshman."

"Except around your friend," I said.

"Oh, Wren?"

"Is that her name?"

She nodded. "She'll probably be upset that I told you, though."

"It'll be our little secret," I said.

"She's having fun flirting with you," she said with a laugh. "She's so high-strung."

"I'd be having fun flirting with *her* too, if I could ever get un-tongue-tied."

"Oh, don't worry about it," Christy said. "She does that to every guy. She's done it as long as I've known her."

"How long is that?"

"About a year. She's been my roommate since we met, when we were freshmen."

"So you didn't go to high school with her?"

She shook her head. "I came here from California. She's from Atlanta."

"You're *kidding*."

"No," she said. "Why?"

"That's where *I'm* from."

"California?"

"Well, yes and no. But I meant Atlanta. That's where I'm from."

"Oh? What part?"

"Sandy Springs," I said. "It's north of the Perimeter."

"Wren's from Dunwoody," Christy said. "But I don't know exactly where that is."

"That's right next door to me! I used to wrestle guys from Dunwoody. They were some of our biggest rivals," I added, thinking of Pete Yeager and Emmett Carstairs (the arrogant prick).

We had reached Morrill Hall, but neither of us seemed inclined to end the conversation, so we simply stood in front of the building, in our own little world.

"You used to wrestle?" she asked.

"Yeah. UT doesn't have a wrestling team, though. So now I just work out."

"I can tell."

"So, where in California are you from?" I asked, changing the subject to cover my blush.

"Well," she said, "I came here from San Diego."

"No kidding? I used to live there."

"Oh? When?"

"Actually, I was born there," I said.

"I was born in Hawaii," she said.

"Yep, I lived there too. That's where we moved after California. Did you move from Hawaii to San Diego?" I asked.

She shook her head. "I only lived in San Diego for a couple of years."

"Where'd you live before that?"

"Japan," she said.

I raised my eyebrows in surprise.

"My dad was stationed there."

"Stationed?" I asked, the light beginning to dawn. "Hold on. What's your dad do?"

"He's in the Navy," she said. "Why?"

I laughed.

"What?" she asked.

"Sorry," I said immediately. "That's just kinda funny."

"*What* is?"

"Have you ever lived in Washington?" I asked. With so many coincidences in our lives, I figured I might as well ask. (After Hawaii, my father had been transferred to Bremerton, Washington.)

She frowned at the non sequitur. "Sort of," she said. "We lived in Georgetown."

"No, I meant Washington state," I said, still chuckling. "We lived there after Hawaii."

"What's so *funny?*" she demanded.

"San Diego?" I asked rhetorically. "Hawaii? Washington state? What do they all have in common?"

"They're on the Pacific Ocean," she said, still not following my logic.

"And… why did *you* live in San Diego and Hawaii?"

"Because that's where my father was stationed," she said.

"At…?"

"At Navy bases," she said, still vexed, but too polite to get downright angry.

"*I* lived in San Diego, Hawaii, and Washington because…"

Then she Got It, and her eyes widened. "You're kidding."

"Nope. My dad was a pilot in the Navy," I said proudly.

With that, it was *her* turn to laugh.

"What's so funny?" I asked, trying not to frown now that the tables were turned.

"My father's a pilot too," she said.

"Really? What's he fly?"

"Well, he doesn't fly much anymore, but he used to fly F-8s and F-4s."

"My dad flew A-4s," I said.

She nodded in recognition. "My brother Danny flies those."

"No shi— no kidding?"

"No kidding," she said, grinning at my slip. "He's a Marine," she added. Then her eyes misted and she swallowed hard.

"What's the matter?" I asked.

"It's nothing," she said. Then she looked up at the dorm. "I'd better go."

I looked at my watch and then twitched in shock. I was supposed to meet Kendall after the drawing class, and that was almost *forty minutes* ago.

"It was nice talking to you," Christy said. She smiled, but her eyes were sad.

"It was nice talking to you too," I said, a little bewildered. We'd been having a good conversation. What had I done wrong?

She looked back at me before she walked into the building, and I waved. When she disappeared through the doors, I somehow felt empty.

✧ ✧ ✧

Kendall yanked the door open when I knocked.

"What happened?" she asked. "Is everything okay?"

"I'm fine," I said. I didn't want to tell her that I'd been talking to Christy, so I fibbed. "It just took longer than I thought."

"I was getting worried," Kendall said. Then she leaned close. "And… you know."

I recognized the look in her eyes, and my dick stirred in response.

"I was just about to come looking for you," she said.

"Oh? And what would you have done if you'd found me?" I asked as I shut the door behind me. Then I backed Kendall against the wall and kissed her.

She responded eagerly.

I cupped her breast through her shirt, and felt her nipple harden under my palm. Still kissing her, I pulled back and lifted her t-shirt.

She tried to resist, but I was insistent.

When I freed her breasts, I reached between us and unzipped my shorts. Then I extracted my dick.

"No, Paul, we can't," Kendall breathed.

With my body, I held her against the wall. Then I lifted her skirt and pressed my dick against her panty-clad pussy.

"Paul," she hissed, "Vivian's here. She's home early."

"I don't care," I said.

"Paul, no."

I rubbed the head of my cock against her crotch. When I felt the heat and moisture of her arousal, I groaned softly.

"We *can't,*" she insisted.

"Where's Vivian?" I asked.

"In her bedroom," Kendall said. Then her eyes rolled back as my glans rubbed against her hooded clit.

Without another word, I lifted her and walked down the hallway to her bedroom. Then I used my foot to shut the door.

"Paul, no, we can't," she said as I pinned her against the wall. "Vivian will *hear*."

I ignored her protests and kissed her again. Her bare breasts pressed against my chest, and I felt her nipples harden with desire. Then I grinned to myself as I reached under her ass and pulled her panties to the side.

Moist heat washed over my cock as I slid it along her smooth pussy. She tried to get me to stop, but I ignored her pleas. I tilted my hips and the tip of my dick entered her easily. She whimpered when I jerked my hips upward. After the briefest moment of resistance, her labia parted and I slid half my length inside her. She was as tight as ever, but doubly slippery.

"You've been horny all day," I said. "Haven't you?"

She bit her lip and nodded. Then she closed her eyes in ecstasy as I gently forced the rest of my cock into her.

"You're so hot and wet," I breathed. "And your pussy's so smooth." Then I kissed her, my tongue exploring her mouth as my cock explored her depths.

I easily supported her weight, holding her against the wall with my body. She locked her ankles behind me and then bucked her hips, moaning as her engorged clit rubbed the base of my cock.

"No, Paul," she begged when I began thrusting. "Vivian will hear us."

"Then we'd better be quiet," I said, my voice pitched low.

I continued moving within her. Because of the angle, I couldn't get my hips back, but neither of us cared. My cock filled her completely, and with each short thrust, the base rubbed her clit, sending shockwaves of pleasure through her.

My orgasm came on like a rushing bull, all power and intensity. One moment, I was fine, the next, I was lost in a fog of ecstasy, spurting deep within her pussy. She clutched me tight, her body responding as I filled her with my seed.

Finally, my orgasm subsided, and I opened my eyes. Then, panting, I pulled back to look at her.

She smiled and then blew an errant strand of hair from her face. She was panting and grinning as well.

"My goodness," she said. "I didn't know how badly I needed that."

I swallowed to moisten my mouth and then nodded (with a stupid, post-orgasmic grin, of course).

"I think you'll have to do that again," she said, "only slower."

"Your wish is my command," I said, carrying her toward the bed.

✧ ✧ ✧

Later, Kendall and I lay entwined atop her sheets, the sweat from our exertions evaporating in the gentle current from the air conditioner. Vivian was probably still in the apartment, but with Kendall's bedroom door shut, the blonde girl *probably* hadn't heard us having sex.

And while I was thinking about roommates…

"When does Abby get back from class?" I asked.

"Oh, she's got a paper to write, so she's at the library. She said she'll be there till after dinner. So you're trapped with me."

"Oh, save me," I said facetiously.

Her eyes glittering with mischief, Kendall climbed atop me and began tickling me.

For a moment, I tried to fend her off. When that didn't work, I simply grabbed her and rolled over. Then I scooted us toward the center of the bed. We came to rest with my hips between her thighs. I kissed her and she eagerly responded. When we broke the kiss, she gazed up at me speculatively.

"Paul?"

"Mmm hmm?"

"Do you have a camera?"

I nodded. I'd bought a 35mm Nikon before my trip to Europe.

"Do you think we could…?"

"Could what?" I prompted, when her pause drew out.

"Do you think we could… play with it, maybe?"

"Play with it?"

She nodded.

"How?" I asked, still a little confused.

"Maybe I could model for you," she suggested tentatively.

"And?" I asked. (I sensed there was more, of course.)

"And maybe you can pretend you're a fashion photographer, and I'm your model."

I nodded for her to continue.

"You can tell me that if I don't take off my clothes, I'll never become a famous model."

"That sounds like fun," I said.

"And once you force me to strip for you, you can make me… do things."

"Do things?"

"You know," she said. "*Things*."

"Such as?"

"You know," she said. Then, "You could make me suck your dick."

"Mmm hmm…?"

"And then you could make me do anything you want. *Any*thing."

"You mean I could make you spread your legs?" I asked, getting into the spirit of her fantasy.

She nodded.

"And I could make you play with your pussy?"

Another nod.

"I could make you finger yourself until you were nice and wet?"

"Oh, yes," she breathed.

"I could make you beg me to fuck you," I said.

She moistened her lips and then nodded.

"I could take pictures of you as my cock spread you open and slid inside you."

"Yesssss."

As I continued teasing her with ideas, she reached between us and gripped my resurgent shaft. Then she rubbed the head against her smooth pussy, coating it with her juices. I kept talking about her fantasy as I slowly sank into her. After a few gentle thrusts, however, she silenced me with a passionate kiss.

Since I'd already come twice, it took me a while to reach the point of no return. Just before I did, Kendall's inner muscles clenched me as *she* climaxed. With a deep groan, I emptied my balls into her.

As our mutual orgasms subsided, she wrapped her arms around me and I collapsed against her, exhausted.

✧ ✧ ✧

Later, Kendall asked me what it was like when I modeled for Siobhan's class. I told her about most of it, although I left out the part about my surprise erection, of course. I also wondered whether or not I should mention Christy. After debating it in my head, I finally decided to say something.

"You're not going to believe who was in the class," I said.

"Oh? Who?"

"Do you remember that blonde girl, from my Art History class?"

"The banana crème pie," she teased.

"Yeah," I said, my face heating. "Her."

"She's a cute pie," Kendall said, grinning. "What's her name?"

"Christy," I said. "I think."

"Are there many guys in the class?" Kendall asked.

"Um… three."

"So it's mostly women?"

I nodded. "Eight, I think."

"Do you think the women think about your body, after class?" she asked.

I mentally paused at the non sequitur, but then shrugged.

"I bet they do. I know I would."

"Yeah," I said, "but you're almost as horny as Gina."

At the mention of the other girl's name, Kendall grew quiet.

I tried not to let my annoyance show, but I don't know how successful I was.

"What were you thinking as you posed?" she asked, ignoring my reaction.

"To be honest," I said, "I was writing my Am. Lit. paper."

"I wish I could do it with you," she said.

"My paper?" I teased.

"You know what I mean. Modeling."

I nodded.

After a moment, I felt her gathering her courage. "Paul?"

"Mmm hmm."

"Can we really do… um… you know, with your camera?"

"Play fashion photographer and sex slave model?" I asked.

She nodded.

"Sure."

"I don't think I want to use film, though. Is that okay?"

I nodded. In reality, I hadn't thought we'd be actually *taking* pictures. I figured we'd simply use the camera as a prop.

"Maybe we can, though, if we find someplace that'll develop the film, without looking at it or getting us arrested," she added.

"I guess we could," I said, although I had *no* idea how to go about it.

"I kind of want to see what I look like with your come on my face," she said excitedly.

"You look beautiful," I said.

"I want you to make me suck you, and then you can shoot all over my face and tits."

With that, she reached for my flaccid member.

"Whoa there," I said, stopping her. "Hold on a second. I still haven't recovered from the *last* time," I explained. Then I read the dejection in her body language. "That doesn't mean we can't fool around, though. I just don't think my dick's ready for the next round."

"That's okay," she said.

"Oh, that doesn't mean my fingers and mouth are too tired to have fun," I said.

Then I rolled her to her back and grinned down at her. As my fingers sought her damp slit, I waggled my eyebrows and then flicked my tongue against her nipple.

She ran her fingers through my hair and simply enjoyed herself as I took my time building her up. When she climaxed, she clutched my head to her breast and cried out in ecstasy.

✧ ✧ ✧

When Kendall and I finally emerged from her bedroom, both Vivian and Phoebe were in the living room. They looked up and then grinned.

"Why, Phoebe," Vivian said, "I didn't know Paul was here. Did you?"

"Why, no," Phoebe said, "I had no idea. I didn't hear a thing."

"Not a thing," Vivian echoed.

"Oh, hush," Kendall said. Then she grinned sheepishly.

"Far be it from us to be nosy," Vivian said.

"Indeed," Phoebe said. "The very thought!"

Then they burst into girlish howls of laughter at Kendall's expression.

When Kendall glanced at me, I tried to suppress my grin, but I simply couldn't.

"Not you *too*," she accused.

I shrugged, my eyes still smiling. "C'mon," I said, "let's go take a shower before we eat."

"Not again," Vivian teased.

"*Four* times?" Phoebe asked with feigned shock.

"Actually, I think the shower might be number five," Vivian said conversationally. "You missed one."

"Oh? When?"

"Before you got home," Vivian said.

Kendall blushed furiously.

"Let's see," Vivian said, counting on her fingers, "the first was up against the wall…"

Completely abashed, Kendall grabbed my hand and practically dragged me down the hall. Vivian and Phoebe's good-natured laughter followed us.

"I can't *believe* them," Kendall said as we stepped into the shower. Then she looked at me, a pained expression on her face. "I thought we were quiet," she said.

I laughed. "Your bed squeaks. A *lot*. And these walls aren't that thick," I added. "Besides," I said, "Vivian and Phoebe both have boyfriends. They know what it's like."

"Still, I guess I don't want them to know when we're having sex."

"Why not?" I asked, lathering her shoulders and back.

"I don't know. It just seems… dirty."

"I thought you liked it dirty," I teased, grinding my dick against her ass for effect.

"You know what I mean," she said.

"Yeah. But I don't think it'll hurt if Vivian and Phoebe know we're having sex. You're not a nun. You're a woman. And you have needs."

"Not anymore. You took care of all of them."

"*All* of them?" I asked with a grin.

"Well, I'm bound to have more needs tomorrow. Does that count?"

I nodded, still grinning. Then, "Oh, that reminds me…"

She raised her eyebrows and then began soaping my chest.

I told her about my conversation with Trip (about inviting Luke and Tara over to watch *Dallas*).

"Sure," she said immediately, "that sounds like a great idea. But we need to go grocery shopping Friday afternoon."

"I've got modeling till four," I said. "At least," I added, thinking about a possible conversation with Christy.

"We can go afterward," she said. "Is that okay?"

"Yep. Now, we'd better get out of the shower before Vivian and Phoebe think we're going for a world record."

✧ ✧ ✧

The next day, in Art History class, Christy and I shared a smile as she and Wren sat down.

"Hi, tall, dark, and mysterious," Wren said.

I wanted to call her by her name, but I reminded myself not to.

"Feeling tongue-tied today?" she asked. Then she took a deep breath.

She was wearing a scoop-neck shirt, but I didn't take the bait and look at her cleavage.

She arched a curious eyebrow.

"I was just wondering if I should remind you that I'm tall, dark, mysterious, *and* artistic," I said. Then I tried to suppress a grin.

Christy giggled at my unruffled audacity.

Before Wren could reply, Professor Dubois started her lecture.

I merely smirked as I took out my notebook and started paying attention to the professor.

✧ ✧ ✧

Later Tuesday night, we had an intramural football game versus the Hess Hall Third Floor team.

Both Kendall and Gina were there, and they seemed to get along. Tara was there as well, and she and Gina spent most of the game talking to each other. Surprisingly, Abby came to the game as well. I didn't know whether Kendall had invited her simply for the company, or because she was busy playing matchmaker.

Either way, I didn't have much time to worry about it; I was too busy playing the game. The Hess team had the bare minimum of players, and only two of them seemed to have any real football experience. I certainly wasn't a star player, but I was a lot better than most of *their* players.

Jeff even managed to score against them, although he fumbled the football before he ran into the end zone. Fortunately, he was so far ahead of his pursuers that he simply chased down the ball and recovered it for the touchdown.

Consequently, the game was a rout, 28–0.

Our team celebrated by going to a pizza place on the Strip. We ordered several pitchers of beer and generally made fools of ourselves, but we had fun.

Afterward, Trip and I escorted the girls back to campus. We walked with Kendall and Abby to their apartment first. Then Trip headed up the hill to North Carrick so Gina and I could have some time alone.

"Do you wanna hang out in the lobby for a while?" she asked when we reached South Carrick. "I don't want to face Miss Goody-two-shoes. She'll know I've been out drinking, and she'll pray for me to see the error of my sinful ways, blah, blah, blah."

"Sure," I said.

So we found an empty couch in her lobby.

"I miss doing this," she said as she curled up next to me.

"Me too."

For a while, we sat in comfortable silence. Then we started talking: about classes, our professors, and life in general.

"Oh, my God," I said, interrupting her. "You're not going to believe what Kendall signed me up for."

"What?"

I told her about the modeling.

"You're *kidding*," she said.

"Nope."

"I guess that makes sense," Gina said, upon reflection. "Kendall always has wanted to be a model," she added. Then she looked up at me. "But I didn't know *you* wanted to be one too."

"I kinda got talked into it," I said, although I didn't explain about Kendall's photographer fantasy.

"That's okay," Gina said. "I was just teasing you."

"I know."

"I think you'll be good at it, though," she said after a moment. "You've got a great body, and you're comfortable being nude."

I nodded.

"That's pretty cool," she mused.

"What is?"

"I'm dating a male model."

"I guess," I said.

"I guess I'll have to call you pitter-pat *model* man," she teased with a soft sigh. Then she hugged herself to me.

We sat together for a long, sinfully comfortable time. Finally, well after midnight, I kissed her goodnight and headed home.

✧ ✧ ✧

After Design class on Wednesday, I said goodbye to Trip and headed toward Studio 6. The sculpture class was in progress, of course, but I already knew that. So I took out my sketchpad and sat down in the hallway.

I thought about drawing another Italian building, something Baroque or Renaissance. But then I thought about something even earlier, and simpler: the Temple of Athena Nike, in Athens.

The temple sits on the Acropolis, and has a breathtaking view of the city. But what surprised me was the building's size; it was small, only eleven or twelve feet tall. I imaged it for a few moments, simply fixing the details in my mind. When I opened my eyes, I stared at the sketchpad for a moment. Then I lowered my hand, the tip of my pencil resting on the pristine paper.

Like the ancient architect, Callicrates, I began with the stylobate (the temple base). Then I drew the fluted columns, adding the curled volutes of the Ionic capitals. Next, I sketched the entablature: architrave, frieze, and cornice. Last but not least, I outlined the rest of the temple.

Almost in a trance, I began filling in the details: the weathered carvings on the frieze, the circular pattern on the volutes, the lines of the cut stone blocks. As I shaded the drawing, I could almost smell the sun-baked marble. Finally, I lifted my pencil.

"That looks like Greece," Christy said from beside me.

"How long have you been here?" I asked. I wasn't surprised that she was there, but I *was* surprised that I hadn't heard her. After all, she sat less than a foot away.

"Since you started adding details to the top part," she said.

"The entablature."

"Right," she said. Then she looked thoughtful. "That's… Ionic?"

"Mmm hmm," I said. "See, the column capitals have volutes, these little curly things. Doric columns are more massive, and the capitals are plainer. Corinthian capitals have stylized

acanthus leaves, like this," I said, sketching a quick Corinthian column. "All the columns are fluted, so you have to look at the capitals. You can also tell what Order it is by the proportions of the overall design," I added, "but that's a bit tougher, and it usually involves some math and a few measurements."

"You said you're a first-year architecture student?" she asked, her blue eyes dancing with mirth.

"Okay, so I like architecture."

"I can tell."

"So, what do *you* like?"

"I like your drawings," she said. "It's almost like I'm *there*."

"Thank you," I said, my cheeks heating.

At that moment, the bell rang. Christy and I grinned at each other and stood.

"Time for me to take off my clothes again," I said.

With an amused shrug, she nodded. "At least you're not nervous, like some guys."

"Nope," I said, although I wasn't about to explain why.

As the hallway began to clear, Siobhan emerged from the studio.

"Here you two are again," she said cheerfully. Then she turned to me. "Ready for another hard day of lounging around?" she asked. "Although I probably shouldn't use the word 'hard,'" she added with a teasing grin.

Christy giggled as I turned six shades of purple.

✧ ✧ ✧

After class, I came out of Siobhan's office to find her looking at Christy's drawing.

"Come see," the older woman said.

Christy had drawn me from the waist up. *I* thought I was too soft, but her drawing made me look like a Greek statue, with well-defined muscles and a trim stomach. And like the best Greek statues, she'd somehow given her drawing a sense of humanity. She also gave it a sense of motion: I looked like I was coiled and ready to move at any moment, with an aura of power and purpose.

I don't know how she did it, but I was in awe.

"It's splendid, isn't it?" Siobhan asked softly.

I could only nod. When I looked up, Christy was blushing.

"It's your fault," she said to me.

I looked a question at her.

"You got me thinking about Greek art."

"Sorry, but I must be off," Siobhan interrupted. "It's an excellent piece, Christy. And I'll see you tomorrow." Then she turned to me. "Thank you again, Paul."

We said goodbye to her and she rushed off.

As Christy gathered up her things, I waited.

"Have you always been able to draw like that?" I asked as we walked toward her dorm.

"Mmm hmm. Since I was two or three."

"You started drawing when you were *two?!*"

"Mmm hmm. Just simple things, but by the time I was four, I could sketch anyone I saw. I don't really remember it, but I've seen my drawings. They're…"

"Amazing," I said.

"I was going to say 'scary.'"

"Why?"

"I don't know. I just look at the drawings—they're often of people I don't remember—and I feel like I know them. I get really emotional when I look at some of them."

"Why?"

"What's it like when you draw a building you've seen?" she asked.

"I can smell the air," I said. "I can feel the ground beneath my feet. I dunno," I added with a shrug. "I guess it's like I'm *there*." Then, "Oh, I get it."

She nodded. "That's how it is with me. Only it's not buildings, it's people. It's like I know what they're thinking."

"What was *I* thinking today?" I asked.

"I don't know," she said. "I haven't figured you out yet."

Oddly, that made me feel good. If she hadn't figured me out yet, she'd keep trying. And that meant I'd get to spend more time with her.

"You're not very old, but you're intense," she said. "Sometimes, you're really silly, but you have moments when you seem like you're carrying the weight of the world. At times, you're really self-conscious, but then you start paying attention to the people around you, and you're different. It's like you're completely comfortable with yourself for a change."

I was silent.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I shouldn't've said anything."

"No, it's okay. It's just… well… I dunno. I guess I never thought about it like that."

"Here we are," she said, looking up at Morrill. "I'd better get upstairs."

"Okay," I said distractedly.

She reached out and then hesitated. After a moment of indecision, she put her hand on my arm. As she pulled away, her fingertips trailed over my skin. I wanted her to linger, but…

At the door to the building, she looked back and I waved. She smiled in reply and then disappeared inside.

✧ ✧ ✧

On Friday, Trip and I got to Design class early. Professor Joska was due to return our project drawings and critiques, and I was both excited and apprehensive. When Joska arrived, the class grew ominously quiet.

"Since you're all anxiously awaiting your project grades," he said, "I won't keep you in suspense for long. As most of you should recall, the technical quality of your drawings is fifty percent of your grade. Your critiques are worth ten percent. Artistic expression comprises the remaining forty percent of your grade, and you were in competition within your own team for those points," he reiterated. "Are there any questions?"

No one uttered a peep.

"Very well," he said. Then his demeanor changed and he held up a roll of drawings. "These," he said heavily, "were dismal."

I gripped the edge of my desk and tried not to grimace.

"And your critiques," he added, holding up a sheaf of papers, "were superficial and mediocre. When I say 'critique,' I *mean* critique. I do *not* mean a few shallow remarks that gloss over

major deficiencies."

When he paused for effect, most of us looked around nervously.

"In the unlikely event that any of you become architects," Joska continued, "your success, *and the very lives of the people who inhabit your buildings,* will depend upon your ability to critique not only your own work, but that of others. For instance…," he said, rifling through the papers. When he found the one he wanted, he began to read. "'This drawing is good, but could probably use some more work. The proportions are a little off, but the lines are straight.'"

My stomach lurched as I realized that he was reading my critique of Samantha Poole's drawing.

"'The lines are straight'?" Joska repeated, practically beside himself. "Any five-year-old with a ruler can draw straight lines."

I fumed in silence.

"This is *not* a critique. It's a grade-school book report. You'll have to do better than this… Mr. Hughes," he said.

I looked up in shock. Not only had he ridiculed me, but he'd let everyone know that it was *me*.

Seething murderously, I started to open my mouth to tell Joska exactly what he could *do* with his comment, but Trip suddenly—and deliberately?—knocked his textbook off his desk.

"*Little things*," he hissed as he bent over to pick it up.

As I clenched my fists, my knuckles turned white.

"Do you have anything to say, Mr. Hughes?" Joska asked, his voice deceptively calm.

When I started to open my mouth, Trip cleared his throat.

"Well?" Joska asked.

"No," I grated. I added a "sir" as an insulting afterthought.

Joska glanced at Trip, as if to say, "You kept him on a leash *this* time, but what about next time?"

Trip returned Joska's gaze with a lot more composure than *I* was capable of at the moment.

With a nod of almost-respect for Trip, Joska turned to the class as a whole.

"Quit smirking," he said. "None of the rest of you did any better than Mr. Hughes. A number of you did quite a bit worse. Architecture is a serious business for serious people," he said heavily. "None of you have gotten serious yet."

With that, he began passing out the critiques and drawings. Mine was first, and I walked to the front of the class with barely concealed fury. When I returned to my desk, I practically threw myself into it. Then I looked at my critiques. Joska had given me one point out of ten.

He'd written a note at the top of the first sheet, *These are cursory and careless, Mr. Hughes. When are you going to take this seriously? You'll have to do better than this.*

I thought about crumpling the paper, but that would have been admitting defeat. And I'd be *damned* if I'd let Joska win. With an angry tug, I unrolled my drawing.

Not surprisingly, Joska had written a lengthy note. It read, *You have several areas where you need to pay more attention to detail. Overall, your drawing shows flair and promise, but you've reached the point where your natural talent can take you no further. You have to constantly strive to improve your abilities, and you cannot do that until you stop treating architecture as a glorified excuse to draw pretty buildings. This is work, Mr. Hughes. As strange as it may seem to you, you need to approach it that way.*

Then, surprisingly, he had added a quote, by Michelangelo, *"If people knew how hard I have to work to gain my mastery, it wouldn't seem wonderful at all."*

In the lower right-hand corner of the drawing, Joska had written, *Technical merit: 38/50. Critiques: 1/10. Design: 1st place, 40/40. 79 points overall, C+. Good, but not good enough.*

"What the fuck does he want from me?" I muttered to myself. "Perfection?"

✧ ✧ ✧

"I want to fucking *kill* that guy," I said as Trip and I walked back to the dorm. I still had to go to Siobhan's class and model, but I didn't feel like going early.

"Be happy you won first place. Those forty points were the difference between a C and an F," he said.

Trip had gotten second place, twenty points. Between his drawing and his critiques, he'd eked out sixty-six points, a D. Both Antonio and Samantha had gotten Fs. Joska had said that more than half of the class had received a failing grade on the project. I was thankful for my C+, but I still wanted to throttle Joska.

"Anyway," Trip said, "at least the combined projects are only twenty percent of our grade, and I did pretty good on the first two."

I nodded.

"The *big* test is going to be the midterm exam. That's forty percent of our grade."

"No kidding," I said.

"Hey," he said, "since we're in a funk, I was gonna listen to some Funk. That always makes me feel better. You up for it? I've got a Parliament album that'll blow your mind."

"Maybe for a little while," I said. "But I can't stay long. I've got this… thing… I need to do at three. And I need to be there a little early."

"No problem, man," he said. Then he grinned at me. "You're gonna *love* George Clinton."

✧ ✧ ✧

For Friday night's dinner party, Kendall and Abby had an entire menu planned out, complete with a shopping list. The three of us walked down to the parking garage and then I drove to the nearest supermarket. I insisted on paying for the groceries, since I still had money left over from my trip to Europe (and I knew how tight Kendall's budget was).

When we got back to the apartment, the girls put me to work washing lettuce and preparing the salad. Then they started making the main dish and sides.

Trip, Luke, and Tara showed up right on time, and Tara immediately went to the kitchen to help. (Kendall didn't seem to have any qualms about Tara being a sorority girl. I filed away that tidbit of information.)

Dinner was Chicken Cordon Bleu, with herb-roasted potatoes and glazed carrots. It was delicious. We also had two bottles of white wine, so we were all a little mellow. For dessert, the girls served ice cream, which I skipped.

After dinner, we moved to the living room and watched the season premiere of *Dallas*. Before the show started, they showed a recap of the previous season, reminding us about the various storylines. Then the episode began, and we all watched eagerly.

When the show was finally over, I had to chuckle at myself. I was hooked, although I didn't know *how* I'd become so engrossed in a TV show (and a glorified soap opera at that). Still, it

was fun to watch the machinations and scheming.

Luke and Tara were going to a party at the Fiji Island, so they thanked us for dinner and then headed out. Kendall, Abby, Trip, and I sat around talking until well after midnight. I watched how Abby looked at Trip and came to the conclusion that she *did* like him.

Unfortunately, I was worried that she would get her feelings hurt when she found out that Trip didn't really *want* a girlfriend. I wanted to say something to let her down easy, but I decided that it would do more harm than good. Besides, it wasn't really my place to interfere.

Finally, around one in the morning, Trip and I said goodnight to the girls and headed back to our dorm.

"That was fun," he said as we walked up the hill. "Thanks for inviting me. And thanks for dinner."

"You're welcome."

We walked the rest of the way in silence, both of us tired from a long day. Billy was sleeping soundly when I shuffled into my room, so I stripped off my clothes in the dark and climbed into bed. Unfortunately, I couldn't go to sleep.

I kept thinking about Joska and the way he treated me, but what could I do about it?

There ain't no justice, I thought sullenly.

I brooded about it for a while, but then decided to think about something else. So I mentally went over my weekend plans.

On Saturday, UT was playing Georgia Tech, and Kendall's parents were probably already in Knoxville, with their RV parked in the usual spot. Gina was supposed to go to the game with us, but I didn't know what she had planned with her sorority.

I also wanted to get in a workout or two. I'd eaten too much at dinner, and I needed to work it off before it turned to fat.

I wanted to call home as well. I never imagined that I'd miss Erin, but I did. I also missed my parents, but not as much as I thought I would. It made my mom happy when I called regularly, though, so I tried to do it at least once a week.

On top of all *that,* I had lots of schoolwork to do. I had to finish my Faulkner paper, study for my Calculus and Art History midterms, and study extra hard for my Design midterm.

And, last but not least, I had more modeling to do on Monday. The first week had gone well—I hadn't gotten another surprise erection, thank God—but on Monday, I'd be posing with a female model. She'd be nude as well, of course.

As I thought about the drawing class, however, my mind turned to Christy. I enjoyed our time before class, and she was an incredibly talented artist. We also had a lot in common, which made her easy to talk to. But there was something else about her—something I couldn't pin down.

I thought about it for a moment and then decided that she intrigued me.

Unfortunately, a new girl was the *last* thing I needed in my life. I had two girlfriends already. And while Kendall and Gina weren't *actively* feuding, they weren't exactly best friends, like it seemed in the beginning.

I started to sulk, but then I angrily shook my head to clear it. Since I couldn't really relax, I let my mind wander back to the drawing class.

As I did, I wondered what the female model would be like. Would she be flirty, or stand-offish? Would she be cute? Would she think *I* was cute? What would her breasts look like?

Would they be large? Small? Somewhere in between? What color would her nipples be? Pink? Rosy? Dark? Would she trim her pubic hair?

As I imagined her body, I felt my penis swell.

I peered across the darkened room to make sure Billy was sleeping. When I decided that he was, I reached under the sheet. Then I gripped my shaft and began stroking. As I did, visions of a dark-haired, dark-eyed model danced through my imagination.

When I reached the point of no return, I threw back the sheet and reached for the box of Kleenex that every college guy keeps close at hand. With a barely suppressed groan, I squirted into a wad of tissues.

After I cleaned up, I laced my fingers behind my head and stared at the ceiling, my breathing slowly returning to normal.

I wonder what she'll really *look like*, I thought as I finally drifted off to sleep.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Trip met Kendall and me for breakfast on Monday morning.

"Did you have fun on Saturday?" Kendall asked him. She was trying to be sly, but I saw through her act.

"Yeah, I did," Trip said. "Thanks again for inviting me to the party at your parents' RV."

Needless to say, Kendall had invited *Abby* to the party as well. Gina also came by, but she didn't stay long. She had to meet Jessica, her sorority big sister, for the game itself. (Sorority girls seemed to travel in packs.)

Kendall, Abby, Trip, Drew, and I had a fun time at the football game; UT beat Georgia Tech, 10–7. Afterward, Drew headed off with his SAE friends, and the rest of us hung out at Kendall and Abby's apartment.

Trip and I also ended up studying with Kendall and Abby on Sunday (once again, by Kendall's design).

"Maybe you and Paul could come hang out with us again sometime," Kendall said, interrupting my retrospection.

When I returned my attention to the present, it took me a moment to realize that she was talking to Trip. I shot her a meaningful look, which she blithely ignored.

"Sure," Trip said. "That'd be fun. But…"

"But…?" Kendall prompted.

"I don't know when I can," he said. "I've got four midterms this week. And I've got an English paper to finish." Then he glanced at me. "Just be lucky you don't have to take it."

"Oh," I said, "don't think I'm getting off easy. I may not be taking freshman English, but that doesn't mean I'm not taking *any* English. I've got a paper due in my American Lit. class."

"You mean you *volunteered* to take more English than you have to?"

"Sure," I said. "I've gotta have an elective, and it might as well be something I enjoy. Why? What're you taking for your elective?"

"Accounting," he said.

"See? I can't *imagine* wanting to take Accounting."

"Well, I think I'm going to minor in business. With all that I want to do, it'll come in handy someday."

I nodded. I'd been thinking of getting an English minor, or maybe an Art History minor.

"I kind of stumbled upon my minors," Kendall said. "I couldn't decide what I wanted to take—it *all* sounded so interesting. I've always known I wanted to be a psychiatrist, and I wanted my undergrad degree to be psychology, but I also wanted to take English, philosophy, sociology, religious studies, and women's studies classes. I couldn't take them all, but I *am* going to end up with minors in English and women's studies. On top of that, though, I've got to take classes for medical school, like Organic Chemistry."

"You are *entirely* too educated for your own good," I said.

"But I thought you liked smart women," she said.

"I do," I teased. "But not *too* smart."

Trip and I chuckled at Kendall's faux-pained look. At that point, the conversation turned to everyday things. When we finished eating, we headed out. Trip walked with us as far as the

Humanities building and then said goodbye.

Outside Ayers Hall, Kendall and I stopped for a moment.

"Are you coming over after modeling?" she asked.

"Gina and I were supposed to go to the library together. Why don't you come with us?"

"I can't," she said evasively. "I've got a paper to write for Child Psych."

I wanted to argue with her that she could write the paper in the library just as well as in her apartment, but that wasn't the point. She simply didn't want to be around Gina. She knew it, and *I* knew it.

"It's quieter in the apartment," she said, sensing my dark thoughts.

It's a library, *for cryin' out loud!* I thought.

"I'd better get to class," she said at last.

I kissed her goodbye and then watched as she walked down the back side of the Hill.

With a sigh, I walked into Ayers and headed upstairs to my Calculus class.

✧ ✧ ✧

After Design class, I headed down to Studio 6. In the hallway, I took out my sketchpad and sat down. I was in the mood for something different from Italy or Greece, so I sifted through my memories. One building immediately sprang to mind.

During our time in Paris, Gina and I had simply explored and enjoyed ourselves. We were in the City of Light, the home of some of the most beautiful art and architecture in all of Europe.

One breezy afternoon—the weather was unseasonably cool for summer—our waiter overheard us speaking English. He was a student at the American University of Paris, he explained, and he was delighted for the chance to speak English. We struck up a conversation, much to the consternation of the maître d'. When we asked what sights we should see, the waiter immediately recommended one. Then he gave us directions. Gina and I thanked him and headed for the Metro.

When we arrived at the *Place de l'Opéra*, the Paris Opera House, I stood at the end of the street and simply stared. The building was magnificent. At the time, I had no idea what architectural style it was or who had designed it. All I knew was that it took my breath away. Without a doubt, it's one of the most beautiful buildings in the world.

As my mind drew back to the present, I smiled at the memory. Gina had teased me about my sense of wonder, but I think she shared some of it, and she definitely delighted in my enthusiasm. She had even gone to the library with me after we returned to the U.S.—so I could check out books on all the architecture we'd seen in Europe.

Still smiling, I flipped to a new page in my sketchpad and began to draw. The opera house's Neo-Baroque façade was incredibly complicated. Vaulted arcades supported pairs of columns, while the columns themselves framed large French windows. A bronze sculpture—patinaed with age—crowned the low dome, and the building's flanking pediments were topped by still more sculpture.

With the building firmly in my mind's eye, I drew meticulously, reproducing details I didn't know I remembered. As I began to shade the arcades, I sensed someone beside me. When I glanced up, Christy smiled at me. I smiled in reply and then returned to my drawing. I could've spent hours on it, simply filling in details, but the bell rang before I was half-finished.

"The Paris Opera House, right?" Christy asked.

I nodded.

"That's *The Dance*, by Carpeaux," she said, pointing to my roughed-in sketch of the sculpture at ground level. "He was a French Realist," she added. "I *love* his sculpture."

"I guess I paid more attention to the building than the sculpture," I said.

"Why?" she asked, genuinely perplexed. "The sculpture is *part* of the building. One beauty lends itself to another."

"I guess I never thought of it that way."

"Carpeaux studied at the *École des Beaux-Arts*. Didn't a lot of architects study there as well?"

"Yeah," I said, somewhat amazed at her knowledge. Then I pointed to my drawing. "This is sometimes called the Garnier Opera House. The architect, Charles Garnier, was a Beaux-Arts student. Lots of famous architects studied there. As a matter of fact, most of the large public buildings in New York and Chicago are Beaux-Arts style," I finished.

"See?" she said with a grin. "Art and architecture go hand in hand." As if to illustrate her point, she gestured at the building around us—the *Art & Architecture* building. "Without architects," she added whimsically, "artists wouldn't have anyplace to display our art. And without artists, architects wouldn't have anything worthwhile to display in their buildings."

I fought not to grin, but ultimately lost the battle.

"It's true," she said.

"You two again," Siobhan interrupted from the studio doorway.

We stood.

"Christy tells me you're an architecture student," Siobhan said to me. "I thought you'd be an art student," she added. Then she noticed my sketchpad. She gestured and I let her look at my half-finished drawing. "Impressive detail," she said. "Christy said you were talented, and she was right."

Beside me, the blonde shifted nervously, and I felt my face heat.

"Are you a third-year student?" Siobhan asked. "Fourth-year?"

"Actually, I'm a freshman," I said, somewhat sheepishly.

"Oh, splendid. Then you're still in the wide-eyed wonder stage. Which architecture professors do you have?"

"Spielman for Intro, Ledbetter for Drawing, and Joska for Design," I finished sourly.

"I don't know Professor Spielman," she said, "but Don Ledbetter is good. And you're lucky to have Professor Joska."

I merely blinked at her. She obviously didn't know Laszlo Joska *or* his disagreeable personality.

"The university itself is very lucky to have him," she added.

"Are we talking about the same Professor Joska?" I asked. *How many could there be?* I wondered rhetorically.

"Oh, yes," Siobhan said. "He and I came here at the same time. The School of Art did quite a bit to persuade me to join the faculty. The College of Architecture undoubtedly did the same for him."

"Siobhan's a world-famous sculptress," Christy explained. "She's officially an Artist in Residence."

"Hold on a second," I interrupted. I mentally cringed at being rude, but I was dying to know

what Siobhan meant by “the university itself is very lucky to have” Joska. So I asked her.

“You don’t know?” she replied.

I shook my head.

“He’s won a number of design awards,” she said. “And he gave up a position at MIT to come here.”

“Hold on, he was a *professor* at MIT?”

She nodded.

“*And* he’s a famous architect?”

“Oh, yes. The dean practically turned over UT’s design curriculum to him. In fact, Professor Joska teaches most of the first-year design classes.”

“Most of the— You mean I’ll have him for *the rest of the year?!*”

“If you’re lucky, yes,” Siobhan said.

I don’t think she understood why I let out a hopeless cry of frustration.

✧ ✧ ✧

A few minutes later, clad only in my robe, I sat on the stool in the center of the circle of easels. As I stared at the female model’s empty stool, I sullenly pondered my future.

“I can’t fucking believe it,” I muttered.

I was so preoccupied that I didn’t even notice when the female model entered the studio. I wouldn’t have seen much anyway; she simply breezed into the office.

When I looked up, Christy was grinning at me. I didn’t know what she had to grin about, but I tried to smile in return.

“Sorry I’m late,” the female model said as she emerged from the office.

I didn’t even look up as she walked to her stool (although I *did* notice that she had nice legs and painted toenails).

When she turned toward me, she gasped.

At the sound, I looked up and got the shock of my life.

“Are we ready?” Siobhan asked.

I swallowed hard. When Siobhan held out her hand, I paused for a moment. Then, in a daze, I untied my robe.

“Paul, meet Wren,” Siobhan said. “Wren, meet Paul.”

✧ ✧ ✧

Holy shit, I railed silently. *First Christy, and now Wren.*

Why hadn’t Christy told me? For that matter, Wren looked as shocked as I felt, so Christy probably hadn’t told her friend either. When I glanced up at the blonde, her eyes twinkled mischievously. Then she inclined her head, her grin turning whimsical. Finally, she turned back to her drawing, but she never stopped smiling.

Wren shifted and I was tempted to look at her, but I didn’t dare. I already thought she was attractive, and if I let my mind wander, I wasn’t sure I could keep from getting an erection.

Treacherous organ.

In self-defense, I turned my thoughts to something *sure* to keep my dick limp: Joska.

I wondered how I’d survive—*if* I’d survive—another two quarters of his hectoring. He wanted me to be perfect, and I just wasn’t living up to his standards.

Well, I thought, *screw him. If he wants me to be perfect, I'll* be *perfect. I'll learn everything I can about architecture. And then I'll show him.*

In the past, if I wanted to learn something, I read a book. With Joska, I got the feeling that simple book-learning wouldn't be enough. Nor would it be enough to create a picture-perfect drawing of anyplace I'd seen.

As I morosely pondered my fate, I came to a sudden and startling conclusion.

I knew what the inside of the Paris Opera House smelled like. I'd felt the travertine blocks of the Colosseum under my feet. I could vividly remember the sun-blasted white of the buildings on the Acropolis.

But that wasn't enough.

As much as I hated to admit it, Joska was right. I couldn't sail through life drawing pretty pictures.

How was the Paris Opera House built? It was a marvel of design and elegance, as beautiful within as it was without. Yet it was built on a cramped site, atop a natural spring and an underground lake.

Why didn't the Colosseum collapse under its own weight? The building was massive, designed to hold more than 50,000 spectators. But it had eighty exits, which could disgorge all those spectators in fifteen minutes. And it was built in the first century A.D.

What had the Parthenon looked like in its heyday? The temple was a perfect example of Doric architecture, but it was also replete with optical illusions, all designed to make the building look even *more* impressive. The Greeks had known all those little tricks, nearly 2,500 years ago.

As beautiful as those buildings were, someone had purposefully designed them. An architect had created them from his imagination and, more importantly, from his *experience*.

I was a good artist, and I knew I could draw beautiful buildings. But could I design a stunning building on top of an underground lake? Could I design a massive building, capable of withstanding its own weight, as well as the test of time? Could I design a building to seamlessly combine tricks of light, dimension, scale, and proportion?

Unfortunately, I knew the answers to those questions: no, no, and no.

Then I thought about Professor Joska's quote from Michelangelo, *"If people knew how hard I have to work to gain my mastery, it wouldn't seem wonderful at all."*

I knew how hard Michelangelo had to work, and it *did* seem wonderful.

I knew that I'd never achieve even a fraction of Michelangelo's fame, but deep down, I was willing to work that hard. I was willing to set my goals higher than I thought I could achieve. I was willing to…

"Paul?"

I looked up suddenly and shook my head to clear it.

Siobhan stood close, holding my robe. Class was over.

Wren looked at me, her head cocked to the side.

Christy's eyes darted between me and her easel as she feverishly added details to her drawing.

"Are you okay, Paul?" Siobhan asked.

Still staring at me, Wren put on her robe and tied it. In a semi-stupor, I took my robe from Siobhan and donned it.

"Why don't you use the office first," I suggested to Wren.

"O-okay."

A few minutes later, when she emerged, I was still in my own little world. Without looking up, I walked into the office and shut the door behind me. I got dressed mechanically, my thoughts tumultuous. Then, as I tied my shoes, I came to a decision.

No matter what Joska demanded, I'd do it. No matter how hard he tried to beat me down, I'd keep standing up. No matter how much he criticized me, I'd keep coming back for more.

Surprisingly, I felt as if the weight of the world had been lifted from my shoulders. I don't know why, but I didn't really care, either. I knew what I wanted to do, and I was *going* to do it.

With a headshake at my own reckless determination, I slung my backpack over my shoulder.

I felt *good*—really good—for the first time in weeks.

When I opened the office door, Siobhan was bidding farewell to Christy and Wren. A moment later, she left. The two girls were halfway around the circle of easels, and they hadn't heard me open the door. On a whim, I pushed it most of the way closed. Then I stepped out of sight and paused to listen. The girls' voices were low, but if I concentrated, I could just make them out.

"Why didn't you *tell* me the guy was Mysterious?" Wren hissed. "You just said he was cute."

"I guess it was your turn to be tongue-tied," Christy said evenly. "And his name is Paul."

"But if you'd've told me, I could've done something."

"Like what?" Christy asked. "Flirt with him?"

I grinned at the teasing in her voice. Then I leaned closer to the door, straining to hear.

"It's kinda hard to do that when you don't have anything to hide," Christy added. "Don't you think?"

"But still…," Wren said. "I could've made him… I dunno… *some*thing. Now I'll never get the upper hand back."

"Oh, get over it," Christy said. "He's a nice guy."

"Oh?" Wren countered. "And how do you know that?"

"I've talked to him a lot. And he walked me back to the dorm all last week."

"I'll *bet*."

"He's got a girlfriend," Christy said. "And he's been a perfect gentleman. Besides, you know how I feel about Simon."

"Simon?" Wren mocked. "Simon's just— Oh, never mind. Forget I said anything. Let's figure out how I can keep teasing Mysterious."

"His name is *Paul*," Christy said deliberately.

"Okay. Jeez. You'd think you've got the hots for him or something."

"I told you, he's a nice guy. And… well…"

After a moment of silence, they both giggled.

"He's *really* cute," Christy said.

"And he's got a great body," Wren added. "Did you see the size of his…"

At that point, their voices dropped to a whisper.

I leaned forward, desperate to pick up their faint conversation.

As I strained, I felt my arm shifting. I was using a table to brace myself, and it had started moving. In a slow-motion panic, I fell forward. My face hit the door jamb before I could catch myself. My nose flattened and then my shoulder hit the door.

It closed with a distinctive click-*clack*.

My face hot with embarrassment, I pushed away from the wall and stood upright. For a fraction of a second, I panicked. What should I do? Had the girls heard the door close? Would they realize that I'd been eavesdropping? What would they…?

With an act of will, I took a deep, calming breath. My nose still throbbed, and my face felt flushed, but I had to do *something*. After all, I didn't want to seem like I'd been eavesdropping (which is *exactly* what I'd been doing, of course).

After another deep breath, I swallowed hard and then opened the door.

When I stepped into view, the girls glanced at me. Christy held my eyes and smiled. Wren tried to look coquettish, but when she realized that I wasn't flustered, she gave up. Fortunately, she didn't realize that I was too *nervous* to be flustered. With each step, however, my pulse steadied and my composure slowly returned. When I reached the girls, I had my emotions mostly under control.

"You're still Mysterious," Wren said, as if she were trying to convince *herself* as much as me.

"And you're still Beautiful," I shot back.

Christy chuckled softly. Then she looked at me and smiled. After a moment, she hesitantly asked if I wanted to see her drawing.

I nodded.

She had drawn us from the shoulders up, and I could almost *feel* the emotions as I looked at the drawing. In it, Wren's eyes were averted, but she seemed to be looking at me on the sly. Then I looked at my face; Christy had perfectly captured my expression of anxiety and sullen frustration. But as I looked at my eyes, I realized that she had also captured a sense of resolve and self-confidence that I hadn't known was there.

"Do I really look like that?" I asked.

"Yes," she said softly. "I don't know what you were thinking, but you became… I don't know… defiant."

"About what?" Wren asked, her curiosity overwhelming her desire to remain aloof.

For a long moment, I simply stared at her, wondering how much to tell her about Professor Joska. Finally, I admitted to myself what I'd been thinking all along.

"I guess I decided that I'll be *damned* if I'm going to let anyone come between me and what I want to do with my life," I said with calm intensity.

✧ ✧ ✧

Later, Gina and I ate dinner together and then studied in the library until it closed. It was almost like we were in high school again, and we enjoyed ourselves (even though we both had our noses buried in our books).

She asked why Kendall didn't join us, and I made up an excuse. I didn't like lying to her, but she'd get upset if she knew the truth. Worse, I couldn't blame her.

When I got back to my room, I lay awake in bed, thinking about my three-way relationship. It used to be hard enough juggling two girlfriends. But lately, I seemed to be doing two *separate* juggling acts. I didn't like it, but I didn't know what to do about it either.

Finally, with a conscious effort, I put Kendall and Gina out of my mind. When I did, my thoughts turned to the Art History girls.

I liked Christy; she was easy to talk to. We had a lot in common, and she was friendly as well. She was pretty, but more importantly, she seemed pretty on the inside. (Gina's friend Regan was

attractive, but I still didn't like her.)

As I replayed the overheard conversation between Christy and Wren, I wondered who Simon was. I figured he was Christy's boyfriend, but Wren didn't like him. Curious.

Wren was still a bit of a mystery herself. She seemed to have a wild streak, much like Gina. I usually liked that sense of adventure, but I reminded myself that I didn't need *another* adventurous girl in my life (not as anything more than a friend, at least).

As I thought about Wren's body, however, I felt my dick swell. Even though I hadn't spent much time looking directly at her, I *did* have a good memory. So I closed my eyes and pictured her.

She was shorter than Gina, by about an inch. And like Gina, her breasts were full and round (although her nipples were light brown, compared to Gina's dark ones). Her stomach was soft and smooth, and she trimmed her pubic hair. Surprisingly, she had the remnants of a good tan (and no tan lines—*very* interesting). She didn't have any hard angles or well-defined muscles, but she certainly wasn't soft.

As I pictured Wren's body, I let out a soft chuckle. In a way, I owed a debt of gratitude to Professor Joska; if I hadn't been preoccupied, I would've had a tough time keeping my thoughts away from sex. The privacy of my dorm room, however, was a different matter altogether. (Billy's play was entering the final stage of preparation, and the crew was working all night for the next day's dress rehearsal.)

Since I had the room to myself, I threw back my sheet and skinned off my underwear. Then I pictured Wren in my mind. I imagined her on her knees before me, her mouth open as I stepped toward her. While I slowly stroked my erection, I imagined her gently kissing the tip.

Next, I pictured her on her back, her legs spread in invitation. In my imagination, her pussy was completely shaved, her lips plump and slick with arousal. I knelt between her thighs and ran my hands over her legs. Then I lifted them and kissed her painted toes. She moaned as I entered her, of course. She was tight, but not too tight; wet, but not too wet.

In the real world, I stroked my dick a little faster and imagined Wren on hands and knees in front of me, her round, firm ass in my hands. She moaned as I slammed into her, and I imagined her breasts swinging with each thrust.

Lost in my fantasy, I stroked myself, my left hand cupping my balls as my right blurred up and down. With my eyes still closed, I imagined Wren begging me to fuck her harder. I gripped her hips and slammed into her, her tight pussy clutching at me every time I pulled back.

A moment later, I felt my orgasm welling up. I imagined pulling my pussy-slick cock from within her and pumping it, aiming it at her ass. Then I pictured an arc of white come spurting over her back. Without opening my eyes, I frantically reached for my box of tissues.

Too late.

I felt the first surge of orgasmic bliss as my flailing left hand finally found the Kleenex. My muscles tensed up and I completely lost interest in anything other than my climax. Hot splatters of come landed on my chest and stomach. The next spurt followed the first, covering my abdomen with droplets of semen.

After several more gushes, my orgasm subsided and I sagged to the bed. My breathing was heavy and my mouth was dry, but a warm, wonderful feeling radiated from my groin. I'd have to clean myself up sooner or later, but at the moment, I didn't care.

✧ ✧ ✧

The next morning at breakfast, Kendall looked at me and I wondered if she could tell that I'd "cheated" on her. It wasn't cheating, of course, but jerking off while fantasizing about another girl wasn't something I did very often.

I thought about Susan sometimes, or Stacy, but Kendall knew about both of them. Other times, I thought about buxom Heather, or super-sexy Annika. I even thought about Leah or Erin every once in a while. But Kendall knew about all of them as well.

Kendall *didn't* know about Wren. And instead of thinking about something from my past, I was imagining something that hadn't happened (nor would it, if I had any sense). So while it wasn't cheating, strictly speaking, I still felt a little guilty about it. It's irrational, I know, but that's how I am sometimes.

"Is that all you're eating?" Kendall asked.

I almost sagged in relief at her question. I didn't really want to defend my choice of toast and an orange, but I also didn't want her looking across the table and asking, "So, do you really want to have sex with Wren instead of me?"

"Paul, you need to eat *something*," she said. "You work out all the time and you never eat. It's not healthy."

"I don't want to gain the 'Freshman Fifteen,'" I said as calmly as I could.

"You're going to *lose* fifteen pounds if you're not careful," she said.

"So? I need to lose a few pounds anyway."

"No, you don't," she insisted. "I love you just the way you are."

"Isn't that a song?" I asked, trying to change the subject.

"You know what I mean."

"Look, you're not my mother. And I'm not a kid. All right?" When she looked wounded, I apologized. "Listen," I said, calmer, "I just need to lose a couple of pounds. I'm not doing wrestling workouts anymore, and I gained too much weight over the summer. I just need to shed a little baby fat. That's all."

"I worry about you," she said.

"I know," I said, taking her hand.

"And I just want you to be happy."

I'd be happier if I weighed less, I thought. Fortunately, I had the good sense not to say that aloud.

"I'm sorry," Kendall said.

"It's okay. I'm sorry I snapped at you."

She smiled bleakly. "How was modeling yesterday?" she asked, changing the subject.

"It was good," I said. After a tentative pause, I decided to tell her about Wren. "You're not going to believe who the female model is, though."

"Um… what's her name? Christy?"

I shook my head.

With a frown, she gazed at the table, thinking hard. Then she looked up suddenly, her eyes wide.

"Yep," I said.

"The *other* Art History girl?!"

"Her name's Wren," I said.

"Like the bird?"

"Mmm hmm. She and Christy are roommates."

"Oh?" she asked, her expression curious (and a little teasing). "And how do you know *that?*"

"I talked to them after class," I said.

"You think they're cute," she accused.

I tried to hide my emotions, but Kendall was Kendall, and she saw the truth. I cringed, waiting for her to get upset.

To my surprise, she laughed.

I furrowed my brow in confusion.

"They *are* cute," she said. "I told you that the first time we saw them."

"I remember," I said, blushing as I recalled the pie conversation.

"So," she asked slyly, "what's Wren look like?"

"Why?" I asked, wary.

It was Kendall's turn to blush.

"Oh ho," I said. "*You* think she's cute too."

"Paul, not so loud," she chided urgently. Then she looked around to see if anyone had overheard.

"You *do*," I said. "You think she's cute."

"Can we talk about something else?"

"Sure," I said with a smug grin. "Like what? *Pie?*"

Kendall's eyes widened.

"I bet some pie would taste good right now."

"*Paul!*"

"Mmmmm," I continued. "I'd like to watch you eat some pie."

"What time's your football game tonight?" she asked.

"Nice, warm, *tasty* pie. While you eat some pie, I can fill *your* pie from behind. You like my pie filling, right?"

"Paul, *please*."

"Okay," I said at last.

"Goodness, is it hot in here?"

With that, we shared a grin at her tacit admission that she was attracted to Wren.

Then I remembered a fantasy of hers. She had mentioned it during our Truth or Dare game with Dennis and Elaine Raeford.

"You remember," she said, reading my expression.

I nodded.

Her fantasy was for the two of us to meet a woman, someone we didn't know, and seduce her. Kendall wanted to watch me have sex with the stranger, and then she wanted me to force *her* to have sex with the woman as well.

At the time, it was a fun fantasy to think about, but I couldn't imagine it actually *happening*. First, I had *no* idea how to go about picking up some random woman—who'd have to be interested in a ménage à trois, no less. Second, I didn't think Kendall was serious.

Many of her fantasies were just that, fantasies. For instance: she wanted to be tied up and

raped, but that was play-acting. I knew she didn't have any desire to be raped for real. (I suspected that whatever had happened with Big Mistake Guy was akin to rape, and I knew how she responded to any mention of him.)

Then I thought about how she had reacted when she first saw Christy and Wren.

"Are you really attracted to her?" I asked at last.

"Who? Wren? Or Christy?"

"Either," I said in sudden understanding. Then I read Kendall's expression. "*Both?!*"

After a moment's hesitation, she nodded. "But Wren especially."

"You think she could be the one that we… you know?"

"I don't know," she answered honestly. Then she glanced up, her eyes searching mine. Finally, she blushed and looked away. "It's fun to think about," she said softly.

"Yeah," I said. Then I reached out and took her hand.

It was shaking.

Gina and Susan were the only women she'd ever had sex with, so for her to think about having sex with another woman—for real—it must've been serious.

"I'm not … you know… one of *them* or anything," she whispered.

A lesbian, I mentally supplied. Then I nodded.

"I just think… you know."

Once again, I nodded.

"My fear of flying," she said, smiling thinly.

"I know."

"And… I want to make you happy."

"You do."

For a long moment, we were silent. I squeezed her hand and she smiled in reply. Then she looked up, her eyes full of love. After a moment, she blushed and looked down. She must've been thinking about Wren. I smiled to myself.

"So," she asked, "what time's your football game?"

With an understanding smile, I let her change the subject.

"Six o'clock," I said, "versus the Carrick First Floor team. Gina will be there. Maybe after the game we can do something together," I suggested. "Just the three of us."

"Okay," Kendall said quietly.

We finished breakfast in companionable silence and then I walked her to her Child Psychology class. After that, I headed over to the A&A building, where I could hang out for an hour before my Drawing class started.

Once there, I took out my sketchpad and began drawing arcades. With proper support on the ends, an arcade (a series of arches) is an inherently stable structure. The very weight of the building material keeps everything in place, and the lateral loads from the individual arches are spread to the next arch, and so on.

A circular building like the Colosseum was constructed almost entirely of arches, each one supporting the next. Like tiers in a wedding cake, the builders had added layers of arches. And unlike post-and-lintel—*trabeated*—construction, arches could support a stupendous amount of weight. It's a very elegant system, as the Romans discovered.

By the time nine o'clock rolled around, I had a page full of arches and vaults. But then I

realized that I was still drawing pretty pictures with no substance. So I spent most of Drawing class thinking about *how* arches and vaults fit into the overall design of a building. I know I probably should've been paying attention to Professor Ledbetter, but his lecture was on the importance of proper dimensioning (a fairly dry subject to begin with).

When the bell rang at the end of class, I closed my sketchpad.

"Would you stay a moment, Paul?" Professor Ledbetter asked.

I looked around to make sure he was talking to me. Unfortunately, he was.

"You know," he said after the other students had left, "this really *is* important stuff."

I looked at him as innocently as I could.

He didn't buy it.

"Um… sorry," I said at last.

"We really *can* see all that's going on from up here," he said in gentle reproach. Then he turned serious. "If you want to be an architect, this is part of it. It may be boring, but it's important. God is in the details, you know."

"Yes, sir," I said. "It won't happen again."

"Good," he said. "But that's not the reason I asked you to stay after."

"It's not?"

"No," he said with an embarrassed cough. "I was talking to Professor O'Riordan yesterday afternoon."

Professor O'Riordan? I wondered. *Who's he? I don't have anyone named O'Riordan.* "Who?" I finally asked.

"Professor O'Riordan," he repeated. "She said you're a model in her Life Drawing class."

"Oh, Siobhan!"

"Um… yes," he said. "She *is* a bit less formal." Then, "She told me about some of your drawings. Do you mind if I have a look?"

"O-okay," I said. Then I handed over my sketchpad.

He flipped through several pages of doodles: capitals and entablatures, Palladian windows, and a page of nothing but Art Deco ornaments and stylized machinery (I'd been in a weird mood that day). Finally, he turned to the illustration of the *Tempietto di San Pietro*.

"Ah, Bramante," he said softly. "This is such a beautiful little building." Then he turned through a few more doodle pages, nodding appreciatively. When he reached my sketch of the Temple of Athena Nike, he paused. "Another little building," he said with a smile. "Small, but grand in stature."

I nodded.

"Ah, now *this* is a truly magnificent building," he said, gazing at my drawing of the Paris Opera House. "It's beautiful." After a moment, he turned to the most recent page. Then he held it up. "Is this what you were so busy ignoring me for?"

I felt my face heat as I nodded.

He smiled to show me that he wasn't angry, and then he looked back at the page of arcades and vaults.

I shifted nervously.

"It's very good," he said. "But you should put this much energy into dimensioning and lettering." When I started to apologize, he forestalled me with a gesture. Then he looked at me

seriously. “Would you like some helpful advice?”

“I guess.”

“Artistically,” he said, flipping to the drawing of Bramante’s *Tempietto*, “these are very good. Exceptional, even. But they’re just that: artistic. It’s okay to be artistic,” he added. “A client’s first view of your overall design is often your watercolor rendering, and it *should* be artistically pleasing. But it shouldn’t look like a sketch.”

When he glanced at me to see if I understood, I furrowed my brow.

“Don’t be afraid to use a straightedge or a French curve,” he said. “You’ve got artistic talent, Paul, but you need to hone your skills. And the skills of an architect include precise, razor-sharp lines. These are good freehand drawings,” he said, holding up my sketchpad, “but they’re not architectural renderings.”

“I think I see what you mean,” I said at last.

“Good. Because I can train you to draw straight lines and smooth curves. I can teach you about lettering and even boring old dimensioning. But what I *can’t* teach is talent like this,” he said, brandishing my sketchpad again. “You either have it, or you don’t. It’s as simple as that. Professor O’Riordan thinks you ‘have it,’ and after seeing your drawings, I agree. But there’s a vast gulf between being artistic and being an architect. Do you understand?”

I nodded.

“Good. Now, as extra credit, to make up for ‘skipping’ today’s class, I want you to take an architectural element—*any* element you want, no matter how big or how small—and *render* it. I don’t want a sketch; I want something worthy of an architect. Use the techniques you’ve learned in class, and be precise,” he cautioned. “Remember, God is in the details.”

“Yes, sir,” I said. I certainly didn’t need the extra work, but it *would* be a challenge, which I’d enjoy.

“I know you’ve got midterms this week,” he said, “so I’ll give you the weekend to work on it. Have it on my desk by next Tuesday’s class.”

“Yes, sir.”

“And, Paul,” he said as I turned to go, “you really *do* need to pay attention in class. You might just learn a thing or two.”

Chagrined, I nodded.

With a smile, he shooed me out of the room.

✧ ✧ ✧

I got to Art History a little early, but I still sat in the back of the auditorium. The syllabus called for a review, since Thursday was our midterm exam. I wasn’t looking forward to it, but I *did* need to go over the material.

Christy and Wren showed up predictably late. They giggled when they saw me, and then practically tumbled into their seats. Professor Dubois began lecturing a moment later.

Instead of paying attention to the lecture, I thought about Wren. Because she and I had seen each other nude, things had changed between us. It might not seem like a big deal, but a lot of a person’s sense of security is tied up in her clothes. Without them, Wren had nothing left to hide.

Once I’d seen Wren without her clothes, my attitude changed. If I wanted to, I could imagine the curve of her breast, or the half-hidden shape of her sex. The thing I *couldn’t* simply call up in my memory was her personality.

Why did she flirt with me? Why was she friends with Christy? Why did she model?

Once I got past the "I wonder what her tits look like" stage, I wanted to learn about *her*. Consequently, I wasn't flustered when she turned and gave me a sultry look.

"Christy tells me you've got a girlfriend," she whispered, leaning close.

I nodded.

"Is she the pretty brunette we see you with in the morning?"

I nodded again.

"How serious are you?" she asked.

I turned and silently gazed into her hazel eyes.

"I mean, could I tempt you away?" she asked.

"Would you want me if you could?" I asked coolly.

"What do you mean?" she asked, taken aback.

"If I were the kind of guy who'd cheat on his girlfriend, would you *really* want me?"

"That's not what I asked," she said defensively.

"But it's what you meant."

"It is *not*."

"Suit yourself," I said.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means," I said, leaning close, my voice level, "that I'm not going to jump at the first beautiful body that comes along. You've seen my girlfriend; she's gorgeous, and I love her. So, no, you probably couldn't tempt me away. But if you'd like to stop this high school prick-tease shit and *talk* to me… well, *that's* tempting. I mean, you seem like an interesting person."

She sat back, stunned.

"Besides," I added, "it'd be nice to talk to someone from home."

"Home? What do you mean?"

"Christy told me you're from Dunwoody."

"So?"

"I'm from Sandy Springs," I said.

Her eyes widened.

"So we've got more in common than Art History and modeling," I said. Then, with a roguish grin, I leaned close to her again. "And by the way, you *are* beautiful." When she blinked incredulously, I continued. "But even though you're a knockout, you're still not going to tempt me away from my girlfriend with your body alone. You'd better use your mind too. Even then… I don't know," I finished with a theatrical shrug.

Flabbergasted, she sat back. Then she looked at me again, her eyes wide with disbelief. I don't think she'd ever been told no before.

"What's the matter, Wren?" Christy asked with a wry grin. "Tongue-tied?"

When Wren didn't answer, Christy and I shared a smile. Her blue eyes twinkled when I winked at her.

With that, I sat back and felt my lips quirk up in a smug grin.

Even though I was looking at Professor Dubois, I didn't hear a word she said. My heart was racing and I felt ten feet tall. Without a doubt, saying what I had was one of the *coolest* things I'd ever done.

✧ ✧ ✧

After the intramural football game—which we won—I joined Kendall on the sidelines. Then I motioned Gina over to us. The girls weren't exactly being friendly to each other, but they weren't scowling either. They had both taken a little persuading, but they agreed to try and fix things. (Additionally, I hadn't had sex with either of them in several days, so they were probably a little horny. I felt like a cad for manipulating them, but I wanted to hedge my bets.)

Trip knew that I was going somewhere with the girls, so he started organizing an impromptu after-game party. As planned, I begged off, telling the guys that I had to study. Trip neatly diverted their attention, which gave the girls and me a chance to slip away unnoticed.

I really *did* have to study, but I also wanted to spend some quality time with Kendall and Gina. *Together*. I didn't know how to fix things, but if we were together, that would be a good start.

"Do you mind if I use your shower?" I asked Kendall when we reached her apartment.

"Sure," she said. She looked like she wanted to join me, but she didn't ask.

Fifteen minutes later, I emerged from the bathroom, scrubbed, shaved, and refreshed. I paused for a moment and then followed the sound of Kendall and Gina's voices to Kendall's room.

"Hi," Gina said.

"Feeling better?" Kendall asked.

I nodded. They were sitting on Kendall's bed, and seemed to be getting along, which was good. I closed the door, shed my towel, and reached for my change of clothes.

"What do y'all wanna do?" Gina asked.

"Mostly, I just want to spend some time with you two," I said. "But I also need to study for my Design midterm."

"We can go to the library," Gina suggested.

"I guess," Kendall said.

"I've got a Chem. test on Friday and a Bio. test on Monday. So I've got lots of studying to do," Gina said. Then she turned to Kendall. "How about you?"

"I've got an O. Chem. exam on Friday," Kendall said.

"Organic Chemistry, right? What's that like?"

"It's horrid… and it stinks," Kendall said, wrinkling her nose. "I've smelled things coming out of the O. Chem. labs that I don't *ever* want to smell again."

"Is it hard?" Gina asked.

"It's a lot of rote memorization," Kendall answered with a shrug. "It's basically a pre-med 'weed out' course."

As Kendall and Gina started talking about their chemistry classes, I smiled to myself and slung my backpack over my shoulder. When the girls forgot to be annoyed with each other, they got along just fine. By the time we reached the library, they were making plans to quiz each other for their chemistry exams. I didn't know how long it would last, but I was happy with the return to the way things used to be. I smiled to myself and held the door for them as we entered the library.

The main floors of the building had several large areas devoted to tables and chairs, but many of the smaller sections were almost private. Kendall suggested a part of the library that saw little traffic: the philosophy reference section. It was tucked into a corner of the building, and had only

one table and four chairs.

When we got there, the study area was deserted. So we sat down, opened our books, and got to work. After two solid hours of studying, I leaned back and rubbed my eyes.

"Okay," I said. "If I go over these design paradigms *one* more time, I think I'm gonna go crazy."

"Be glad you're not memorizing the properties of alkali metals," Gina said.

"You think *that's* bad?" Kendall asked. "Wait till you get to stereochemistry and classification of isomers. *Yuck*."

I looked at my watch—it was after ten o'clock. The library closed in a couple of hours, but I was tired of studying. When I stood up to stretch, the girls decided that stretching wasn't such a bad idea, so they stood as well.

When Gina laced her fingers together and thrust her hands above her head, her shirt rode up, revealing her midriff.

"Cute," I said with a nod.

As she lowered her arms, she grinned at me. Then she grasped the hem of her shirt and flipped it up, flashing her bra-clad breasts.

"I dare you to take off your shirt," I said.

Since we were in an isolated part of the library, she grinned and pulled her shirt over her head.

Kendall looked around nervously, but she also looked a little excited.

"How 'bout the bra?" I asked.

Gina arched an eyebrow and then reached between her breasts to release the catch on her bra. It fell open and she shrugged it off.

"And the skirt?"

"Paul," Kendall cautioned.

"We'll hear if anyone's coming," I said, although I wasn't entirely sure that was true. It *was* a library, after all, with thick carpeting and lots of sound-absorbing books.

Gina bit her lower lip for a moment. Then, with a challenging look, she unzipped her skirt and let it fall to the floor.

"If we get caught, they'll kick us out of school," Kendall said.

That seemed to spur Gina on, and she hooked her thumbs in her panties before I could even ask. Instead of lowering them, however, she looked at me.

I lifted an eyebrow in question, but she simply cocked her head to the side, as if asking what I wanted her to do.

When I waggled my eyebrows at her, she smiled and lowered her panties.

"Next," I suggested to Kendall.

"Paul, I can't. What happens if someone sees us? They'll call the campus police."

Instead of replying, I gestured for Gina to come around the table. When she did, I pulled her close. Then I reached for Kendall and pulled her against me as well.

"I want to fuck you both," I said, my voice pitched low. "Right here, in the library."

Kendall squirmed anxiously, but Gina merely smiled in anticipation.

I kissed Gina quickly, feeling her pulse race.

She put her hand on my crotch and cupped the bulge of my erection.

When I broke the kiss with Gina, I turned to Kendall and kissed her as well.

As I did, Gina unzipped my pants and pulled out my erection. Then she sank to her knees in front of me.

I continued kissing Kendall as Gina began sucking me.

"At least sit down," Kendall said when we broke the kiss. She was flushed, and her breathing had quickened. "The table will hide what we're doing," she explained.

With a nod, I pulled my cock from Gina's hungry mouth. Then I hooked a chair with my foot and dragged it close. As soon as I sat down, Gina returned her lips to my manhood. Before Kendall sat, I stopped her.

"Take off your panties," I said.

She looked around nervously, but then reached under her skirt. After a moment of fumbling, she tugged her underwear down her long legs.

"And your shirt," I said.

She shook her head.

"Then take off your bra."

She looked at me pleadingly, but I reached under her skirt and "persuaded" her by stroking her damp pussy.

With her shirt still on, she unhooked her bra and drew one shoulder strap through her sleeve and down her arm. Then she repeated the maneuver with the other strap. Finally, she tugged the garment from beneath her shirt.

I chuckled silently; we were accumulating quite a collection of discarded clothing.

With an eager smile, I pulled a chair next to mine and nodded for Kendall to sit. Between my legs, Gina took my cock as deep as she could, clamping her lips around the middle of my shaft.

When Kendall leaned in to kiss me, I reached behind her. Then I lifted her skirt and cupped her bare ass.

"Put your hand on Gina's head," I said to Kendall when we broke the kiss. "Direct her while she sucks me."

After a moment's hesitation, she moved her hand to Gina's bobbing head.

"Do you remember when Gina taught you how to suck my cock?" I asked.

Kendall's face flushed as she nodded.

"You'd never done it before," I recalled quietly, "but you'd read about it." When she nodded, I kissed her again. "You scraped me a couple of times with your teeth, but Gina showed you what to do. Do you remember?"

"Yes," she breathed. Then she held me tight as I reached between her cheeks and started playing with her pussy.

"Gina wanted you and me to be happy together," I said. With all that was going on—and where!—I couldn't believe I was giving Kendall a lecture about how much Gina loved her. "She taught you how to make me happy," I continued. "Would she do that if she didn't love you?"

Kendall shook her head and then kissed me again. Her hand still rested atop Gina's head, and I indicated it with a glance when we broke the kiss.

"Push her down," I said. "Make her take me as deep as she can."

Gina heard me, so she plunged her head down and wrapped her lips around my shaft. Then she gently sucked, her cheeks caving in and caressing the sides of my cock.

"Oh, God," I groaned. "That's nice."

Gina moaned around my cock as she slowly pulled back, her lips dragging along my length.

"I wanna fuck her," I said to Kendall. "And while I do, I want her to lick your pussy."

Kendall started to protest, but my finger on her clit convinced her not to.

"Sit on the table and spread your legs," I told her. Then I looked down at Gina. "Stand up and turn around. Sit on my cock."

In a moment, we changed positions. I put my hands on Gina's hips as she reached between her legs to guide my shaft to her opening.

With a whimper, she lowered herself onto my hard-on. She was hot and wet, and I slid into her easily.

"Lift your skirt," I directed Kendall. "Show us your pussy."

She put one foot up on the table and I shoved a chair toward her so she'd have someplace to put her other foot. When she spread her legs, her pussy spread open, revealing her pink inner folds.

With my hands still on Gina's hips to steady her, the darker girl leaned forward and began sucking Kendall's clit. I lifted Gina's hips and then she started moving on her own, gently bouncing atop me, my cock impaling her each time she sat back.

"Lift your shirt," I said to Kendall. "Play with your nipples."

At that point, I was too far gone to worry about anyone discovering us. We were in a seldom-used part of the library, and we were trying to be quiet, but a librarian or another student could still happen upon us at any minute.

Instead of worrying, I concentrated on the feeling as Gina's pussy glided up and down my shaft.

For five or ten minutes, we moved together, soft moans and whimpers occasionally breaking the silence.

"Stand up," I said to Gina with a pat on her ass. "I want to fuck Kendall."

She moaned, but lifted herself off me.

"Suck her nipples while I fuck her," I said to Gina.

Then I eased into Kendall's tight pussy. Since Gina had been fingering her, it only took me two thrusts to completely bury my length inside her. She moaned softly when my hips ground against her pelvis. Then she moaned again as Gina latched onto one of her nipples.

For the next several minutes, I simply plowed into Kendall, her pussy gently contracting around me. With my free hand, I played with Gina's pussy from behind.

Finally, I pulled out of Kendall, my erection shiny with her juices.

Gina didn't need me to tell her to drop to her knees. She knew what I wanted as well as *I* did, and she was more than happy to comply. As she sucked me, I felt my orgasm welling up.

I pulled Kendall toward me and kissed her fiercely. At the same time, Gina went into overdrive, sucking my cock while she pumped her fist around the base, driving me toward release.

A moment later, I groaned into Kendall's mouth as I filled Gina's. Spurt after spurt gushed over her tongue, and she swallowed it greedily. When I finished coming, she sucked my still-hard cock, nursing it and savoring the taste.

When I looked down, she was playing with her pussy while she sucked me. Kendall was still hot and ready as well, but it would take me several minutes to recover. (I was hard enough for

Gina to enjoy sucking me, but I wasn't nearly hard enough to fuck either of them.)

"I want you two to sixty-nine," I said to Kendall.

"Here?!"

"Mmm hmm. I wanna watch you go down on her. I wanna watch you make each other come."

"Oh, God, *yes*," Gina panted.

I arched an eyebrow at Kendall.

She hesitated.

I reached between her legs and teased her clit.

"Please, Kendall," Gina begged. "You know you want to."

I kept playing with Kendall's pussy until she gave in.

"I just know we're gonna get caught," she said ruefully. "And then they're gonna kick us out of school." Then she gazed at me. "I can't *believe* I let you talk me into this."

In spite of her words, she stood and moved over Gina, who was already on her back. As Kendall knelt over the darker girl, I pulled a chair over. Then I sat down and stroked my semi-hard cock.

In a moment, the girls forgot I was there. For several long minutes, they tongued and sucked each other, whimpering softly.

Gina came first, crying out softly as she did. When her orgasm subsided, she paused for a moment, her breathing heavy. Then she opened her eyes and smiled up at me.

A moment later, she resumed sucking Kendall's clit. The taller girl groaned softly and hung her head. With Gina's skillful lips and tongue at work, Kendall didn't hold out long. When she climaxed, she shuddered and gripped Gina's hips to steady herself.

Still in their sixty-nine, both girls panted from the exertion.

When she recovered enough to move, Kendall threw her leg to the side and rolled upright. After she did, Gina sat up. Kendall's knees were red, from the carpeting, but she flashed me a sated smile.

Before I could tease her about her reluctance, we heard someone coming.

"Quick, hide under the table," I hissed to Gina, who was still nude.

As she did, I lunged across the table to retrieve her clothes and underwear. Kendall straightened her skirt and top as I snatched *her* underwear from the table as well. Frantically, I threw the bundle of clothes at Gina.

I could hear the person drawing closer, the jingle of keys heralding their arrival.

Kendall hastily sat down and tried to compose herself.

I reached for a chair and then pulled it to the table. I had *just* sat down when a librarian came around the corner.

"The library closes in fifteen minutes," she said.

I nodded.

As she turned to go, she stopped.

Had she heard us? Had she seen Gina? Could she tell that we'd been having sex?

My heart raced, and I frantically tried to come up with an explanation.

In growing panic, I watched the librarian's nostrils flare. She sniffed the air once, then twice. When she furrowed her brow, I almost leapt up to explain. Instead, I smiled as innocently as I could. She flashed me a look of reproach, but didn't say anything.

"Fifteen minutes," she stressed.

As she turned to leave, I sagged back in my chair and quietly let out my held breath.

When the librarian was out of earshot, I pushed my chair away from the table and motioned for Gina to come out from under it. With the bundle of clothes cradled to her chest, she crawled toward me. When she emerged, she sat back and shook her head in disbelief.

A moment later, I realized that my dick was still sticking through my fly.

It's a good thing I didn't jump up to explain the situation, I thought wryly.

Then I glanced at Kendall. Her hair was in disarray, and her braless nipples threatened to poke through her shirt. To make matters worse, her face and chest were flushed.

I could only imagine what *I* looked like.

The librarian must have known what we'd been up to, but without catching us in the act, she didn't have the nerve to say anything.

We looked at each other for a few moments in stunned silence.

Then Gina started giggling. A moment later, I laughed as well. Kendall tried to maintain her composure, but the absurdity of the situation finally got to her and she laughed right along with us.

If anyone had seen us at that point—three laughing, half-naked idiots—they would've thrown us *under* the loony bin.

✧ ✧ ✧

On Wednesday, Christy, Wren, and I walked back to the dorms together after Siobhan's class. Christy shared her bag of carrot and celery sticks with us, and we talked about life in general. (I also learned their last names: Christy Carmichael and Wren Hilliard.)

Wren still didn't quite know what to make of me, and I was having fun keeping her off balance. I obviously didn't lose my cool when we modeled together, and even though I had finally taken a good look at her body—including arching an eyebrow when she "accidentally" flashed me a shot of her pussy—I didn't react predictably.

In reality, I'd spent most of the class thinking about my Faulkner paper. My eyes were open, but if I actually thought about *Wren*, I knew I'd get a hard-on. So I mentally wrote the closing paragraphs of my paper. Wren didn't know that, of course, so my lack of reaction to her body drove her to distraction.

To my surprise, Christy seemed to be enjoying Wren's confusion as well. The girls were obviously good friends, but I think Christy liked seeing Wren get a little payback.

When we reached Morrill, Wren turned toward me.

"Okay," she finally asked in exasperation, "*what* is up with you?"

"What d'you mean?" I replied (as innocently as I could, of course).

"You know."

"No, I don't," I said.

"Why did you walk back here with us?"

"It seemed like the polite thing to do," I said.

She threw her hands in the air.

Christy merely grinned.

"And I like talking to you," I added.

"But…," Wren stammered.

"But I don't react the way other guys do?" I prompted.

"*Exactly!*"

"I'm not *like* other guys," I said evenly.

"So… what? Are you gay or something?"

To her surprise, I actually laughed.

She looked at me skeptically.

"I like girls," I assured her, still chuckling. "Trust me, I like 'em a lot."

Christy covered her mouth to keep from laughing at her friend's expression.

"But I'm not going to turn into an idiot every time I see a good-looking girl," I continued.

"But you *used* to," Wren half-whined.

"*That* was before I got to know you," I said. I tried to hide another grin, but I just couldn't.

With her hand still covering her mouth, Christy's eyes grinned right along with me.

Wren simply huffed. Then she looked at Christy and flashed an accusing look.

Christy tried to compose herself, unsuccessfully.

"*You* are impossible," Wren said to me. Then she whirled around. "And you're just as bad," she said to Christy. "I'm going upstairs."

"Bye," Christy said to me, her eyes twinkling with mirth.

I think she was enjoying herself as much as I was. I don't know what had come over me, but when I'd gotten over my initial awkwardness with Wren, I'd done it with a *vengeance*.

Things are finally back to normal with Kendall and Gina, I thought. *More or less.*

Maybe *that* was my source of newfound coolness. I didn't want to over-think things and ruin it, though.

As Wren disappeared into the dorm, Christy looked back and waved.

With a smile, I waved in reply.

She was chuckling as the door closed behind her.

✧ ✧ ✧

After dinner, Trip and I got together to study. Luke and Tara were in his room, and Billy was at the theater (the next night was their play's opening night), so we had my room to ourselves.

About eight o'clock, the phone rang.

"Hello?" I answered.

"Hi," Gina said.

"Hi yourself."

"What's going on?"

"Trip and I are studying," I said. "I'm gonna ace that Design exam if it's the last thing I do."

She chuckled. "That Joska guy's really gotten under your skin," she said. "Just like that wrestler in high school. What was his name?"

"Pete Yeager?"

"No, the one you didn't like. Um… Emmett something… Emmett… Carstairs," she said at last.

The arrogant prick, I thought.

"That guy's the reason you started taking wrestling so seriously," she added.

"Well, I *did* like wrestling itself, but you may be right."

"I'm right," she said with certainty. Then she chuckled good-naturedly. "I know you, and I

know how you *hate* losing."

"No kidding," I said.

"Anyway, that's not why I called," she said.

"Oh? What's up?"

"Regan's birthday is Monday, but on Saturday, her boyfriend's having a surprise party for her at his house. It's gonna be a birthday party, but he'll also have the football game on TV. So, do you wanna go?"

"Yeah. It sounds like fun," I said.

"It's gonna be *so* cool. Anyway, I asked if I could bring someone else too."

"Oh?"

"I thought it'd be kinda nice if you, me, and Kendall could go together. I mean, except for the other night in the library—which was *really* cool, by the way—we hardly get to do anything with each other. And since things are starting to get back to normal, I thought…"

"Yeah," I said. "That sounds cool. Do you want me to call Kendall?"

"No, I'll do it."

"Okay."

"Anyway, I'm sorry I can't talk longer, but I've gotta go. Regan and I have to meet our big sisters at Panhellenic."

"No problem," I said.

"Remember, though, it's a *surprise* party, so don't tell Regan."

"I'll be sure to keep my mouth shut the next time I see her," I said facetiously.

"You know what I mean, silly," Gina said, a smile in her voice.

"Yeah."

"Oh, rats, I'm running late. I've gotta go," she said. "I love you."

"I love you too."

When I returned to my room, Trip looked up.

"Kendall?" he asked. "Or Gina?"

"Gina," I said.

"How're things going with the three of you?"

"Pretty good," I said. "I mean, things seem to be getting back to normal."

"I still can't believe you've got *two* girlfriends," he said. "Most guys'd be lucky to have *one*."

"Well, two girlfriends pose their own set of… oh, let's call them 'challenges.'"

He grinned.

"Anyway, Gina's best friend's boyfriend is throwing a party this weekend, and Gina invited me and Kendall."

"Sounds like fun," he said.

"It should be," I said. "On that note," I added, changing the subject, "what's up with you and Abby? I think she likes you."

"Yeah," he said flatly. "Kendall's really playing matchmaker, isn't she?"

"Sorry about that."

"I like Abby," he said with a shrug, "but that's just it… I *like* her. You know?"

I nodded.

"I don't want to hurt her feelings, but I don't wanna date anyone right now. It's not her, it's

me," he said. For a moment, he sat in pensive silence. Then, "I guess I'll have to talk to her sooner or later."

"Do you want me to ask Kendall to back off a little bit?"

"If you don't mind," he said. "I mean, I can let Abby down easy. We've got a lot in common, and I *do* like her, but just as a friend."

"I'll say something to Kendall," I said.

"Thanks," he said. Then he lifted his textbook. "But if I don't learn this human sciences stuff," he said, "it's not gonna matter. Joska will kill me with a kinetic energy strike from lunar orbit. Or worse."

I chuckled.

"I'm serious. Help me out with this stuff," he said.

"What're you hung up on?"

"I understand the natural light part, but this texture thing has me completely back-asswards."

"Okay," I said, "here's how it works: texture breaks up the light and reflects it differently, which means that when people perceive it…"

✧ ✧ ✧

We were still studying at midnight, when Billy came home. He looked dead tired. Trip glanced at his watch and then started gathering his books.

"Thanks for letting me use your desk," he said to Billy.

"No problem," Billy said. "You're welcome anytime."

"Breakfast tomorrow with you and Kendall?" Trip asked me.

"I'll be ready at six forty-five," I said.

With a nod, he headed back to his own room.

Without saying a word, Billy got undressed, collapsed into bed, and turned out his light. I turned out the overhead light, but left my desk lamp on. Then I stripped down to my shorts. I needed to get some sleep, but I decided to do a couple of sets of curls before turning in.

In the weeks since I'd started working out again, I'd managed to get my bench press back up to a respectable three hundred pounds. Luke and Jeff no longer worked out with us, but Trip was a dedicated partner. He couldn't lift as much as I could—not even close—but that didn't stop him from offering good-natured taunts to encourage me.

After my curls, I stood in front of the mirror and simply looked at myself. Then I struck a couple of bodybuilder poses, flexing my shoulders and chest. At a noise, I turned, but Billy looked like he was asleep.

With my side to the mirror, I studied my stomach. I needed to lose a few pounds, which would eliminate the thin layer of fat on my midsection. Since I wanted a bodybuilder's washboard abs, I decided to do several sets of sit-ups and crunches.

Finally, I decided to take a quick shower and then try to go to sleep. Without thinking, I shucked off my shorts and kicked them into the corner. I glanced at Billy, but he looked sound asleep, so I grabbed my towel and padded into the foyer.

After my shower, I didn't worry about wrapping my towel around my waist. Billy was asleep, and even if he weren't, I didn't think he'd have a problem with me being nude for the few minutes it would take to brush my teeth and get ready for bed.

It was after two when I finally turned out my light. I was asleep within minutes.

✧ ✧ ✧

The Art History exam was a breeze. Christy, Wren, and I talked about it as we walked back to the dorms. We all thought we'd done well.

When I got to Kendall's apartment, we both had work to do. She had to finish her Child Psychology paper and I had to type the final draft of my American Literature paper (I *still* hadn't figured out how to use my computer's word processing program, Jeff's offer for help notwithstanding).

Kendall and I spent the afternoon proofreading each other's papers. When I went to work out with Trip, it was a welcome relief from Kendall's "Cognitive and Logical Development Stages" and my own "William Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County."

Trip and I did a light workout, because we had an early-evening football game versus the SAE team. The intramurals were open to all on-campus organizations, but this was our first game against a fraternity team.

Unfortunately, the SAE guys were a lot better than we were, and they beat us 21–7. We were lucky to get the one touchdown, which came on a screen pass from Trip to T.J. I took out the nearest tackler and then T.J. yelled at me to block for him. Without thinking, I started sprinting toward the end zone. T.J. was right behind me, easily matching my pace.

With me running interference, we weren't the *fastest* pair on the field, but I easily knocked aside the two SAE defenders who tried to intercept us. After I cleared the way, T.J. whooped and then sprinted around me, intent on the end zone. When he scored, he spiked the ball and then pointed at me.

"Kick *ass*, Loverboy!" he shouted exuberantly. "That was fuckin' *awesome!*"

Unfortunately, the SAE defenders shut us down after that. We got the ball three more times, but didn't make a single first down, and they ran out the clock before we could make anything happen.

When the game ended, I said goodbye to Kendall and Gina and then headed back to the dorm for *more* studying. On the way up the hill, Trip and I commiserated about the game. It had been a tough loss, but I tried to put it behind me. I still had lots of studying to do, and thinking about a lost football game wouldn't help me pass my exams.

✧ ✧ ✧

On Friday, my Calculus exam wasn't exactly easy, but I was pretty sure I did well. In my Intro to Architecture class, Professor Spielman gave us a pop quiz, which I aced. Finally, I turned in the Faulkner paper in my American Literature class. Given Professor Feller's grading habits, I was positive that I'd get an A. Fortunately, I thought I deserved it.

I spent the rest of the morning in one of the student design labs in the A&A building. I sat at a drawing board in the corner and pored over my Design textbook. I even skipped lunch, determined to cram everything I could into my brain.

Finally, it was time for class. I gathered up my things and then headed toward Joska's classroom.

"Are you ready?" Trip asked as he slid into his seat a moment after I did.

"As ready as I'll ever be."

"I don't think I slept a wink last night," Samantha said as she joined us.

"Time to apply at McDonald's, y'all," Antonio said from beside her.

"How long did you all study?" Samantha asked.

"Paul and I were up till midnight," Trip replied.

"I got my beauty sleep," Antonio said.

We looked at him in disbelief.

"The textbook fell off my shelf and knocked me plumb unconscious," he said with a grin. Then, "Naw, I know this stuff. It ain't nothin' but couple of big words and a few fancy pictures."

Trip and I grinned at each other.

Samantha looked nervous, but she smiled at Antonio's lighthearted attitude.

When Professor Joska entered the classroom, we reflexively grew quiet.

"Today, we see who has a future as an architect, and who doesn't," he said. Then he held up two sheaves of paper. "These," he said, shaking one set, "are your exams. And *these* are job applications for McDonald's."

"See?" Antonio whispered.

Trip and I looked at each other in shock.

"One of my buddies told me," Antonio quietly explained.

"You can have one or the other," Joska continued, drawing my attention back to the front of the class. "So," he asked, "which will it be… Miss Fisher?"

"The exam, sir," she said.

"Mr. Whitman?"

"The exam."

Joska's merciless eyes settle upon me.

I clenched my jaw.

"Mr. Hughes?" he asked.

I took a deep breath. *No matter how hard he tries to beat me down,* I reminded myself, *I'll keep standing up.* I wanted to wipe the smug expression off his face—with my fist—but I took another deep breath instead.

"Well," he prompted. "Which will it be? The fast food industry always needs more college dropouts."

"I'll take the job application," I said impudently. "*And* the exam," I added a half-second later.

That got his attention.

"I can use the back of the application to write my graduation speech," I said evenly.

I think the rest of the class didn't know whether to snicker or to dive for cover.

Joska gazed at me calmly. When the class grew ominously quiet, he nodded—once. It was curt and ambiguous, but I knew I'd just gained a measure of respect in his eyes.

And I'll keep coming back for more, I silently vowed.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

On Saturday morning, I slept in and skipped breakfast. A little after ten o'clock, I finally woke up. But then I decided to simply lie in bed. I was so comfortable that I didn't even feel like jerking off. *That's* relaxed.

About an hour later, Gina called.

"What're you up to?" she asked.

"Nothing," I answered blissfully.

"Yesterday was Leah's birthday," she said. "When I talked to her, she asked about you. I told her you had exams all day, but that you wanted me to tell her 'Happy Birthday.' I hope that's okay."

"Yeah, thanks." I'd been so caught up in my own life—not to mention studying for midterms—that I'd completely forgotten about Leah's birthday. It was her Sweet Sixteen, and I was glad that Gina had covered for me.

"Anyway," she continued, "I also told her we'd try to call today. Erin and your parents will be over at our house for a barbeque later today; they're having a party for Leah and a bunch of her friends from school."

I vaguely recalled Erin mentioning something like that the last time I talked to her.

"Miss Goody-two-shoes went home for the weekend," Gina said. "So do you wanna come over and hang out?"

"That'd be cool," I said. "Lemme get cleaned up and I'll call you when I head out."

"Okay."

After I showered and shaved, I got dressed and headed downstairs. Gina met me in the South Carrick lobby and then we headed up to her room. Inside, I pulled up short, in surprise.

"Whoa, that's new," I said.

Faith had hung a new poster over her bed. It depicted Jesus looking heavenward and praying. It was a *large* poster.

"She wanted to hang it on the door," Gina said sourly. "I told her that if she did, it'd be gone before she could turn around."

I blinked at her venomous tone.

"I hate her," Gina said simply. "And she's starting to figure that out. So we basically don't talk to each other anymore. She still prays for me, though," she said, her tone heavy with irony. "Only now, she says things like 'I pray that some girls at UT will stop acting like harlots' and 'Jesus, save certain people from the ways of Jezebel'—whoever *Jezebel* was. I wanted to scratch her eyes out when she called me a harlot, though. Can you believe that?"

"Holy shit," I said quietly.

"No, holy *bull*shit," Gina said. Then she grinned at her own joke. "Anyway, forget about her. I try to… every day."

"When did you want to call Leah?" I asked, changing the subject.

"The party starts at two, so everyone should be at our house by now."

With that, she walked into the foyer and picked up the phone.

"I'd like to make a collect call," she said to the operator, "to area code 404…"

As she made the call, I thought about Faith. Then I shook my head in disbelief at her behavior.

She *was* judgmental, but she'd always been nice to me.

Then I thought about my own roommate. I guess I was lucky to live with Billy. Even though we didn't see each other much, he seemed like a regular guy. And after my first two roommates, I was happy to have *anybody* who didn't suddenly disappear.

A moment later, Gina returned to the room, interrupting my contemplation. She moved the phone out of the way, stood on tiptoe to kiss me, and then returned the receiver to her ear.

"Uh-huh," she said. "No, they weren't all that hard. I've got another one on Monday, but that's the last of them. I think I did well," she said. Then she grinned at me. "Hold on a second, Mom. Paul's here. He wants to say hi."

Before I could do more than blink, Gina thrust the phone at me.

I talked to Elizabeth for at least five minutes: about school, classes, professors, midterms, and more. Then Leah started pestering her. Elizabeth said goodbye and passed the phone to her youngest daughter.

"Hi," Leah chirped.

"Hi yourself," I said. Then I wished her a happy birthday.

While she chattered on for several minutes, I tried not to grin. She talked about friends, clothes, music, and more. Sixteen didn't seem that young, but to my eighteen-year-old ears, Leah sounded like a kid.

"God, Paul," she said at last, "I wish you and Gina could be here."

"Well," I said, "we'll be home for Thanksgiving."

"But that's a month away. More!"

"I know," I said, chuckling.

"I was thinking…," she said, her voice suggestive. "Maybe Gina will let you—"

"Hold on a second," I interrupted, "Gina's trying to get my attention." I was pretty sure Leah wanted to talk about sex. And while I didn't object to the idea of having sex with her, I didn't want to make a promise that would cause me problems later.

At my desperate look, Gina smiled and took the phone.

"Hey, Leah," she said. "It's me… No, I didn't want you to talk his ear off. I mean, he's *my* boyfriend," she said. Then she laughed. "Maybe if you're good… maybe… *Leah!* Maybe, okay? We'll see," she said, with finality. Then, "Hey, lemme talk to Mom… okay… happy birthday again… bye."

Gina talked to her mother for a minute and then asked to speak to my mom. After a few pleasantries, she handed the phone to me. I talked to Mom for a few minutes, filling her in on everything that had happened since our last phone call.

I talked to my dad for a few minutes as well, and I even managed not to blush when he told me how proud he was. Then I talked to Erin. She seemed more grown-up than Leah, but she still talked about teenage-girl things.

Finally, Gina talked to her parents for a few more minutes and then we hung up.

"God," she said, when she returned from the foyer, "I thought we'd never get off the phone."

"Was Leah asking about what I think she was?" I asked.

With a mischievous twinkle in her eye, Gina nodded.

"Uh-oh."

"You made a good impression," she teased. "I still think she likes girls more than guys, but

she seems to like *some* guys more than others."

I rolled my eyes.

"After all," Gina said, "I think she's predisposed to like certain parts of a guy. She can't help it," she added whimsically. "It's in her genes."

"Oh really?"

"Mmm hmm. And it's time for me to reacquaint myself with a certain part of you," she said softly. Then she tilted her head back for a kiss.

When our lips met, I pulled her against me.

"God, you make me so hot," she said when we finally broke the kiss. "Even if that *does* make me a harlot. Now c'mon," she said, reaching for my belt. "You know what I want… you know what I *need*."

With a knowing smile, I nodded. Coincidentally, it was exactly what *I* needed as well. As my dick stiffened, Gina sank to her knees. A moment later, she fished out my hard-on and wrapped her lips around the glans.

Sorry, Leah, I thought, *Gina got here first… and she's oh so good.*

As Gina started sucking in earnest, I closed my eyes and stopped thinking, period.

✧ ✧ ✧

Later that afternoon, Trip and I did a quick workout and then I returned to my room to shower and get ready for Regan and Rod's party. It started at seven, but Gina wanted to get there by five, to help with the preparations.

The weather had turned cool, so I picked out a pair of khakis and a long-sleeved Polo button-down. Then I called Kendall.

"Hey," I said, when she answered. "We need to leave in about twenty minutes. Are you ready to go?"

Silence.

"Hello?"

"I'm here," she said without inflection.

"Well? Are you ready to go?"

"I'm not going," she said.

"But you said…"

"I know what I said. But I changed my mind."

For the next few minutes, we went back and forth. I told her that the party was important to Gina, but that didn't seem to matter.

The guests would be mostly Greeks, she said, and she flat-out refused to go.

I was sympathetic, but my sympathy only went so far. I tried to explain that Greeks were people just like us, and that she'd have fun once she got there, but she wouldn't listen.

According to her, fraternity guys were all assholes (she actually used the word "assholes"), and sorority girls were all shallow bitches (she didn't say "bitches," but her meaning was clear).

"Fine," I said at last, giving up in disgust. "Don't go."

"Do you want to come down here?"

"What for?" I asked incredulously.

"I thought…"

"You thought I wouldn't go? Just because *you're* not going?"

"But… you're not like them."

"I'm a lot more like them than you want to admit," I said.

"No, you're *not*," she said. "You're *nothing* like them."

"Yes, I am," I said. "And I'm going. This is important to Gina, which means it's important to *me*. And Gina thought it'd be nice for the three of us to do something together, but I guess that doesn't mean anything to you. If you don't want to go, I can't force you. But I'm not gonna live my life based on your petty prejudices. Now, I gotta go."

Without saying goodbye, I slammed the phone into the cradle.

"What's all the shoutin' about, Loverboy?" T.J. asked.

I hadn't even heard his door open. Normally, T.J. and I ignored each other. Except for a couple of times on the football field, we didn't get along. So we'd come to an unspoken agreement: I didn't bother him and he didn't bother me.

"Trouble in paradise?" he asked.

"Shut the fuck up, T.J., before I—"

"Before you *what?!*" he sneered, suddenly in my face.

A moment later, Glen appeared in the doorway.

T.J. looked back at him. "What?" he demanded. "*He* started it," he added, pointing to me.

"One day, you're gonna shoot your mouth off, T.J.," I said, "and Glen's not gonna be around to keep you out of trouble."

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah," I said. "And I'm gonna enjoy beating the crap outta you."

"You think you're so tough, *pretty boy?*" he asked, in my face again. "Bring it on. I ain't afraid of you. I'll kick your ass."

"Cool it, T.J.," Glen rumbled. Then he looked at me. "You too."

"You know, Glen," I said, "I don't know what you see in this runt."

Glen's eyes hardened.

A half-second later, T.J. shoved me.

Before I could lunge at him, Glen jerked him back and stepped between us. Even though I'd seen the big man on the football field, I was still shocked by how quickly he moved.

"We don't want no trouble," he said.

I didn't think I could make it through him to get to T.J.

"God dammit, Glen," T.J. blustered, "He started it."

"I don't care," Glen said to his roommate. Then he looked at me again. "Seriously, we don't want no trouble."

When I looked into Glen's eyes, they were resolute. They were also apologetic. He knew as well as I did that T.J. had started things.

"Y'all go on to your party and have a good time," Glen said to me.

I stared at him for a moment longer, my blood hot with anger.

He nodded; he knew I was going to back down (no matter how much it galled me to do it).

"Next time, I'll kick your ass," T.J. taunted.

"*Cool it*," Glen said to him.

Then, without waiting for me to retreat, Glen grabbed T.J. and forcefully propelled him into their room. When he shut the door, he locked it as well.

Through the closed door, I heard Glen's voice.

"Why d'you gotta give him shit all the time?" he asked.

"'Cause he's a stuck-up *ass*hole," T.J. half-shouted.

As I turned toward my room, T.J. was still going, but Glen hadn't said another word. One day, I vowed, I was going to give T.J. what he deserved. And he *wasn't* going to enjoy the experience.

Back in my room, I shook my head to clear it and then gathered my things. Gina had said that Rod's parents had a pool, so I needed to bring a swimsuit. I threw some trunks, a towel, and a change of clothes into a duffel bag and then headed downstairs.

Even though T.J. had distracted me from my fight with Kendall, I was *not* in a good mood when I called Gina from the South Carrick lobby.

She heard the tension in my voice. "What's the matter?" she asked.

"Kendall's not going tonight," I said flatly.

"Is she okay?" Gina asked in concern.

"She's fine, she's just not going."

"This is about *me*, isn't it?"

"No," I half-lied. "It's about Greeks."

"*I'm* a Greek, Paul." Then, "I can't *believe* how prejudiced she is. She doesn't even *know* these people! I mean, I can understand if someone doesn't like me because I'm not white. I don't like it, but I've gotten used to it. But God! To not like me because of who my friends are?!"

I started to answer, but she cut me off.

"That's the *last* time I try to do something nice for her," she seethed. "I know who my *real* friends are. God, she drives me crazy. Oh, forget her. I'll be right down."

With a click, the line went dead.

Well, I thought darkly, *at least Gina and I are in the same mood. That's worth something, right?*

✧ ✧ ✧

On the drive to Rod's house, Gina and I were silent.

Rod's parents lived in the same neighborhood as Bridget's family, but Rod's house was even bigger. It was directly on the river, and Gina told me to drive around back, since the party was at the boathouse. (In reality, their "boathouse" was larger than my family's house in Atlanta.)

"What do Rod's parents do?" I asked.

"His grandfather started some oil and gas company, and his dad runs it. They've got lots of old money. I mean, Regan told me that Rod's trust fund is worth four million dollars."

"*Four million dollars?!*"

"That's what *I* said," Gina agreed. "Regan's got a trust fund from her grandfather, but it's only a million dollars."

"*Only*," I said sarcastically.

"No kidding. I'd like to have those kinds of problems." As we pulled up to the boathouse, her brow wrinkled in confusion. "What's *she* doing here?"

"Who?" I asked.

"Regan," she said, pointing at a red convertible. "That's her car."

"Whose car is the black Porsche?"

"That's Rod's," she said absently. "We're early, but…"

"Do we need to come back later?"

She shook her head. "Regan sometimes leaves her car here. I'm sure that's what happened. Jess and Hayley are supposed to keep her occupied till it's time for her to be here."

I nodded and then parked the Jeep next to the little red Alfa Romeo.

When we knocked on the boathouse door, no one answered. After knocking again, we waited a few minutes. Finally, Gina tried the door—it was unlocked. As soon as we stepped inside, Gina called out.

No one answered.

We walked toward the back of the house and heard loud music. Then we followed the strains of David Bowie until we got to one of the bedrooms. The door was ajar, but as Gina reached to push it open, she suddenly stopped. Then she gasped and covered her mouth.

When I looked into the room, my eyes flew wide.

Regan and a guy I could only presume was Rod were on the bed. They were both nude, but that wasn't the shocking part. With her strap-on firmly in place, Regan was on her knees behind Rod.

She was fucking him in the ass.

Too stunned to move, I watched as the Nordic blonde pumped into him. With each thrust, he grimaced in pleasure.

A moment later, Gina turned, her hand still covering her mouth. She urgently gestured back the way we'd come.

"Oh, my God!" she blurted when we reached the safety of the driveway. "We've got to get out of here."

With that, we jumped into the Jeep and sped away. Then we turned into a little park about a mile from Rod's house.

"Oh… my… God," Gina said again. "Did you see that?"

I nodded numbly.

"Paul, you've got to promise me—you can't say a word about that… to *anyone*. Not even Kendall."

Once again, I nodded, my thoughts still chaotic.

We sat in shocked silence for several minutes, each of us staring at nothing. Then, completely out of the blue, Gina started giggling. A moment later, I began laughing as well.

"Oh, my God," I said at last.

"That has got to be one of the funniest, kinkiest things I've *ever* seen," Gina said. "And we've seen some pretty kinky stuff," she added.

"No kidding."

"I had no idea…"

"It's not exactly something you talk about," I said. "I mean, you'll probably never hear a guy say, 'Hi, I'm Rod. I let my girlfriend fuck me in the ass with a strap-on.'"

That started us giggling again.

"Jeez," I said, once we calmed down.

"And did you see the size of his dick?" Gina asked.

"I wasn't exactly looking at his *dick*," I said. I'm sure she figured out that I'd been looking at

Regan's breasts instead.

"Regan said he was big, but… wow. He must be nine or ten inches," she mused. Then she suddenly looked at me. "I like yours better, though."

"I'm glad," I said glibly.

"But God, he's even bigger than your dad. Well, longer at least…"

When she trailed off, we sat in silence for a few moments.

"Paul?" she asked hesitantly.

"Yeah?"

"Have you ever thought about… you know… with a guy?"

"*What?!*"

"Have you ever thought about doing it… with a guy?"

"Are you kidding?" I asked.

"Not by yourself, silly," she said. "You know, like two guys and a girl, everybody doing everybody else, and—"

I immediately shook my head.

"I'm not talking about doing it back there," she said. "But maybe just a blowjob."

"No," I said adamantly. Then, to my utter disbelief, my dick began to stiffen. I shifted in my seat and tried to hide it. *What am I thinking?!* I wondered frantically. Perversely, Gina seemed to sense my nascent arousal.

"You've never thought about getting a blowjob from a guy?" she asked, her eyes smoldering.

"Absolutely *not*."

"I think that'd be cool… to watch a guy give you head."

"Gina?! What do you think I am?" I asked, my voice almost strangled.

"I think you're a guy who likes to have his dick sucked," she said simply. "I mean, what's the difference between a girl's mouth and a guy's?"

"A lot!"

"Like what? What if you had your eyes closed? Could you still tell if a guy was sucking you?"

"Gina, jeez. Can we change the subject?" I asked plaintively. To make matters worse, I was acutely aware of my burgeoning erection. I'd never, *ever* thought about having sex with a guy, but when Gina talked about it, her excitement was contagious. Maybe it was simply a titillating fantasy. Maybe it was the thrill of something taboo. Maybe it was because I was a complete horn-dog, and didn't care *who* sucked me off.

"Why?" she asked, jerking me out of my confused introspection. "Why is it okay for *me* to go down on another girl," she asked, "but when I want to talk about a guy going down on you, you suddenly want to talk about something else?"

"It's not that, it's…"

"It's what?" she pressed.

"I'm *not* gay," I said.

"I didn't say you were. And getting a blowjob from a guy isn't going to *make* you gay."

"Um, *yeah*. That's what gay guys *do*."

"Um, *no*," she said, mocking me. "I mean, *I'm* bisexual. Why can't a guy be bisexual?"

"You either suck dick, or you do *not* suck dick," I said.

"Then I guess you're lucky I suck dick," she shot back.

"That's not what I meant and you know it."

"Then what *did* you mean? Are only *girls* supposed to put your dick in their mouth? It's not okay for a *guy* to do it?"

"No!"

"That's a pretty big double standard," she said.

"Why?" I asked in exasperation. "Do you *want* some guy to suck my dick? Is that it?"

"No, not if you don't want to," she said, much to my relief. "But don't you think it's kinda sexy to think about it?"

"No."

"Not at all?"

I shook my head.

"You don't think about two lips wrapped around your dick, slowly sucking you off…?"

"As long as it's a girl," I said.

"What if you can't see who it is?"

"I'd know," I said. "Trust me. I could tell."

"And you know this because of your years of experience getting head from girls *and* guys, right?"

"You know what I mean," I said. "I'd just be able to tell, that's all."

She looked at me speculatively for a moment.

What was she thinking? Why was she looking at me like that? Did she think I was gay? Did she want to watch some other guy suck my dick? Is *that* what this was really about?

"Paul?"

"Yeah?" I answered, trying to make sense of my chaotic thoughts.

"What if I wanted you and some other guy to screw me?"

"And…?" I prompted, waiting for the *real* question.

"Well, what if… after you two screwed me silly… what if we wanted to daisy chain?"

I clenched my jaw.

"What if you go down on me, I go down on the guy, and he goes down on you? Remember," she stressed, "you'd be licking me, so you couldn't see that it wasn't a girl giving you head."

"I'd *know*," I said.

"Would you *really?*"

"Yes!"

"But don't you think it'd be sexy?" she asked.

"No!"

In spite of my denials, I *did* think it was sexy, if only a little. Worse, my hard-on gave me away.

Without a word, Gina shifted in her seat and leaned against me. Then she put her hand on the lump in my pants.

"What're you doing?" I asked, in growing panic.

"If you don't think it's sexy," she practically cooed, "then why're you hard?"

"I *don't* think it's sexy," I insisted.

Gina didn't need Kendall's insight; she could feel the lie in my pants. With a skeptical grin, she deftly unzipped my fly.

"Gina, don't…"

"I want to," she purred. "All this talk of blowjobs has gotten me pretty worked up."

"Gina… no."

"Well," she said, lowering her head to my lap, "we've got to hide out here until Regan leaves Rod's." Then she wrapped her lips around my glans. After sucking me for a moment, she came up for air. "Keep an eye out for Regan's car. Until then," she said, a mischievous grin in her voice, "you can pretend I'm a guy while I suck you off. You'd like that, wouldn't you?" She didn't wait for me to answer before plunging her lips over my erection.

"Treacherous organ," I muttered.

"Mmm hmm," she agreed, her lips around my cock. "Vewy tweachewous. An' vewy hawd."

"God," I breathed. "Just shut up and suck me."

Her lips tightened in a smile. "Yes, siwr," she mumbled. Then she took me too deep to talk at all.

She was in the mood to suck me slowly, and I was more than happy to oblige her. Fifteen minutes into the blowjob, however, a red blur caught my eye. I glanced up to see Regan's sports car fly past the entrance to the little park.

"Regan just drove by," I half-grunted.

Gina let my dick slip from her lips. "Did she see us?" she asked.

"I don't think so."

"Okay. Are you ready to come?"

"I've been ready for five minutes," I said.

With a happy sigh, she tried to swallow me whole. Her soft, supple lips worked their magic, and in less than a minute, I was on the verge of exploding. I held her head in place as I rocked my hips, forcing my cock in and out of her lips.

With a grunt, I stiffened and flooded her mouth with hot, white semen. She moaned in surprise at the force of my ejaculation. After two spurts, she swallowed. The next two spurts weren't as strong, but she swallowed again. As my orgasm subsided, she gently sucked me, taking care to avoid the sensitive glans.

When she finally released my softening dick, she smacked her lips happily.

"God, I love the taste of your come," she said softly.

I merely breathed hard in reply.

A moment later, I tucked my dick back into my pants while Gina opened her purse and pulled out a hairbrush. When she turned the rearview mirror to examine herself, she chuckled.

"What?" I asked.

"This is gonna sound crazy, but…"

"What?"

"I love the way I look after I suck you off. I dunno," she said with a shrug. "I kind of glow. And I always have this silly, semi-vacant look in my eyes. I just think it's funny," she said, shrugging again.

"I probably look the same," I said.

"Not really. You look like the cat that ate the canary."

I chuckled. That's exactly what I said to myself sometimes.

With a self-satisfied grin, I watched as Gina fixed her makeup and hair. Once we were

presentable, I started the Jeep and pulled out of the park.

With a deliberate effort, I banished all thoughts of guys giving blowjobs. I was still disturbed by Gina's baiting questions—not to mention my own reaction—but I didn't want to think about it too much. (I might not like the conclusions.)

Back at Rod's boathouse, his Porsche was the only car there.

"Remember," Gina said, "you can't say *anything* about earlier. Not even a hint. If they find out that we saw, I don't know what they'll do. I mean, I don't wanna be kicked out of Chi O for something as stupid as a little buggery," she said. Then, to my surprise, she laughed.

"What?"

"That's a word my mom uses… 'buggery.'"

"Well, it fits," I said.

"I'm sure Rod says the same thing about Regan's strap-on," she joked.

I felt my face heating, which made her giggle.

"C'mon, pitter-pat man," she said fondly. Then she put her hand on mine and smiled. "Who needs Kendall?"

Without waiting for a reply, Gina hopped out of the Jeep.

Rod answered the door the third time we knocked (we didn't *dare* enter the house on our own—not again). He had a towel wrapped around his waist, and he'd obviously just finished a shower.

Well, I'd probably want to take a shower too, especially after getting fucked in the ass, I mused. Then I tried to hide my shiver of distaste.

"Hey, Gina," Rod said. Then, "You're early."

"Sorry, I thought you knew… Anyway," Gina said. Then she gestured to me. "Rod, this is my boyfriend, Paul. Paul, this is Rod Fortner."

"Paul Hughes," I said, holding out my hand.

"Yeah, whatever," he said. "C'mon in. You can hang out while I get dressed. Neil and Margot should be here in a little while."

With that, he turned and headed toward the back of the house.

I'd known Rod less than a minute, and I didn't like him already.

✧ ✧ ✧

Neil and Margot showed up about thirty minutes later.

I'd already met Margot Seaford—she was the blonde who'd been with Gina and Regan when they stopped by the Payton's RV. Her boyfriend, Neil Lowry, was a carbon copy of Rod. He greeted me indifferently and then promptly ignored me.

While the guys tapped the kegs (which had been delivered earlier), the girls started hanging streamers and decorating.

"What can I help with?" I asked Rod.

"I dunno," he said. "Why don't you go help the girls or something."

Translation: go away, you're bothering us.

Silent reply: fine, fuck you very much.

I helped the girls hang a big Happy Birthday banner and then the three of us started opening bags of chips and pretzels.

While we did, Gina and Margot talked about who was coming to the party. It sounded like an

exclusively Pike and Chi O affair. From my experience during Rush Week, I didn't think I'd like many of the Pikes.

Maybe Kendall was right after all, I thought. Then I pasted on a smile. *Making Gina happy is a good reason to be here,* I told myself firmly.

People started arriving a little after seven. Gina introduced me to the Chi O girls and some of their boyfriends (the ones she knew, at least).

When it became clear that my father wasn't in the same tax bracket as theirs, however, most of the Pike guys dismissed me as so much dross. They weren't overtly rude about it, but I could tell.

It's going to be a long *night,* I silently predicted.

✧ ✧ ✧

When Regan arrived at eight o'clock, two girls led her into the house in a blindfold. She knew something was up, but she still acted shocked when we all shouted "Surprise!"

Regan professed ignorance about the party, but I was pretty sure she'd known about it. After all, she was at the boathouse earlier in the day, so she must've known something was up.

She thanked the two girls who'd brought her. Then she came over to us and hugged Gina. A moment later, Rod possessively put his arm around Regan and led her off to talk to someone else. Gina used the opportunity to introduce the girls who'd kept Regan away from the party until the appointed time.

"Paul," Gina said, "I'd like you to meet my big sister, Jessica Roedeffer. Jess, this is Paul."

We shook hands and exchanged pleasantries.

"And this is Regan's big sister," Gina said, "Hayley Devlin."

Hayley's name sounded familiar, but I couldn't place it.

She didn't seem to notice my hesitation, though, and we shook hands in greeting.

As we made small talk, I took a moment to study the two girls.

Jessica was slender and attractive, with flaxen hair and blue eyes. Although she was about Gina's height, she had slimmer hips and smaller breasts.

Unlike Jessica, Hayley was tall, with light brown hair and blue eyes. She had a lithe, attractive figure, and she carried herself like a model. At first, I couldn't decide why I didn't like her. Then I realized what it was: she *knew* she was pretty, and she acted like I should be thankful simply for being in her presence. Unfortunately for her, I knew a lot of pretty girls, and most of them weren't conceited about it.

Strike one for Hayley.

A few moments later, a guy came up behind her and wrapped his arms around her. When she turned and saw who it was, she hugged him in return. As they headed toward the kegs, Jessica got my attention.

"So," she said, "Gina tells me you're an architecture major."

I nodded.

"How do you like it?"

"It's a lot of work," I said. "But it's worth it."

"I dated an architecture major when I was a freshman," she said. "He was a junior, and he was really cool, but I never saw him. He was always working on a project or something."

"Well, right now, I don't have too many projects," I said. "But next year, I'll have lots to do,

and even more after that. It only gets harder from here on out," I said.

Gina smiled proudly.

"So, what's your major?" I asked Jessica.

"Hotel and Restaurant Management."

"You can get a *degree* in that?" I blurted. *Note to self: Put brain into gear* before *engaging mouth.* Fortunately, Jessica didn't take offense.

"Oh, yes," she said. "It's a serious major."

"Jess's father is a big manager for Hilton Hotels," Gina said. "He's here to manage the new Hilton, for the World's Fair next year."

"Oh, now that's cool," I said.

Gina, Jessica, and I made small talk for a few minutes, until Regan ran up and grabbed Gina.

"C'mon," Regan said. "Rod just gave me one of my presents. It's you-know-what. So let's go freshen our makeup." Then she looked at Jessica. "Do you wanna come too?"

"No, thanks," Jessica said. "I'm fine. You go on."

"Are you sure?"

Jessica nodded. "I'll keep Paul company until Gina gets back."

With that, Gina and Regan headed toward the back of the house. On the way, they collected Margot and Hayley. I chuckled at the group powder break that girls always seemed to organize. Hayley even seemed to be…

Suddenly, I remembered.

"What?" Jessica asked when I snapped my fingers..

"I just remembered something," I said, playing it off. "It's nothing."

But it *wasn't* nothing. I knew where I'd heard Hayley's name before: Kendall.

Hayley and another Chi O girl had been involved in Kendall's Big Mistake Guy incident. Hayley wasn't a common name, but I decided to ask anyway. Jessica confirmed my suspicions—Hayley was the only girl with that name in Chi Omega.

Strike two for Hayley.

A moment later, I neatly deflected Jessica's question regarding my curiosity—I made up a quick, vague story about a friend of a friend. She took my fib at face value.

When Gina returned, she had a wild gleam in her eye.

"Let's go get something to drink," she said.

With a knowing grin, Jessica waved us off when I asked if she wanted anything.

On the way to the kegs, Gina pulled me into a bedroom. The party wasn't in full swing yet, so the room was still empty. As soon as she shut the door, she practically threw herself into my arms. After kissing me for several seconds, she pulled back.

"What was that for?" I asked, surprised.

"Because you're the best boyfriend in the world."

I arched my eyebrows.

"And you make me *so* hot," she added. "I'm sure you'll have to screw me senseless before the night's out," she said.

"*Here?*"

"*Some*where," she said. "I'm sure we can slip away for a few minutes."

"You're not satisfied from earlier?"

"Earlier was just a warm-up," she said, her voice sultry.

Then she tilted her head back and drew me down for another kiss. After a minute or two of lip lock, we returned to the party.

In party overdrive, Gina dragged me toward the beer. The football game was on the TV in the den, but I barely caught a glimpse before Gina introduced me to another pledge.

The next couple of hours were a blur of new people, conversation, beer, and football. Unfortunately, UT lost to Alabama, 38–19. Everyone's spirits fell at that, but most people were too drunk to stay dejected for long. When Rod turned up the stereo, the party quickly picked up.

Gina had disappeared with Regan a few times, but for the most part, she stuck by my side. She was in a crazy mood, though. The beer didn't seem to affect her, and she drank almost as much as I did. I probably had only four or five beers, though, since I didn't want to make a fool of myself (like some of the Pikes seemed more than willing to do).

In addition to being in party overdrive, Gina seemed to be in sexual overdrive as well. Every time we had a moment to ourselves, she made a suggestive comment. A couple of times, she fondled me when no one was looking. Once, she even managed to get her hand into my pants and stroke me to hardness.

After the football game ended, she dragged me away from the party. We couldn't find anyplace without a crowd, so we simply locked ourselves in a bathroom. After kissing for a minute or two, Gina skinned off her jeans and bent over the sink.

I slid into her from behind and started thrusting. Our sex was hard and frenzied. She got off quickly, her pussy clutching me as she climaxed. I thought it would take me a while to come, but I reached the point of no return soon after Gina did. When she felt me tense up, she whirled around and dropped to her knees. A moment later, I filled her mouth with semen.

Shortly after we emerged from the bathroom, a bunch of people headed up to the main house to go swimming. I thought it would be a little chilly, but someone told us that the pool was heated. So we headed *back* into the bathroom to change into our swimsuits. Afterward, we tossed my duffel bag in the room with everyone else's clothes and headed up to the main house.

When we reached the pool, Regan pulled Gina away. They had to go freshen their makeup, Regan said. Jessica went along as well. A moment later, Margot and Hayley joined them, and the five of them slipped into the main house to use the bathroom (the beer had been flowing freely, and I couldn't blame them).

When they came out, Hayley immediately pulled off her bikini top. A bunch of the guys started chanting "Hayley Devil" (her nickname—it was a play on her last name). Gina took a moment to spot me, but when she did, she had That Look in her eye.

Again?! I thought.

"God, you make me so hot," she said, rubbing her bikini-clad body against me. Then, "Do you want me to take off my top too?"

Even though several of the other girls had taken their tops off—or had them pulled off by drunken Pikes—I didn't really want Gina joining them. When I shook my head, she pouted for a moment, but then smiled seductively.

"You want to keep me to yourself?" she asked.

It was as good an answer as any other, so I nodded.

When we waded into the pool, Gina stood in front of me. I guess I shouldn't have been

surprised when she reached back and started kneading my cock. I quickly got hard, but I knew I wouldn't be in danger of coming any time soon.

One of the Pikes suggested chicken fights, and everyone drunkenly agreed. (It seemed like a flimsy excuse for the guys to watch as the girls pulled each other's tops off). By unspoken agreement, Gina and I swam toward the deep end of the pool.

Once there, I leaned back against the coping and supported myself with my arms. As Gina floated between my legs, she put one hand behind her and snaked it up the leg of my swimsuit.

As we watched, a half-dozen guys knelt in the shallow end of the pool, the water up to their necks. One by one, a girl climbed onto each guy's shoulders and he stood up. When all the couples were ready, they surged together in a welter of churned water. The object of the game was for the girls to shove each other from the guys' shoulders.

Predictably, the girls who still wore their bikini tops promptly lost them. I think Gina was enjoying the view as much as I was. The girls' breasts ranged from petite to pendulous, but they *all* looked good.

When I glanced at a lounge chair near the side of the pool, Regan and Rod certainly seemed to be having a good time. Thankfully, Rod had loosened up as the night wore on (and as he drank more). He still didn't seem like someone I'd ever hang out with, but at least he was friendly.

Back in the shallow end, Neil and Margot joined the scrum with the other chicken fighters. When Margot's top came off, I took a moment to simply admire her water-slick breasts. Most of the girls had tan lines, but Margot, Hayley, and two others didn't.

Somehow, Hayley lost her bikini *bottoms* as well, but she didn't seem to mind. Neither did the guy who picked her up and put her on his shoulders. (I couldn't figure out whether she had one boyfriend or *several*, since she flirted with any guy within range.)

Twenty minutes later, the chicken fights were still going strong. Several couples had joined in, and a few had left the game. Gina pulled her hand from my trunks and spun in place. As she gently kneaded the lump in my shorts, she suggested that we head down to the boathouse. Since the guys had brought the kegs up, the party had effectively moved to the pool. (I had no idea where Rod's parents were, or if they even cared that a scene from *Animal House* was unfolding in their expansive backyard. Fortunately, that was Rod's problem, not mine.)

Gina gave my hard-on a squeeze and then swam toward the pool's ladder. We climbed out and found our towels. When Regan saw us, she motioned to Gina, and the two of them headed into the house.

Rod looked at me and then flashed a lecherous grin. For a moment, I panicked. Was he looking at me in that *special* way? When he flicked his eyes at the departing girls' asses, I breathed a sigh of relief. Then I returned his smile and walked over to him (my hard-on had softened to the point where it wasn't obvious).

"You havin' fun?" he asked.

I nodded. "Thanks for inviting us."

He smiled magnanimously.

I still didn't like something about him, but being polite wouldn't kill me. My smile hardened, however, as he began making comments about the half-naked girls in and around the pool. *She's got nice tits; the blonde's a total slut; that girl fucks like a nympho; the girl with the big tits doesn't suck dick;* and the like.

I got the impression that he'd had sex with many of them—which was probably the case. What galled me, however, was the way he talked about each of them as though they were simply a piece of meat, no more than a notch on his bedpost.

He and Regan deserve each other, I thought acidly.

A moment later, Gina and the blonde emerged from the main house. Both of them looked wired. Considering that it was after one in the morning, I was surprised. I was starting to feel the effects of all the beer, and even though I'd slept late that morning, it had still been a long day.

When the girls joined us, Rod pulled Regan into his lap and whispered something in her ear. She nodded and then wiggled her ass against his crotch. Gina glanced up at me, her eyes smoldering. Then she grabbed my hand and practically yanked me off my feet as she started toward the boathouse.

Except for a few couples making out, in various stages of undress, the place was empty. Gina led us toward a back bedroom. The room itself was unoccupied, but Gina immediately headed for the private deck. The night had turned chilly, but she didn't seem to care.

I pulled a lounge chair away from the French doors and then spread my towel on it. When I sat down, Gina immediately straddled my hips. As we started kissing, she pulled off her wet top and tossed it aside. In the cool October air, her nipples immediately hardened into puckered brown nubs.

I didn't know why she was so horny, but I wasn't about to complain.

After kissing for a few minutes, she stood up and shucked her bikini bottoms. With a grin, I untied my trunks and she helped me take them off. Then she tossed them on top of her discarded bikini.

She held my eyes as she straddled my hips again. Then she reached for my erection and held it in place while she slowly lowered herself onto it. Her pussy was molten, and I grew dizzy at the sensation. When she started rocking her hips, I lost all track of time.

I think she rode me for twenty minutes. She got off three or four times, crying out with each release. I wasn't in danger of coming any time soon, so I merely ran my hands over her body, cupping her breasts and teasing her nipples.

When her orgasm subsided, she reached down and pulled me toward her. I sat up and she shifted her legs so she could wrap them around me. Then I held her body against mine as I stood up. It was a little awkward, but I got us turned around. When I did, I lowered her to the spot I'd just vacated.

With her legs over my shoulders, I fucked her hard for several minutes. I still wasn't ready to come, but I *was* getting tired. Gina, on the other hand, was as hot, wet, and ready as she'd ever been. She urged me to fuck her harder, so I closed my eyes and summoned the stamina to keep going.

I slammed into her upturned hips for what seemed like an eternity. Finally, blissfully, I felt my orgasm welling up. Gina sensed my need and begged me not to come, but I was too far gone to stop. Besides, I was ready to collapse. With one final grunt, I buried myself inside her and let loose.

For a moment, she looked disappointed, but she quickly hid it. Then, to my surprise, she started playing with her clit. With my semi-hard dick still inside her, she worked herself toward another orgasm. When it hit, she arched her back and moaned.

Afterward, we held each other and kissed, but we soon got chilly. So we searched the dark deck until we found our equally dark bathing suits. They were still sopping wet, and frigid to boot.

"Do you want to go get in the pool to warm up?" Gina asked, her teeth beginning to chatter.

"Actually," I said, looking at my watch, "I'm ready to go home. It's a quarter till three."

Gina nodded and we wrapped our towels around ourselves (neither of us wanted to put on our frozen bathing suits). When I opened the door into the house, I pulled up short; the room was occupied.

"What the fuck?" the guy growled when he saw us in the doorway. "Get the fuck outta here."

"Sorry, dude," I said, "but we gotta go through here to get back into the house."

"Well, hurry the fuck up. Can't you see we're busy?"

"Don't worry about them," the girl said. "Just keep going, Tommy."

I recognized her voice—it was Hayley.

Without saying anything, I quickly ushered Gina through the room and into the hallway. As I shut the door behind us, Hayley was already moaning.

"Hayley's such a slut," Gina whispered as we entered the bedroom with the clothing. Then she closed and locked the door. "Regan told me that she's done it with most of the Pikes. I don't think a guy can even *become* a Pike unless he has sex with Hayley."

"Holy shit," I said.

"No kidding. I like sex and all, but I don't *ever* wanna get like that. You know?"

I nodded. Then I located our duffel bag.

"And she's a real bitch to the other girls. She's nice to Margot and me, 'cause we're friends with Regan, but I'm just waiting for her to do something *really* nasty. She's completely two-faced. And she's really hard on the other pledges. She makes 'em do stuff that's just mean. I don't think many of the other sisters really like her, but it'd cause problems if they tried to kick her out."

Strike three *for Hayley,* I thought. *And… she's… out!* "Sorority politics?" I asked out loud.

"You don't know the *half* of it," Gina said seriously. "I mean, why do you think I get so upset when Kendall won't talk to me? She's the only female friend I've got who's not Greek. Sometimes, it seems like she's the only friend I've got who's *normal*. Except you, of course."

"What do you mean?" I asked

"Well, Regan's a trust fund baby. I mean, she wants to be a doctor and all, but I think that's just because her father wants her to. And Margot's father is super-rich too. Her family owns a bunch of shopping centers. The other pledges' families aren't as rich as them, but they're still pretty wealthy."

"Well, our families aren't exactly hurting," I said.

"Yeah, but we're not rich like most of the other girls. I mean, Jessica's about the only other normal girl in the sorority. Her dad's got a good job, but I think he makes about as much as my dad."

"That's still a lot."

"I know. But compared to the other girls' fathers…"

I nodded in understanding.

"Why do you think Jess is my big sister?" Gina asked. "I mean, we're basically the sorority's

charity cases. They put the poor girls together."

"Gina, you're *not* poor. Trust me."

"I know. But that doesn't mean the other girls don't *treat* us like we are."

I shook my head sadly.

"Yeah," she said, "that's how I feel sometimes."

By then, Gina and I were both dressed. She wrapped the wet swimsuits in our towels and then rolled them up.

Up at the pool, things had settled down. Many of the people had gone home (unbeknownst to Gina and me, since we'd been busy on the boathouse deck). A devoted cadre of partiers was still working on the keg and lounging around the pool, though.

A moment later, we spotted Regan and Rod. Regan looked wide awake and freshly fucked. Rod held a cup of beer and idly fondled her semi-bare breast (she hadn't taken off her bikini, but the top was untied, giving Rod easy access).

They stood when we approached, and Regan casually retied her bikini. Rod was a little unsteady on his feet, but otherwise, he didn't seem very drunk at all.

"C'mon, Gina," Regan said. "Let's go freshen our makeup." When Gina hesitated for a moment, Regan gave her an insistent look.

"Okay," Gina said at last.

"Fuckin' righteous party," Rod said as the girls disappeared into the main house.

"Yeah. We had fun. But I think we're ready to head out."

"You goin' home?"

I nodded.

"Gonna get you some dark meat, huh?" he slurred. He was a lot drunker than I'd previously thought.

I gave him a hard look.

"Hey, man, I'd do her in a heartbeat. Regan says she's got a hot little half-shaved pussy," he added. Then, "No offense."

"None taken," I grated.

"Oh, yeah," he said, glancing back at the house, "a little blow and they'll go all night."

Did he know what Gina and I had been up to on the boathouse deck?

"I bet Gina's a fuckin' great lay," he continued. "But hey, who'm I to tell *you* that?"

I didn't trust myself not to say something I'd regret, so I kept my mouth shut. After all, I was pretty sure that if I decked Regan's boyfriend, it'd cause all sorts of problems for Gina.

"I hear she's a total come slut," he continued. "I bet you like that."

And you like getting fucked in the ass, you rich prick, I thought venomously. I flashed him a tight smile, but inside, I couldn't wait for Gina to return so we could *leave*.

Finally, I got my wish. Unfortunately, the girls looked more awake than ever. I shook my head in disbelief—I was ready to fall asleep standing up, but Gina looked bright-eyed and ready to keep partying.

A minute later, after Gina and I said our goodbyes, we turned to go.

"C'mon, baby," Rod said to Regan, behind us. "Are you bumped up? It's time to introduce the Ram Rod to your hot pussy again."

Regan's reply was too faint to hear, but judging by Rod's drunken whoop, she had agreed.

"I can't wait till we get back to the dorm," Gina said. "I want you to screw me silly."

"*Again?!*"

"God, yes. I'm so horny, I think I might explode."

Instead of replying, I simply shook my head in wonder.

When we got to the Jeep, I threw our stuff in the back seat and then wearily climbed behind the wheel. I had to do a little jockeying to get by two cars parked behind me—another Porsche and a Mercedes convertible (*Jeez!*)—but I eventually reached the main driveway.

As we turned onto the road out of the subdivision, Gina started fondling my crotch.

"Gina, I'm dead tired," I said.

"But I'm horny."

"Haven't you had enough? We were going at it for more than an hour on the deck."

"I want more," she said. Then, "God, you make me *so* hot."

Against my quiet protests, she unzipped my fly and withdrew my flaccid member. I tried to stop her when she lowered her head to my lap, but I didn't want to crash the Jeep. When she started sucking me, I redoubled my efforts to focus on the road. I was tired enough as it was, and I didn't need any *more* distractions.

Unfortunately, my dick had a mind of its own. By the time I pulled into the non-commuter parking garage, I had an erection.

"I wanna do it here," Gina said.

I shook my head.

"C'mon, Paul, please," she begged.

"What's gotten into you?" I asked.

"*You*, I hope," she said.

We went back and forth for a minute or two. She wanted me to fuck her, and I simply wanted to head back to the dorm and go to bed. Finally, she dropped her jeans and bent over the car next to the Jeep.

"Gina, c'mon," I said wearily.

"Please, Paul, just for a few minutes. I promise, you can pull out when I come. I *need* it," she said. Then she began playing with her pussy.

With a frustrated sigh, I realized that she probably wasn't going to move until I fucked her. So I dropped our stuff and moved behind her.

She moaned in anticipation when she heard me unzip my khakis. Unfortunately, my erection had disappeared. I stroked myself for a moment or two, until I was hard. Her pussy was so hot and wet that I slid into her without effort. Even though I was ready to pass out, I summoned the energy to begin thrusting.

As I halfheartedly pumped into her, she continued playing with her pussy. After only a minute or two, I felt her internal muscles begin to flutter.

Thank God, I thought.

Unfortunately, she didn't come. She got close several times, but she never quite reached the point of release. After at least ten minutes, I stopped thrusting. Gina moaned when I pulled out of her, but she didn't say anything. She pulled up her jeans as I tucked my softening dick back into my pants. Then I picked up our stuff and we headed toward the dorm. On the way, I looked at my watch: it was 4:07AM.

When we reached South Carrick, Gina went in through the lobby and then met me at the fire exit. The climb to the sixth floor seemed to take forever. I could've sworn that some vindictive god added ten more flights of stairs while I wasn't looking.

As soon as we reached her room, I started taking off my clothes, intent on the bed. To my consternation, Gina had other ideas; she wanted to play with my dick.

Too tired to hide my irritation, I snapped at her to quit.

When we climbed into bed, I thought Gina understood that I just wanted to go to sleep. Unfortunately, *she* was still wide awake. And horny, of course.

She finally talked me into letting her suck me while she played with herself. When I agreed, she crawled between my legs and wrapped her lips around my limp dick. Even though I got hard, I knew there was *no* way I was going to come again. I was too tired, I'd had too much to drink, and my dick was a little sore from all the sucking and fucking.

Undaunted, Gina kept sucking me. Then she tried to get me to fuck her. With barely concealed pique, I told her that I was *beyond* exhausted. Finally, she crawled from between my legs and petulantly settled next to me.

I tried to get comfortable, but the bed started quivering as she played with her pussy. I was annoyed, but when I closed my eyes…

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Sometime later, I woke up.

Gina and I usually slept well when we were together—even in the twin-size dorm beds. So I was surprised when she rolled over and jostled me. My eyes fluttered open and I looked around blearily.

Early morning light filtered through the blinds, but I couldn't tell what time it was. My eyelids were still heavy, so I let them droop shut. A moment later, Gina restlessly rolled over again.

"Wassa matter?" I mumbled.

"Did I wake you?" she asked.

I nodded.

"Oh, Paul, I'm so sorry."

"What's the matter?" I repeated, my eyes still closed.

"I can't sleep," she said. "And my nose is stuffed up, which is probably obvious." As if to prove her point, she tried snuffling, but it didn't work.

"You probably caught a cold last night," I said.

After a moment's hesitation, she agreed.

Strangely, I felt fine, and I'd been right there with her on the chilly deck. I was tired, of course, but otherwise, I didn't have any complaints.

"Go back to sleep," she said. "I'll go sleep on Miss Goody-two-shoes' bed."

I shook my head and kept her from getting up.

"I don't wanna keep you awake," she said. Then she rolled toward me and caressed my face, as if to soothe me back to sleep.

"I'm awake now," I said with a shrug. "What time is it?"

"Almost seven thirty."

As we lay silently, she traced her finger over my chest. It was gentle and rhythmic, and very relaxing. She was trying to get me to go back to sleep. After a minute or two, I moved her hand

down to my nascent morning erection.

"I'm sorry about last night," she said.

"About what?"

"About being so horny. I know you were tired…"

"I still *am*," I said with a yawn. "But that doesn't mean I'm not horny."

"I'm kinda sore from last night," she said. "I guess I wore myself out."

I chuckled.

"I just got so worked up," she said. "You make me so hot."

"You make me pretty hot too," I said. For emphasis, I clenched my buttocks and made my erection swell. "But if your nose is stuffed up, and you're too sore…"

"My hands aren't sore," she said softly.

"Are you sure?"

"If I can't take care of my boyfriend," she said, "then I could hardly call myself your girlfriend. Hold on."

With that, she got up. When she returned, she knelt between my legs and spread creamy lotion over my erection.

When I mustered the energy to open my eyes and look at her, I got a surprise; she looked like hell. Her eyes were red-rimmed from lack of sleep, she slouched tiredly, and she couldn't breathe through her nose. But she smiled when she noticed me looking at her. Then she began stroking me slowly, her face a mask of devotion.

She hadn't given many handjobs over the years—preferring to suck me instead—but she *had* spent a lot of time with my dick, and she knew what she was doing. With gentle pressure, she slowly worked me up. My cock was still a little sore from the night before, but her fingers felt good. Besides, my balls were ready for their usual morning release.

Gina gradually increased her pace until I was ready to pop.

"That's it," she said softly. "Almost there…"

I closed my eyes and simply concentrated on the pleasure radiating from my dick. As Gina stroked me, she used her other hand to gently massage my balls.

The pressure built and built until finally, with a low grunt, I erupted. While I'd been lost in pre-orgasmic bliss, Gina had wrapped her lips around my glans. As I spurted into her mouth, she kept stroking me. From countless blowjobs, she knew just how fast to pump and when to squeeze. After several long, ecstatic moments, I sagged to the bed, completely spent.

When Gina swallowed the last of my semen, she sat up and took a deep breath.

"Sorry," she said, "I couldn't breathe." Then, with a blissful smile, she savored the taste of my come. "The lotion tastes kinda funny," she commented, "but the taste of you *more* than makes up for it."

"You've got that silly, half-dazed look in your eye again," I teased.

"Can you blame me?"

With a smile, I shook my head. Then I gestured her toward me.

"I think I'm ready to go to sleep," she said, her eyelids drooping. "*Finally*."

I rolled to the side to give her room. When she settled next to me, I wrapped her in my arms. My slowly shrinking cock nestled against her ass as I held her close.

"I love you," she said softly.

"I love you too."

"Good," she added playfully. "Now let me go to sleep."

I didn't think I'd be able to go back to sleep, but as I spooned against Gina's warm, soft body, I felt my eyes grow heavy. I decided to close them for just a minute, but…

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When I woke up again, it was after noon. Gina was sleeping like the dead, but I had to go to the bathroom.

After I returned, I stretched, working the kinks out of my sleep-knotted muscles. I was ravenously hungry, but I didn't want to leave. If I did go downstairs to get something to eat, I'd need an escort to return, and I didn't want to simply abandon Gina. So I decided to pass the time with sit-ups, push-ups, and crunches.

Unfortunately, that made my empty stomach feel even worse. I hadn't drunk enough to be hung over, so I wondered if something else was the cause. I hoped I wasn't coming down with the same thing Gina had.

To stave off hunger pangs, I decided to take a shower. Fortunately, Gina's suitemates weren't around, so I didn't have to worry about startling them.

By two o'clock, Gina was still sound asleep. I didn't want to wake her, but I had to get *something* to eat, or I was going to gnaw off my own leg. So I wrote her a note and set it by her alarm clock. Then I got dressed, gathered my things, and slipped out.

After a quick meal, I returned to my own room and called Kendall. I was still a little upset with her for not going to the party, but after meeting Hayley and some of the other girls, I could understand her refusal.

Kendall sensed my mood and didn't bring up the issue. Instead, we talked about dinner plans. I wanted to include Gina in anything we did, though, which obviously vexed her. Nonetheless, she agreed to meet us at seven o'clock.

After I got off the phone, I hauled out my drafting tools and carrying tube. I still had to do my extra credit for Professor Ledbetter, so I headed to the A&A building.

The assignment was to render an architectural feature, and I had decided on a groin vault (it's a cruciform vault formed by the intersection of two barrel vaults; the Romans used them extensively). Drawing the vault in plan or elevation wouldn't be very difficult, so I decided to draw it in perspective. The angle would complicate the view of the curves where the two vaults met, and it would be a challenging project.

At the A&A building, I headed for one of the student design labs and chose a table near the windows. Then I taped down a piece of paper, took out my drafting tools, and went to work. I drew my lines with a straightedge. I made my curves with the French curve. And I paid attention to details.

When I finally raised my pencil, my neck and shoulders were stiff. And I got a shock when I looked at my watch—I'd been in the lab for more than three hours. It seemed like only a few *minutes* had passed. But I was finished with the vault, and I thought it looked pretty good. So I collected my things and headed back to the dorm.

Gina was just getting out of the shower when I called her. She wasn't very enthusiastic about meeting Kendall for dinner, but after a little verbal arm-twisting, she agreed.

We ended up eating dinner at a Chinese restaurant near the Strip. It had a cheap buffet and the

food was actually pretty good.

The girls didn't say ten words to each other. Instead, they ate in tense silence. I tried to start a conversation a couple of times, but finally gave up in frustration.

How had things come to this point? Where did I go wrong? What could I do to *fix* things?

Unfortunately, I didn't have any answers.

After dinner, both girls wanted to do something with me. Gina was more outspoken about it, but Kendall let me know with a look. I didn't want to choose one of them over the other, so I disappointed *both* of them and decided to go work out.

They objected, but I was adamant. If they couldn't play nice with each other, then they couldn't play with *me*. I didn't tell *them* that, of course, since it would only make the rift worse, but that's how I felt.

So I walked them back to campus and then went to my room. Alone.

I waited long enough for my food to settle and then changed into my workout clothes. I needed to work off dinner, but I also needed to figure out a way to shore up my crumbling relationships.

I was sure I could do the former, but the latter would probably prove more elusive.

Why does everything have to be so complex? I sullenly wondered. *Why aren't there simple solutions for every problem? Why can't I just fix things in life like I can on a drawing?*

I didn't have any answers to *those* questions either.

When I got to the Sports Bubble, I threw myself into my workout and tried to drown out the world.

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Monday afternoon, Gina called shortly after I returned from modeling. Hayley and a couple of the other girls were throwing a girls-only birthday party for Regan, and Gina had a few minutes before she needed to meet them.

We started off talking about the party at Rod's house. Then the conversation turned to Hayley.

"Now that I've met her," I said, "I can see why Kendall didn't want to go to the party."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Gina asked, her voice hard.

"Nothing, really," I said. "It's just that a lot of Kendall's… dislike… of sororities is because of Hayley."

"Is *that* what she told you?"

"Who? Kendall?"

"Yes, Kendall," Gina said tartly.

"What're you talking about?"

"Kendall hates sororities because of *me*," Gina said. "She may have told you some story about Hayley, but that's a load of crap."

"Then how did she know Hayley's name?" I asked.

"A lot of people know who she is. I'm sure Kendall just heard about her and came up with this nonsense because she can't tell you the *real* reason she hates sororities. The real reason is that she hates *me*."

"She does *not*."

"Oh, no?! Then tell me why she's been a total bitch to me since we got here."

"She hasn't been a total bitch," I said.

"Oh yes she has," Gina shot back. "You saw how she treated me last night at the Chinese restaurant. And what about when Susan was in town? God, Paul," she said, "she wouldn't even talk to me unless you made her."

"That's not true and you know it."

"Oh, really? Then why hasn't she called me? *Ever*. Huh, why? I used to call her all the time, but she *never* called me. She hasn't wanted me here since school started, and I'm sick of it."

"Gina, that's not true."

"It's *not?!* Well, you could've fooled me. She wants you all to herself, and she's willing to do *anything* to get you. I can't make you stop seeing her, but I'm certainly not going to have anything to do with her."

"But…"

"But nothing. All she ever does is try to undermine our relationship," she said. "Well, you need to remind her that if it weren't for me, she wouldn't even be *in* a relationship."

"That's not true," I said.

"It is *too*. And why do you keep taking her side? That's all you've done—defend her."

"I have not!"

"Yes, you have. And she's not worth it, Paul. She's two-faced and devious."

"You don't really believe that, do you?" I asked.

"There you go again," she said. "You're defending her. Poor little Kendall, it's never her fault. Well, I'm sick of it. Sick! She treats me like a leper? Okay, fine. I don't need her anyhow. I thought she was my friend. But I guess this is what friendship means to her! You've seen how she treats me. And I've been nothing but nice to her. I don't know what you see in her, Paul, but there are lots of girls like her out there. Lots. And none of them are conniving bitches."

I was stunned by Gina's vehemence.

"I gotta go," she said at last. "I need to get to Panhellenic. I'm already running late."

"Yeah, okay."

"Fine."

"Fine," I echoed sadly.

With that, she hung up.

I stood there and stared at the phone for several long seconds. Then I started to get angry. I was caught in the middle of something I couldn't control, and being powerless made me furious. I silently prayed for T.J. to come out of his room and say something. I wanted to vent my frustration on something, *any*thing.

When T.J. didn't oblige me, I stood there clenching and unclenching my fists.

After a grunt of helpless rage, I went into my room and changed into my workout clothes. If I couldn't vent my spleen on T.J., at least I could work off the calories from lunch.

✧ ✧ ✧

By Tuesday morning, I wasn't in a better mood. Kendall wondered why I wasn't very talkative at breakfast, but she had the good sense not to ask. As we ate, she and Trip talked about everyday things, but I don't remember a bit of the conversation. When we finished, I walked Kendall to her class and then headed to the A&A building.

Later, after Professor Ledbetter dismissed the class, I lingered. When everyone else had gone, I took my extra credit drawing to him.

"Ah, a groin vault," he said as he unrolled it. "Very clever, those Romans."

I nodded. Then I watched nervously as he spread the drawing on his desk and studied it closely.

"Very good…," he thought aloud, "done in perspective… a difficult angle… nice, crisp lines…"

I felt my chest swell with pride.

"But here," he said, pointing to the center of the vault.

In an instant, my emotions swung from pride to anxiety.

"Your brick pattern got skewed," he said. "And here, you drew fourteen courses of brick on the near abutments, but *fifteen* courses on the opposing two. The plinths on the near abutments are thicker, which would explain why your brick courses didn't line up."

I was astounded that he picked out so many defects in a matter of seconds. Worse, I'd been proud of the drawing, since I considered it nearly perfect.

"It's very good, Paul," he said, straightening, "but God is in the details."

I nodded.

"I was talking to Professor Joska about you yesterday morning," he said almost absently.

I tried not to recoil in horror. Wasn't it bad enough that I'd be under Joska's lash for another two quarters? Did he have to get my other professors working against me as well? *There ain't no justice,* I railed silently.

"We have a staff meeting every Monday morning," Professor Ledbetter continued, "and you came up."

"I did?" I asked as calmly as I could. Inside, however, I was nearly frantic.

"Mmm hmm," he said. "We were talking about attention to detail, and Professor Joska mentioned you."

I'll bet Joska didn't have anything good *to say,* I silently groused.

As if he realized he'd said too much, Professor Ledbetter suddenly concentrated on my drawing.

I was too preoccupied by dark thoughts to notice.

"God is in the details, Paul," he said at last. "This is a good drawing, but you need to pay more attention to details—patterns, brick courses, plinths. In a drawing, they're merely an anomaly. But in a building…"

He didn't have to say the rest. I knew what would happen to a vault if it were built like I'd drawn it. I didn't like the imaginary pile of bricks that I conjured up.

Professor Ledbetter gave me a few other suggestions for improvement, and I made a mental note of each of them. Finally, he sent me on my way.

✧ ✧ ✧

On Wednesday, I went to Professor Joska's class with mixed emotions. He was due to return our midterm exams, and I didn't know whether to be excited or full of dread.

"Are you ready?" Trip asked as he slid into the desk beside me.

"As ready as I'll ever be," I said, pasting on a smile that hid my inner turmoil.

When Joska walked into the classroom, we all grew quiet. Our silence was partly anticipation, but if everyone else felt like I did, a bit of it was fear as well.

"Your midterms," Professor Joska said heavily, brandishing a stack of papers. "Some of you

still haven't gotten serious about architecture. It's too late for a late drop, of course, but several of you might as well try. Maybe the administration will take pity on you. But maybe they won't," he said. Then he let the silence draw out. "No matter," he said at last, "it's not my problem. You had ample warning."

I looked around nervously. Was he talking about me? Would any company hire me if I got a C in freshman Design? Could I even get a license? Did the licensing board look at my college transcripts?

With an act of will, I relaxed and took a deep breath.

"Some of you will probably never become architects," Joska continued, "and I hope your test scores convince you of your folly. A few of you *have* gotten serious," he said, brightening a little (as bright as he was capable of, at least). "I was surprised at a few of the grades. But none of you are serious *enough*," he finished gravely. "Architecture is a serious business for serious people."

As Joska paused to let that sink in, Samantha shifted nervously.

To my amazement, Antonio looked cool and collected.

"Architecture is all about competition," Joska said at last. "Accordingly, I've arranged your exams in order from highest to lowest. The people with the highest grades will receive their exams first. Those of you who receive yours last should consider another occupation."

With that, he began calling names.

"Cardenas…"

I looked at Antonio in shock.

He flashed me an I-told-you-so smile as he retrieved his exam.

"Fisher…," Joska said.

Gracie Fisher gave Joska a half-curtsy when she retrieved her exam.

"Hughes…"

I looked around, waiting for the next person to stand up.

"Mr. *Hughes*," Joska repeated.

"Dude, that's you," Trip whispered.

"Are you going to keep us waiting all day, Mr. Hughes?" Joska asked. "Or have you decided to let me keep your exam in the hopes that I'll frame it and proudly display it in my office?"

"Um… no, sir."

"Good," he said laconically.

When he shook my exam to draw my attention, I Got It. I had the third-highest grade in the class! I hadn't failed! I… I… I needed to get my ass up there and get my paper.

"Vang…" Joska continued after I retrieved my exam.

As I slid into my seat, I cradled the paper and simply stared at it. I was too dazed for the grade to even register. Joska continued through the stack, handing out papers and making comments, but I didn't hear a word he said.

✧ ✧ ✧

"Dude," Trip said after class, "congratulations!"

Trip had gotten the sixth-highest score. Surprisingly, Samantha scored ninth. She shed tears of relief and joy when she got her exam back.

"So," Trip asked, breaking my reverie, "what'd you actually get?"

"A 90," I said. "Can you fucking believe that?!"

He simply grinned.

"What'd you get?" I asked.

"An 82," he said. "I missed a bunch of stuff about the human sciences," he added.

I nodded in commiseration.

"So, what'd Joska have to say in his note? He told *me* I needed to pay more attention to the esoteric aspects of architecture."

"Lemme look," I said, flipping to the back page of my exam. "I guess I was too excited about my grade. I mean, I didn't even read his comments," I explained. Then I read the note aloud. "'Mr. Hughes, I'm encouraged to see that you've finally begun to take this seriously. But book-learning will always be one of your strengths. Relying upon it alone, however, will be your undoing. Architecture is as much art as it is craft and technique. You can learn technique from a book. And you can learn craft through practice and repetition. But art comes from within. You have the beginnings of all three, but strength in one will never make up for a weakness in another. If you want to be an architect, you'll have to pay attention to details, and you'll have to do better than this. 90, A-.'"

"Jeez," Trip said. "He gave you an A- and he still said all *that?*"

"He hates me," I said after a moment.

"You may be right," Trip said. "But then again, I thought my baseball coach hated me."

"And…?"

"He coached us to back-to-back state championships."

Chapter Fifteen

For the rest of the week, things were mostly normal.

Gina and I apologized to each other for getting angry. She was still upset with Kendall, but she knew that I shared some of her frustration. For her part, Kendall refused to even discuss the party or its aftermath whenever I brought it up. So I stopped bringing it up.

When I arrived at Kendall's apartment on Thursday afternoon, she greeted me as if nothing were amiss. And she was wearing her white bathrobe, which always meant she was horny. I was surprised, though, because she practically attacked me.

After fooling around on the living room couch for a few minutes, she shed her robe and began pulling off my clothes. When she had me naked, she knelt between my legs and gave me an extra-long blowjob. Then I gently pushed her to her back and spread her legs. Her smooth pussy simply begged to be licked, so I went down on her, teasing her until she cried out in ecstasy.

When we recovered, we went to the kitchen to get something to drink, but ended up having hard, frantic sex against the counter. Afterward, we got the drinks we came for in the first place and then relaxed in the living room.

We were both still in the mood, and she began teasing me. I chased her down the hall and caught her before she could make it to her bedroom. She was laughing as I bent her over her desk and gave her ass a few playful swats.

Then she wiggled her hips and gave me a suggestive look. In an instant, I was hard. I fucked her long enough to get my dick completely lubricated, then pulled out and set the tip at the rosette of her ass. She groaned as I pushed past her sphincter and entered her. Slapping noises filled the hall as I thrust into her. After my orgasm, I collapsed against her and we lay panting on the desk.

Later, we took a shower to cool off, but I ended up fucking her from behind, her breasts crushed against the ceramic tile as I thrust into her. I didn't come, but that didn't stop me from reaching around and playing with her clit until she had a shuddering orgasm.

After our shower, as we relaxed on her bed, we talked about everyday things. I desperately wanted to talk about our deteriorating three-way relationship, but I didn't want to spoil the mood.

So I settled for idly fondling her. Her breasts were as responsive as ever, and she quickly grew excited. When I went down on her, she ran her fingers through my hair and writhed in ecstasy.

After licking and sucking her to two mini-orgasms, I knelt between her legs and rubbed my hard-on along her slit. She was puffy and slippery with arousal, and begged me to fuck her. I let her beg for almost a minute before I slid into her. When I did, she groaned softly and wrapped her legs around me.

We fucked for almost thirty minutes, in a half-dozen different positions. When I finally reached the point of no return, she wanted me to come on her face. I pulled out, knelt over her head, and began stroking my pussy-slick cock. As I worked myself toward release, she played with her clit, her fingers a blur.

With a groan, I erupted. When the first spurt hit her cheek, she cried out softly. The next spurt landed on her lips and chin, and she cried out again. After that, I kept stroking, but only a few gushes came out. Finally, I used the head of my cock to spread my semen over her face. As I did, she tensed up, her climax imminent.

When she came, she came hard. And I mean *really* hard. Her face and chest flushed as she held her breath. Then she groaned deep in her chest. Finally, she cried out in release, her body quivering with pleasure. Her orgasm seemed to last forever. As I watched her shudder in its grip, I rolled and tugged her nipples, driving her higher still.

Afterward, we cleaned up and then relaxed in her bedroom. Abby was due back by 5:30, so we reluctantly got dressed.

In the span of little more than four hours, I had come four times. And I'd lost track of Kendall's orgasms and mini-orgasms. In a way, it seemed that Kendall had been in a Gina-like state of sexual overdrive. I wasn't about to complain, but I *did* wonder what caused it.

✧ ✧ ✧

That weekend, the UT football game was against Memphis State, in Memphis. Gina, Regan, and a bunch of other Chi O girls drove across the state to go to the game. I was disappointed that Gina and I wouldn't be together, but I knew she'd have fun.

Trip and I went down to Kendall and Abby's apartment to listen to the game. Luke and Tara joined us as well. To our surprise, Jeff asked if he could bring someone. We said yes, of course, but none of us expected him to actually show up with a *girl*.

Her name was Meredith, and she was a Phi Mu pledge with a sunny personality. She had blonde hair and blue eyes, and in spite of being a little pudgy, she was cute. Jeff was practically beside himself simply being near her.

I didn't know when Trip had done it, but he and Abby had obviously had a talk. According to Kendall, Abby was disappointed, but she understood why he didn't want to get serious.

Trip sat with his arm around Abby, although it was comfortable and friendly, nothing more. Abby looked happy, and Trip quietly mentioned (later) that she understood his situation.

During the commercials, Luke told Boudreaux and Thibodeaux jokes, which kept us in stitches. I don't think Meredith knew what to make of Luke, but she was having a good time. Jeff was as goofy as ever, which seemed to endear him to her even more.

UT won the game easily, and we went out for pizza and beer afterward. Luke and Tara had to leave for a post-game party with his fraternity, but the rest of us had a good time.

✧ ✧ ✧

Unfortunately, the next month seemed to be a steadily worsening series of headaches.

Gina and I had another fight. Once again, it was about Kendall.

Kendall and I got into a heated discussion about, you guessed it, Gina.

Gina accused me of spending too much time with Kendall, and Kendall quietly resented my time with Gina.

Worse, I didn't have *any* idea what to do about the growing friction in either of my relationships. Susan had told me that I'd have to figure it out on my own, but I didn't seem to be doing very well.

As a matter of fact, I was doing a *lousy* job.

So I had to balance my time between the two girls. Neither of them wanted to have anything to do with the other, and I was at wit's end. I loved them both, but the strain was tearing me up inside.

Unfortunately, the rest of my life was just as stressful.

In Calculus, Professor Tow started teaching derivatives of inverse trigonometric functions, which I'd never done before. So I had to do dozens of sample problems and study hard to keep up. Aside from Design, Calculus was my most challenging class, and I was determined to make an A.

In American Literature, we began studying Late Nineteenth Century authors, and I had a lot of reading to do. I'd gotten an A on my Faulkner paper—as expected—but I wanted to *earn* my A for the class overall. I even had to stop reading my for-pleasure books, since I had so much to read for class.

Professor Spielman's Intro to Architecture class was a welcome relief; it was easy. We were studying the architecture of the Roman Empire (the *Western* Roman Empire; Byzantine architecture was covered in Intro II). I already knew enough about the period that I didn't have to do much to keep my grades up.

Art History wasn't that bad either, although Professor Dubois was as dull as ever. We were studying early Christian art in Western Europe, from the Merovingian and Carolingian dynasties. It was interesting, but not something I wanted to spend hours looking at.

Out of the blue, Professor Ledbetter assigned me more "extra credit"—even though I was already making an A in his class. He wanted me to do more drawings, and to pay attention to details, of course. I suspected that Joska was behind the assignments, but what could I do?

On top of all that, Professor Joska assigned us another team project. Not surprisingly, it involved drawings as well as critiques of our teammates' drawings.

For our drawings, we had a choice of several buildings in Washington, D.C.: the Washington Monument, the Jefferson Memorial, or the Lincoln Memorial. Not only did we have to create plan and elevation drawings of one of the monuments, we had to include the grounds and other public spaces. It was a daunting task, especially given the scale of the sites.

We also had four more intramural football games. To my surprise, we won all four games and made it to the quarter-finals, thanks in large part to Trip's skill as a quarterback. The Pike team also made it to the quarter-finals, and we were scheduled to play them the Monday before Thanksgiving break. The winner of our game would face the winner of the SAE versus Morrill Second Floor game.

I was excited that our team had done so well, although it was an added responsibility. I had a ton of schoolwork to do, but I didn't want to let my teammates down—even T.J., the little weasel.

In addition to everything else, I finally worked up the nerve to check my weight. The Sports Bubble had a nice scale (the kind you find in a doctor's office), and Kendall and her roommates had a small bathroom scale.

On the Sports Bubble scale, I weighed 179 pounds. That was less than my wrestling-days high of 185, but still more than I wanted to weigh. On the bathroom scale in Kendall's apartment, I weighed 174 pounds. I trusted the Sports Bubble scale more than the girls' bathroom model, so I adjusted theirs to read 179, to be accurate.

(The day after I adjusted it, *all* of the snack food in the girls' apartment disappeared. They replaced it with rabbit food: lettuce, carrots, celery, radishes, etc. I didn't eat snacks anyway, but I still chuckled at the thought of Kendall and her roommates panicking because they suddenly "gained" five pounds. I never admitted what I did, though. I simply reset the scale and mentally

added five pounds to whatever it told me.)

While I hadn't gained weight, I hadn't lost much either. So over the course of a month, my schedule was gruelingly simple. When I wasn't doing schoolwork, playing football, or spending time with Kendall or Gina—but never Kendall *and* Gina—I was working out and venting my pent-up frustration. I was exhausted, but I didn't know what I could give up.

Siobhan's drawing class was the only consistent bright spot in my life.

Every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, immediately after Design class, I went to Studio 6 and sat in the hallway. Christy usually got there about the same time I did. She took out her sketchpad and I took out mine. While I drew buildings or design elements, she drew sketches of me.

My drawings were simple. I focused on tightening my style and paying attention to details. I heard Professor Ledbetter's voice in my head, *"God is in the details, Paul."* It was a weird turn of phrase, but it stuck with me. And, of course, I heard Professor Joska's sibilant voice, *"You'll have to do better than this, Mr. Hughes."*

In the course of a month, I must've gone through half of my sketchpad. I drew everything from simple roof styles to façade elements. Christy sketched at least a dozen of my expressions: concentration, melancholy, delight, pensiveness, and more.

I was always amazed by how she captured my mood. In some drawings, I could see the tension in my shoulders or jaw. In others, I wore an expression of childlike wonder and concentration, and I knew that I must've been completely absorbed by my own drawing.

Once, when I was particularly upset (after an argument with Gina), I looked up to see tears in Christy's eyes. She smiled bashfully and wiped her cheeks, her charcoal-smudged fingers simply adding dark smears. Impulsively, I reached out and tried to clean her cheek. My hand had pencil smudges on it, though, and I only made things worse.

We ended up laughing about the situation, the release of tension almost palpable. After we cleaned up and washed our hands, I asked her why she'd been crying. She wouldn't tell me. When she asked why *I* had been so upset, it was my turn to demur.

"We've both got our secrets," she said softly.

I nodded.

"Maybe I'll tell you… someday."

Her smile was so sad that I wanted to put my arm around her and comfort her. When we got back to the hallway outside Studio 6, neither of us returned to our sketchpads. Instead, we sat and talked about everything but what was *really* on our minds.

During the drawing class itself, Wren and I played a little game. After an initial period of taking turns undressing in the studio office, we decided that it was a waste of time and simply shared. After all, we'd both seen each other nude. Each day, as we undressed, she teased me and tried to provoke a reaction.

Once, she bent over in front of me, giving me a good view of her pussy and ass (she trimmed her pubic hair, so I could easily see her labia). Another time, she absently tweaked her nipples as I was getting undressed. Yet another time, she "accidentally" brushed against my dick.

While we posed, she was almost as bad, although she couldn't do anything *truly* outrageous. She would occasionally look at my dick, make eye contact, and then moisten her lips. Other times, she would take a deep breath and subtly thrust her breasts at me when she knew I was

looking. Once, she even managed to sit through an entire class while giving me a fantastic view of her pussy (she was sitting with her knee tucked under her chin, and my body blocked the view of her sex from the rest of the students).

Then, for an entire week, we had to pose standing next to each other; I stood behind her with my hands on her hips. My dick was perilously close to her ass—close enough that I could feel the heat of her body. Siobhan wanted her students to draw the contrast between our bodies. For three days, Wren teased me with subtle movements and not-so-inadvertent contact.

When we posed so close together, it took a fantastic degree of willpower and control not to react to her antics. A couple of times, I felt my dick begin to swell. The first time, I got myself under control. The second time, nothing I did seemed to work. I spent at least ten minutes with my hard-on squarely planted in the crack of Wren's ass.

She turned and grinned at me, but then grew annoyed that she couldn't actually *see* the fruit of her labors. At last, I imagined Professor Dubois droning on about illuminated manuscripts, and that did the trick.

When my dick finally shrank, Wren turned and made a mocking pout, her lips pursed. I closed my eyes and kept my mind *firmly* occupied.

Treacherous organ.

When Wren got dressed after each class, she took her time putting on her clothes. I think she enjoyed looking at me as much as I enjoyed looking at her, but we always had our little game to play. Since I didn't respond the way she expected—usually—she took it as a personal challenge.

Each day, Siobhan had to leave shortly after class, but Christy was always waiting for Wren and me when we emerged from the office. Afterward, the three of us would walk back to Morrill, sharing Christy's bag of snacks. (For such a petite girl, she had a voracious appetite, and she always had food with her, from carrot and celery sticks to fresh fruit and granola. In my head, I started thinking of her as "Bunny," since she ate like a rabbit.)

While we walked, we talked, and those were the times I enjoyed most of all.

Wren and I talked about growing up and going to school in the suburbs of Atlanta. Her father owned a half-dozen successful restaurants, and I was familiar with several of them. She was on the swim team in high school, and had come to UT to be a swimmer. After a bad bout of mononucleosis when she was a freshman, however, she decided to give up racing and focus on her health and classes.

Christy had also been a high school swimmer. She raced in the relays, but her primary focus was diving. Unlike Wren, she had come to UT to study with Siobhan (whom she'd met at a gallery opening in San Diego). The auburn-haired professor had originally been teaching at Notre Dame, but when UT lured her from South Bend to Knoxville, Christy applied to Tennessee.

Christy and I also talked about growing up with fathers who were pilots. While my father left the Navy and took a job as a commercial pilot, hers stayed in and rose through the ranks to command his own squadron. In Japan, he commanded an Air Wing. When Christy told me that his current job was as a commander of an entire Carrier Battle Group, my jaw nearly hit the sidewalk.

"What *is* your dad," I asked, "some kind of Admiral?"

"Why yes," she said, her blue eyes dancing with laughter, "he *is*."

"So you're the Admiral's daughter?"

"The Admiral's *only* daughter," she stressed, her eyes still twinkling.

"The Admiral's only daughter, huh? Then I bet your boyfriend must be completely squared away."

To my surprise, Wren snorted.

"What?" I asked.

"Simon?" the brunette said to Christy, ignoring me. "Squared away? Ha!"

"*Wren*," Christy warned.

"What?" I asked, more confused than ever.

"Simon's actually her fiancé," Wren explained, "which makes it even worse."

"Why?" I asked.

"Because he's *hardly* squared away, if that means what I think it does."

"Fiancé?" I asked, my throat inexplicably tight.

Christy shyly held up her left hand and flashed her ring finger.

I'd seen the small diamond ring before, of course, but its significance had never occurred to me. I guess I just couldn't imagine someone her age—my age—being engaged.

"Simon's the least 'squared away' guy I can think of," Wren continued.

"Wren, *stop*," Christy said.

"Why? You know how I feel about him. I don't like him any more than your father does. Besides, you don't love him."

"Yes… I… do," Christy said. "He was there for me after… you know."

"After what?" I asked.

The girls completely ignored me.

"He took advantage of you," Wren said.

"He did *not*," Christy shot back.

"He did *so*. He knew what you were going through and he *still* asked you to marry him."

"Going through *what?*" I asked, my curiosity completely overwhelming my manners. Once again, the girls ignored me.

"He loves me," Christy said.

"Of course he does," Wren said. "But do you love him?"

"Yes."

Even *I* wasn't convinced.

"Wren, please, I don't want to talk about this anymore," Christy said a moment later. "You *know* how I feel about Simon."

Wren looked like she wanted to reply, but she shut her mouth and simply scowled.

In the awkward silence that followed, the girls looked at each other, an entire unspoken conversation passing between them. Finally, Christy seemed to remember that I was there.

"I'm sorry," she said. "What were we talking about?"

"I don't remember," I said.

She looked like she wanted to say something, but when she gazed back at me, her eyes suddenly filled with tears. She tried to blink them back, but they just kept coming. At her look of anguish, I started to reach out to her. She offered a wan smile at my gesture, but then her emotions finally overcame her.

Before she broke down completely, she turned and raced into the dorm. Wren looked at me helplessly and then chased after her friend.

I simply stood there, more puzzled than ever.

✧ ✧ ✧

"Hey," Trip said as he pushed open my door. "Whatcha doin'?"

"Reading about the Jefferson Memorial," I said absently. "I wanna make sure I've got my portico laid out right."

"You know it's right," he said. "You've checked it… what… ten times?"

"God is in the details," I said, unconsciously echoing Professor Ledbetter. "Which reminds me," I added. "I've still gotta do critiques for Samantha and Antonio's drawings. I hope Samantha forgives me. If I want a good grade on the critiques, I've got to tell her the truth. Her drawing's not bad, and I've tried to help her as much as I can, but she's probably our weakest draftsman."

"She knows she is," Trip said. "And she can handle the truth. She's a lot stronger than you think."

"Maybe."

"She is. Trust me. Just be honest and don't get personal. She knows you're a good designer, and she respects your opinion."

I nodded. I'd been surprised to find that Samantha turned to *me* whenever she had a drafting question. What's more, Trip and Antonio did as well. Antonio could remember virtually anything he read, but he wasn't the best draftsman either, so he often sought my advice.

I had sort of become the team's official design expert. Trip was our leader, without question, but when it came to design, everyone deferred to me. Samantha scheduled our time—sometimes to the minute—and Antonio was a walking resource library. As a team, we'd really come together over the past month. We rarely argued, and we all respected each other.

(Since the four of us spent so much time together, I finally threw decorum to the wind and asked Antonio about the strange combination of his looks, name, and twangy accent. He simply laughed and explained that he was Korean, but had been adopted. His parents were Hispanic, obviously, and had given him his adopted grandfather's name. "And don't *everybody* talk like me?" he asked with a grin.)

I'd begun to wonder how much of our team's cohesiveness was luck and how much was Joska's planning. The man was crafty. I still didn't like him, but I'd gotten a feel for his way of doing things. Contrary to what I'd thought at first, he *didn't* set us up to fail. He set us up to succeed, and then threw dozens of challenges at us.

He still taunted me constantly, and I usually felt like I was one comment away from lunging at him. Even though I answered all of his questions, he seemed to mock me. He wasn't nearly as hard on my classmates (except Gracie Fisher, perhaps), and he seemed to save his really biting comments for me.

"Hello, Paul?" Trip was saying.

I shook my head to clear it.

"Are you with me again?" he asked, smiling.

"Yeah, sorry. I guess I was daydreaming."

"You've been working too hard," he said. Then he sighed. "We all have. Anyway, that's what

I wanted to talk to you about."

"Yeah?"

"Look, with Samantha cracking the whip on our schedule, we're ready. We're disgustingly early, too. Even Gracie's team isn't close to being finished, and they're really on the ball."

I nodded.

"So I was thinking…," he said.

"Yeah?"

"Let's all get together tomorrow night. We'll pull an all-nighter if we have to. I'll review everyone's critiques to make sure they're honest and comprehensive. While I'm doing that, you can help Samantha and Antonio put the finishing touches on their drawings. Then we can write up our final critiques and make any changes to our drawings that we need to."

"Dude," I said, "the projects aren't due till Monday. Why pull an all-nighter on Friday if we don't have to?"

"Because we need to take the weekend and recover. We've all been killing ourselves on this project. Not to mention the fact that we've all got four or five *other* classes we've had to keep up with."

I nodded.

"And besides," he said, "you've been running me ragged with our workouts. I know they're good for us, but you're still driving pretty hard. And you work out about twice as often as I do. That's too much."

I started to shake my head, but he held up a placating hand.

"I know you've had a lot on your mind, with Kendall and Gina and all, but still, you gotta take a break, man."

I felt my shoulders sag in agreement.

"Anyway, I was thinking," he continued, "let's pull an all-nighter if we have to, and then we can take the weekend off."

"Yeah, that sounds like a good idea," I wearily admitted.

"And there's something else I wanted to ask you," he said.

I lifted my head and looked a question at him.

"My little brother Dale's birthday is this weekend, on Saturday. He'll be five, and my dad wanted me to be there for his party. I told him how hard we've been working, and he suggested I bring you along. So… are you up for it?"

"What?"

"Come home with me this weekend. You can meet my dad and step-mom, and my little brothers," he added. "We can relax, enjoy the birthday party with a bunch of five-year-olds, and do *nothing* the rest of the time."

"Birthday," I mused, something tickling the back of my mind. Then, "Oh, shit!"

"What?" he asked, suddenly concerned.

"What's today? The nineteenth?"

He nodded. "Why?" he asked.

I explained that November 19th was my father's birthday, and I'd completely forgotten about it.

"See?" Trip said. "You've been working too hard."

I reluctantly nodded.

"Listen, call your dad and then come on over to my room. I've got this great concert tape a friend sent me. It's a group from your neck of the woods, the University of Georgia. They're called R.E.M., and they're *amazing*. 'Radio Free Europe' is totally cool, man, even if you can't understand a word the lead singer is saying."

"Okay," I said.

"Think about this weekend. My dad and step-mom really wanna meet you. And I know my little brothers would get a kick out of having you there. Besides, we need the break, man. Exams start after we return from Thanksgiving break, and we need to be fresh for 'em."

"Okay, I'll think about it."

"Cool. I'll see ya in a few."

With that, he patted my shoulder and then left.

When I called home, Dad and Mom were getting ready to go out to dinner. They were meeting the Coulters and another couple at a classy restaurant. Leah was spending the night at our house and my parents were planning to return to the Coulters' house with the other couple. I didn't know who the other couple was, but I grinned when I imagined what they'd be up to.

Dad was dutifully surprised that I called. Mom was relieved; she'd been worried that I'd forgotten (which I *had*, but I didn't tell her that). They needed to leave, however, so I wished Dad a happy birthday and then said goodbye.

After I hung up, I thought about Trip's offer. Nashville was only a three-and-a-half-hour drive away, and I could use the time away from Kendall, Gina, and all of my frustrations.

Things hadn't improved between the girls. In spite of their non-existent relationship with each other, however, neither of them pressured me to stop seeing the other. I think *none* of us wanted to open that can of worms.

As long as I didn't talk about the other girl when I was with one of them, things were fine. But any time I brought up the other girl, all bets were off. Gina was snippy about Kendall, and Kendall calmly pointed out that Gina manipulated me.

I was still having sex with each of them, but even then, things were changing. Gina spent more and more time with Regan. The blonde had broken up with Rod and then gotten back together with him. When she wasn't dating him, she monopolized Gina's time. In other words, when Regan's relationship was in a shambles, mine was too.

Kendall, on the other hand, was a calm, quiet presence (as long as I didn't mention Gina). She and I had breakfast together every day, as well as our Thursday afternoons. We spent a lot of time together, since Gina was usually off doing something with her sorority or studying with Regan.

I was watching Gina slip away from me, and I didn't know what to do about it. I'd been in love with her since I was thirteen, and we'd been together since we were fifteen. She was an integral part of my life, and I hated what was happening to us.

I simply didn't know how to fix things.

Kendall, who was normally so insightful, wasn't any help. She usually didn't go out of her way to point out Gina's shortcomings, but her actions certainly emphasized them.

In reality, I wanted some time away from *both* of them, so Trip's offer was perfect.

"Okay, I'll go," I said when he opened his door.

"Cool," he said. "C'mon in."

"When did you wanna leave on Saturday?" I asked.

"As early as possible, but that really depends on how late we're working on Friday night. If we get to bed early… say, midnight… we can get up and be on the road by eight. The party's at two, but we gain an hour, since Franklin's on central time."

"Three o'clock, two central," I said with a grin.

"Friday nights. CBS."

We shared a grin at Luke's expense.

"If we're up really late," Trip said, returning to our travel plans, "we can leave as late as eleven-thirty, but that's cutting it close."

"Hey," I said. "I've got a great idea."

"What?"

"Let's fly to Franklin."

"*Huh?*"

"Let's *fly* to Franklin," I repeated.

"Like on Eastern Airlines?"

"No," I said, "like on *Cessna* Airlines."

"Huh? Oh, yeah, I forgot… you're a pilot!"

"Uh-huh. And it's been months since I've had a chance to fly. I've been so busy that I haven't missed it… much… but this is perfect. Besides, I could use the flight time."

"Okay," he said, leaning forward. "How's it work?"

"We can use my family's plane… but… no… I'd still have to get to Atlanta to pick it up. So we'll rent a plane."

"You can just *rent* a plane?" Trip asked, genuinely shocked. "Don't you have to have a license for that or something?"

I gave him a reproving look.

"Oh, yeah," he said sheepishly. "You've got one of those."

"We can rent something cheap, like a Cessna 152. The wet rate should be—"

"Wet rate?"

"Yeah," I said, nodding, "the wet rate. It's the price for the plane, including fuel and oil. It's standard," I said, shaking off the interruption. "Anyway, the wet rate should be something like thirty bucks an hour," I finished.

"Thirty bucks an *hour?!* We'll need the thing for *two days*," he said. "We can't afford anything like that."

"You only pay for tach time… the time the engine's running," I explained with a chuckle.

Then I held up a hand to forestall his next question and started doing math in my head. A Cessna 152 cruised at about a hundred knots. Franklin was two hundred miles away, but those were *statute* miles. Nautical miles were longer than statute miles. At a hundred knots, 1.15 statute miles per nautical mile, 115 miles per hour…

"An hour and forty-five minutes," I said at last. "That's the flying time from here to Franklin. We can take off from Island Home Airport—it's near downtown—and be there less than two hours later. God, I love flying. And I really miss it. It's… relaxing."

"And you could *definitely* use some relaxation."

I nodded earnestly.

"So," he said, "two hours each way, at thirty bucks an hour. If we split the cost, that's sixty bucks apiece. It's more expensive than driving, but if it relaxes you, I'm in."

"Can your dad pick us up at the airport?" I asked.

"Absolutely."

"Then we've got a plan, my friend."

"We do indeed," he said with a grin.

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"What're you doing this weekend?" Wren asked.

She, Christy, and I were walking back to Morrill after Siobhan's class. I was *supposed* to be working with Trip and the team in the A&A building. I knew I shouldn't be spending so much time with the girls, but something about them—Wren especially—drew me like a moth to flame. Christy and I had become good friends, but Wren was the fuel of fantasies (even though I did my best not to let *her* know that).

"A friend and I are flying to Nashville," I said, returning my thoughts to Wren's question. "It's his little brother's birthday."

"Why're you flying?" Wren asked. "I thought you had a car."

I explained the situation with our project and the time constraints.

"So *you're* flying?" she asked, surprised.

I nodded.

"You can fly?"

"Sure," I said. "I've had my pilot's license for more than a year."

Christy smiled slyly at her friend.

"We're going to rent a plane and fly to Nashville," I continued.

"Cool," Christy said.

"Have you ever done it in a plane?" Wren asked me.

"*Wren*," Christy blurted.

"I'll never tell," I said. Of *course* I'd had sex in an airplane, but I wasn't a blabbermouth. Not only did Gina and I have sex during the flight to Europe, but we'd had sex a couple of times when I was flying our family Cessna. (I think it's a requirement for every young, horny pilot.)

"That means you *have*," Wren said.

"No, that means I'm not answering, one way or the other."

"What's it like?" she asked.

"Lorelei *Wren*," Christy scolded.

"Lorelei?" I asked, glad for the opportunity to change the subject. I didn't *mind* talking with Wren about sex, but the change in subject would drive her crazy.

She grimaced indignantly.

"Wren's her middle name," Christy said.

I looked a question at Wren.

With a frown, she realized that I wasn't going to let the conversation go back to sex in airplanes. "My mother has a penchant for obscure German mythology," she explained.

"It's a pretty name," I said.

She actually blushed. "Thank you."

"What's your middle name?" I asked Christy.

"Marie."

"Christina Marie? Or Christ*ine* Marie?"

"Christine," she said.

"Dean," I said.

"Huh?" Wren asked.

"His name," Christy said. "Paul Dean Hughes." Then she glanced at me for verification.

I nodded.

"You're still Mysterious," Wren said.

"And you're still Beautiful," I replied, flashing the cockiest grin I could work up.

Christy silently tittered at Wren's expression.

"But I gotta go, Beautiful," I said, looking at my watch. "I'm already late."

"You were late because of li'l ol' me?" she asked flirtatiously.

"Well," I said, still grinning, "because of you and Bunny."

"'Bunny'?" Christy asked suspiciously.

"That's what I call *you*," I said, grinning wryly. "In my head, that is."

She huffed.

"Well, you eat like a rabbit."

"That's not *all* she does like a rabbit," Wren said.

"Lorelei *Wren* Hilliard," Christy blurted, her face turning a deeper shade.

Wren merely grinned from ear to ear.

"Bye, Beautiful," I said. "Bye, Bunny."

Christy tried to work up a towering fury, but it was more like a petite fury. When I kept grinning, she stomped her foot.

"Yes?" I asked, my eyes laughing.

"I want a better nickname than *Bunny*," she said.

"Sorry, kiddo," I said, "that's what you got. We're Mysterious, Beautiful, and Bunny. Now, I *really* gotta go. Have a nice weekend, and I'll see you Monday."

With a wink at Christy, I turned and headed toward the A&A building.

"This is all *your* fault," she said to Wren. She tried to sound angry, but she just couldn't pull it off.

Wren merely snickered in reply.

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The work on our project didn't take all night after all. Samantha really *was* a whiz with scheduling, and we were all more or less finished with our drawings. Trip analyzed our critiques and made comments on them. While he did that, I worked with Samantha and Antonio on final touches for their drawings.

We had a quick dinner and finished everything by eleven o'clock. Exhausted, we walked back to the dorms together (Antonio lived in Reese Hall). At the courtyard, we said goodnight to each other and then headed our separate ways.

"Did you call the airport?" Trip asked as we waited for the elevator.

"Yeah," I said. "I called this morning. They have a Cessna 152, but they keep it booked for training, and they don't want to let it go for the whole weekend. Not for just four hours tach time,

anyway."

"That's okay," he said. "We can still drive."

"Not so fast," I replied, grinning. "They've got a 172 we *can* rent for the whole weekend. It'll cost more, but it's also bigger and faster."

"How much does it cost?"

"About forty-five bucks an hour," I said. "Since it's faster, though, we won't put as much time on the engine, and that's what we're paying for. But I'm willing to pay the difference, just to get the flight time."

"No, I'll cover half of it," he said.

"Thanks, man."

"So," he asked with a nod, "what's the plan?"

"We need to be there by nine o'clock. I'll have to take an exam and a checkride, but that's normal. It should take about an hour and a half. And then we've got the plane till Sunday evening. The FBO closes at six, though, so we'll need to be back by then. Besides, I don't have my instrument rating yet, so I'm not really comfortable flying after dark. I mean, I *can*, but… you know."

"FBO?" he asked. "Instrument rating?"

"Fixed Base Operations," I explained. "It's the place that operates the airport. And 'instrument rating' is actually an Instrument Flight Rating."

"So you can't read the instruments yet?" he asked, incredulous.

"Of course I can read the instruments. An instrument rating just means that I can fly using *only* the instruments. I could fly at night if I *had* to, but I still want the IFR training before I do it. I guess I'm just cautious."

He nodded in approval.

"But we'll be flying in broad daylight, both going and coming," I said. "And when I called the FBO, I asked 'em to check the weather for tomorrow. We'll have good visibility all weekend. So we're cool."

"Cool."

When we got to the fourth floor, we walked to our rooms in silence—we were both worn out from working all afternoon and evening. We said goodnight and then headed to our separate suites.

Billy was lying on his bed, reading. He looked up when I entered. We silently greeted each other and then I dumped my backpack and carrying tube on my bed. Under the guise of combing my hair, I stared at myself in the mirror.

Was I gaining weight? I knew I *wasn't*, of course, but I wasn't losing it either. I was constantly aware of how much I ate, and I worked out all the time, which helped. I was a little worried, though, because my shirts were actually getting tighter through the chest and shoulders (although my pants were ready to fall off).

Maybe Mom and I can go clothes shopping during the Thanksgiving break, I thought.

I still had money left over from the summer, but it was dwindling. And it certainly wasn't enough to buy a new wardrobe. Besides, the stores in Knoxville didn't have the latest fashions, like the ones in Atlanta did. Izod was around, but Polo was *just* starting to appear in Knoxville, while I'd been wearing them for at least a year. I wasn't exactly a fashion maven, but I *did* like to

dress nicely.

With a sigh, I took one last look at myself in the mirror and then headed back to the foyer. Kendall wanted me to call if I got home before midnight, so I dutifully dialed her number. Then I pulled the long phone cord into my room and closed the door behind me. She answered on the third ring.

"Hi," I said. "I'm home."

"Did you get everything done?" she asked.

"Yeah."

"It's before midnight, do you want me to come up?" she asked. "Is Billy there?"

"Um… yeah," I said, flicking my eyes at my roommate.

He seemed preternaturally aware of what I was doing, however, and noticed.

"Is that your girlfriend?" he asked. (I was pretty sure he had figured out that I actually had two girlfriends, but he was circumspect when he didn't know whom I was talking to.)

"It's Kendall," I told him, covering the mouthpiece.

"Oh, that's too bad," Kendall said in my ear. "I was hoping I could come over and spend some time with you."

I darted another glance at Billy.

"Um…," Billy said hesitantly, "I can take off, if you want."

I shook my head. "It's almost midnight," I said. In reality, I *did* want him to leave, but it was his room too, so I wasn't about to ask him to go.

"Seriously," he said.

"Do you want to come over here?" Kendall asked. "We can hang out for a little while."

"We're working on a new play, *Inherit the Wind*," Billy said. "I can work on lines with Jamie. It's no problem."

"Hold on a second," I said to Kendall, the two conversations finally overwhelming me.

"You don't have to go, dude," I said to Billy.

"I don't mind. I'll just spend the night at Jamie's. I'm cool."

"Are you sure?" I asked, giving him one last chance to stay.

"Yeah. It's no problem," he said. Then he closed his book and started putting on his shoes.

"Thanks, man," I said. "I really appreciate it."

He shrugged, a little embarrassed.

"Let me call you right back," I said to Kendall.

"Is everything okay?" she asked.

"Yeah, everything's fine. Lemme call you back in… two minutes. Okay?"

"Okay," she said, a little confused.

Billy smiled diffidently and then used the phone to call his friend. I thanked him again, which made him blush. Then he grabbed his backpack and headed out.

A moment later, I picked up the phone and dialed Kendall's number.

"What was that about?" she asked after we greeted each other.

I explained.

"Do you want me to come over?" she asked. "You're not too tired?"

"Yes and no," I said. "In that order."

"I can spend the night, if you want."

"Yes and yes, in that order."

"Let me pack a few things. Meet me in the lobby in ten minutes?"

"I'll see you then," I said.

Fifteen minutes later, I ushered Kendall into my room and shut the door behind us. She immediately flowed into my arms.

"You look so tired," she said, caressing my face. "You've got dark bags under your eyes."

I shrugged.

"You should take better care of yourself."

"I haven't been sleeping well," I said.

"Still…"

"Well," I said testily, "I've been working my *ass* off with, oh, let's see… trig derivatives, Henry James and Mark Twain, early Christian art, which is boring as hell, by the way, 'extra credit' drawing projects, late Roman architecture, a *major* design project, modeling for a drawing class, working out, intramural football, and two girlfriends who don't talk to each other. Did I leave anything out?"

"Shhhh," she whispered, caressing my face again. "I'm sorry. I know you've been working hard." Then she leaned her forehead against mine. "I love you," she said softly.

"I love you too," I said. Then, "I'm sorry I snapped at you."

"It's okay. You're under a lot of stress."

I nodded.

"I was thinking…," she said. "Maybe I could give you a long backrub to help you relax. And then afterward…"

"Afterward…?"

"If you want, I could give you a long *front*-rub to help you relax," she said.

"That sounds like a *great* idea," I said, with a tired nod.

After I locked the door, Kendall slowly took off my clothes. With each new patch of skin she revealed, she kissed it tenderly. When I was finally nude, she kissed the tip of my penis and then smiled up at me.

"You've got too many clothes on," I said.

"I know," she said softly. "But we'll get to me in a minute."

With that, she wrapped her lips around my manhood. Since I was still mostly soft, she could get my whole dick in her mouth. I sighed when I felt her nose press into my pubic hair. Her chin brushed my balls as I held the sides of her head. A moment later, she began moving her tongue over my flaccid shaft.

No matter how often she tried, she couldn't deep throat me when I was fully erect. She could only swallow about three-fourths of my length; more than that and she gagged. I know that disappointed her, but it was more than enough to keep me happy.

Since I knew she liked having all of me in her mouth, I closed my eyes and tried to stay soft as long as I could. To keep from getting hard, I thought about my design project, going over my drawing in my mind's eye. My body reacted predictably, but with my mind on the Jefferson Memorial, it took me several minutes to reach full erection.

Kendall moaned in frustration when my hard-on finally triggered her gag reflex. She withdrew a bit and then compressed her lips around my shaft as she pulled back slowly.

"Oh my goodness," she said, breathless. "You took a long time to get hard."

"I know how much you enjoy that," I said. "So I was thinking about my design project."

"While I was…?" she asked in disbelief.

With a grin, I nodded.

"You're *horrible*," she said. "How could you think about a project when I'm… you know?!"

"I did it for you," I said as earnestly as I could. But then I cracked a smile. She didn't know whether to laugh or scowl, so I reached down and pulled her to her feet. "You've *still* got too many clothes on," I said. "Let's see what we can do about that."

A minute later, her clothes rested in a pile next to mine and I pulled her against me, my hard-on bent between us.

"Thanks for coming over tonight," I said softly. "I know I've been busy lately, and I appreciate you being patient. And…"

"And what?"

"And it's tough splitting my time between you and Gina," I said.

Her eyes grew hard. "You don't *have* to spl—"

Before she said something we'd both regret, I kissed her. Hard. As my tongue sparred with hers, I felt her nipples harden against my chest. When I broke the kiss, she was panting softly.

"What was that for?" she asked, her eyes still closed.

"Because I love you," I said.

"I love you too. And I love you *more* th—"

Once again, I kissed her. I'm ashamed to admit it, but by then, I was horny. And I wanted to have sex, not an argument. If Kendall finished her thought, we'd argue. Guaranteed.

"Paul," she asked when we pulled back, "why won't you let me finish? You *know* she doesn't—"

My lips crushed against hers, and I shamelessly used her body's reactions to my advantage. Instead of breaking the kiss, I put her hand on my cock. Then I started playing with her smooth pussy. She quickly warmed to my touch, and I teased her hooded clit with two fingers. Finally, I broke the kiss long enough to look at her.

"I want you to suck me," I said softly. "Take me as deep as you can."

At my gentle touch on her shoulder, she sank to her knees and wrapped her lips around my shaft.

I bet you can't criticize Gina with my dick in your mouth, I thought cynically. Was it chauvinistic and underhanded? Probably. Was it true? Definitely. Regardless, I enjoyed the sensations as she slowly sucked me. I felt a little guilty for manipulating her, but her lips and tongue soon made me forget all about it.

For a few minutes, I simply watched as she fellated me, her lips gliding smoothly over my rock-hard shaft. Occasionally, she took my cock out of her mouth and kissed along the underside ridge. But for the most part, she sucked me, her tongue dancing over my sensitive skin.

Finally, I pulled my manhood from her mouth. She looked up at me, her blue eyes glassy with lust. Wordlessly, I lifted her to her feet and we headed to my bed. As she lay back, I moved between her thighs, my dangling erection bumping her pussy. I held myself above her and we kissed for several long, delicious moments.

We were still kissing when I felt her hands move between us and caress my shaft. Then she

began rubbing the tip against her slippery folds. When she set the glans against her opening, I lowered my hips. Her pussy was tight, hot, and wet, and she moaned softly as I forced myself inside her.

When I finally bottomed out, I groaned softly. She was so snug that I was sure I felt her pussy's inner ridges. I tried to bury myself deeper, but my hips ground against her pelvis.

"Oh my goodness," she gasped. "I love how you fill me completely. Your dick was made especially for me. I just know it."

A moment later, I began thrusting, slowly at first, but with mounting speed. When I was close to my release, I buried myself inside her and waited until the feeling passed.

I stopped and started two more times. Each time I let my impending orgasm subside, I sucked Kendall's nipples, driving her wild. When I started thrusting after the second interlude, I felt Kendall's pussy flutter around my shaft. She pulled me to her chest as the flutters turned to spasms. With her breasts crushed between us, I rocked my hips, sliding my cock in and out of her deepest recesses.

When she came, she grew quiet; the sound of her breathing was all I could hear. Her pussy squeezed and relaxed, gripping my shaft as I moved within her. Finally, she let out a low moan and wrapped her legs around me, her inner muscles clenching wildly.

After her orgasm subsided, she tightened her legs and held my hips in place. I supported myself on my elbows, my arms under her shoulders. Her breath whispered in my ear as she panted. I grinned to myself as her pussy quivered with aftershocks.

Finally, her breathing returned to normal and I lifted my head to look at her.

"Wow," she said.

I nodded, smiling smugly.

"I bet you're pretty proud of yourself, huh?"

Once again, I flashed her a smug smile as I nodded.

"Wow," she said again, her eyes drooping shut.

After a minute or two, I experimentally moved my hips. She gasped, but didn't stop me.

"Come inside me," she whispered. "I want to feel it."

I nodded and picked up my pace. She was still sensitive from her climax, and I quickly drove her to another set of smaller orgasms (glorified aftershocks, really). When I reached the point of release, I started pumping madly, my dick jackhammering into her. Finally, I felt my cock swell with the first surge of orgasm.

With a grunt, I buried myself as deep as I could and then tried to force myself deeper still. As I emptied my balls into her, time stood still. Pleasure raced along my nerves, assaulting my brain and redoubling with each passing moment. I closed my eyes as my senses overloaded. Finally, I sagged against her, completely sated.

"Every time I think it can't get any better…," she said softly, her legs still wrapped around me, "but it does."

I kissed her shoulder, inhaling the scent of her skin as we held each other.

"One day," she whispered, "when you come inside me, we're going to make a baby."

My eyes snapped open.

She sighed contentedly.

Did she just say what I think *she did? Baby? B-A-B-Y, baby? Holy shit! I'm eighteen years*

old. I'm way *too young to be a father.*

"You'll make a good father," she said softly, as if reading my mind. "I just *know* it," she added. Then she kissed my shoulder.

I tried not to tense up in panic.

She continued planting tender kisses on my shoulder and neck.

Was she still on the pill? Would she even *tell* me if she stopped taking it? What would I do if she *did* stop taking it? Would I go back to rubbers again? Could I come in her mouth *every* time we had sex? Would she get suspicious if I did? How could I find out if…?

"What's the matter?" she asked.

"What?"

"You got tense all of a sudden," she said.

"Oh, sorry… um… I was starting to get a cramp."

"Oh, bless your heart. Do you need to move?"

"I'm fine now," I said. Then I had *another* panicked thought. I was still hard, and I was still inside her. How much sperm was still in my shaft? What would happen if it leaked into her? *Calm down!* I mentally shouted. I had just *filled* her with semen, what difference would another couple of drops make? Still…

"Where's your cramp?" she asked. "You're still tense."

"My back," I lied.

"Do you want me to rub it?"

Letting her believe that my back was tense was better than the alternative—explaining my panicked tenseness—so I agreed. When I pulled out of her, she looked into my eyes and smiled. I desperately hoped she couldn't see what I was *really* thinking.

"Lie on your stomach," she said. As I folded my arms beneath my chin, she straddled my thighs. Then she laughed, soft and short. "Oops," she said. "Your come's leaking out. Oh well, no baby tonight," she joked.

I hoped she didn't feel me grow even *more* tense. My mind raced as she cleaned herself with a wad of tissues.

"Where does it hurt?" she asked at last.

"It's easing off," I fibbed.

As she started rubbing my back, I tried to relax. Unfortunately, visions of a pregnant Kendall paraded through my imagination.

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The next morning, I woke up early. I hadn't slept well—I *never* slept well when Kendall and I shared a bed. Unlike Gina, she didn't spoon. Worse, she seemed to take her half of the narrow bed out of the middle. I tried to get comfortable and go back to sleep, but it was useless. Finally, I climbed out of bed, taking care not to jostle her.

I cast about for something to do and then decided to work out. I took out my weights as quietly as I could. Then I watched myself in the mirror as I did biceps curls. Since my body was on autopilot, my mind wandered. As I thought about the night before, I tried to forget Kendall's comment about getting pregnant.

I wanted to be a father, but on my *own* terms, and when I was ready. I *definitely* wasn't ready. I wanted to finish college before getting married, much less starting a family. And the night

before wasn't the first hint that Kendall had dropped about our future together.

Kendall wanted me to herself. I didn't have to be a couples counselor to figure that one out. And unlike Gina, Kendall *was* the type of person to give me an ultimatum. I didn't think things had reached that point, but I saw the writing on the wall.

How would I react if she *did*? I don't think anyone likes being told what to do, and I certainly wasn't an exception. I think Kendall realized that, however, and she wasn't willing to risk our relationship by making demands that I wasn't willing to accept.

Worse, I don't think she understood how much I loved Gina. The dark-haired, dark-skinned beauty was my first love, my first *true* love.

I wanted to ask when life had become so complicated, but that would just be whining. Instead, I drowned out my misgivings with mindless exercise—I reversed my grip on the curling bar and started doing shoulder presses. After that, I did sit-ups. Then I did push-ups. At last, I stood up and studied myself in the mirror.

My stomach was *finally* starting to gain some definition. Abdominal muscles are very dense, and it takes a lot of work to shape them. My shoulders, chest, and arms were already well-defined, and my legs had never really been a problem. I still wanted to lose a few pounds, though. The dreaded "Freshman Fifteen" were only a few heavy meals away.

"What are you doing?" Kendall asked from the bed.

Startled, I turned.

"Were you working out?"

"Yeah," I said. "I woke up early, and… well…" As I trailed off, I shrugged. Then I grabbed a dirty t-shirt and wiped the sheen of sweat that covered my torso.

"Do you want to come back to bed?" she asked.

I shook my head. "I need to get in the shower," I explained. "Trip and I have to be at the airport by nine. And I've still got to pack."

She frowned.

"What?"

"Why don't you just *drive* to Nashville?" she asked. "It's only four hours."

"Because I miss flying," I said.

"But it's so dangerous."

"It is *not*. I'm a good pilot."

"I'm sure you are," she said. "But what if the plane breaks down? Or what if you run out of gas?"

"The plane's not going to break down. And I know how much gas we need to take. We'll have a comfortable reserve. The useful load on a 172 is more than enough for me, Trip, and all the gas we'll need," I explained. Then I realized that she didn't know "useful load" from a hole in the ground. "Don't worry about it," I said.

She frowned again.

"*What?*"

"Nothing," she said.

"No, not 'nothing.' What's the matter?"

"What if something happens? What if some piece falls off the plane or something? Can you land in a field? What if you don't see another plane until it's too late, and you crash into each

other? What if—"

"What if you worry too much?" I asked rhetorically, cutting her off. "It's safer than driving a car." When she set her jaw and shook her head, I looked at her in astonishment. "Hold on, have you ever flown before?" I asked.

She shook her head.

"Never?"

Another headshake.

"Not once?"

"I think I'd know if I'd ever been in an airplane before," she snapped.

"Whoa," I said hastily. "I was just asking."

"I still don't see why you can't just drive," she said.

"Because I *like* flying."

"I don't see what's so special about it."

"Let me take you up sometime," I said. "You'll love it."

She turned pale and immediately shook her head.

"It'll be fun," I urged. When she still looked like I was asking her to kiss a rattlesnake, I shook my head in disbelief. Then I laughed. "I thought 'fear of flying' was a metaphor," I said. "You're afraid to *fly*, aren't you?"

"No," so answered immediately. "I just don't see the need. And I don't see why *you* want to do it either."

"I want to do it because it's fun. It saves lots of time. And besides, it's relaxing," I said. "I've got to concentrate on flying, so I don't have time to worry about all the things in my life that I can't control." *Like a girlfriend who doesn't want me to fly,* I thought sourly. "Now, I'm gonna take a shower. Do you wanna join me?"

"You go on," she said, shaking her head.

"Suit yourself."

With that, I grabbed my towel and shower basket and headed into the foyer. I'd forgotten to put on a pair of shorts, but I didn't think T.J. or Glen would catch me.

Halfway through my shower, I started playing with myself. Kendall might not want to shower with me, but my balls still expected to be relieved. Before I worked up a good rhythm, however, I heard my door open. A moment later, Kendall tentatively pulled the shower curtain open.

"Do you mind if I join you?" she asked.

"C'mon in," I said. "The water's fine."

"That's not *all* that's fine, I see," she said, grinning at my erection.

I shrugged unrepentantly.

"I… I'm sorry about earlier," she said softly. "I just don't want anything to happen to you."

"Don't worry about it," I said, pulling her into my arms. "I'm a good pilot. I don't have a whole lot of hours yet, but that means I'm doubly careful. I don't wanna die, trust me."

"I know, but I still worry about you."

"I'll be fine. I know what I'm doing."

After a pause, she nodded.

"Now," I asked, "do you want me to wash your hair?"

"Yes, please."

"I've got a special cream rinse," I said, hefting my erection for emphasis. "Maybe you'd like the cream before the shampoo?"

"You've got a one-track mind," she said. "Do you know that?"

"When I've got my girlfriend in the shower with me? You bet your sweet ass I do. Now, speaking of sweet asses…"

✧ ✧ ✧

When Trip and I got to the airport, I told the man at the FBO who we were. While Trip leafed through magazines in the small waiting area, the man made a copy of my pilot's license and medical certificate. Then he handed me the renter's exam.

The exam was an open-book test, using the Cessna 172's manual. The questions were simple. *What is the total useable fuel capacity? What is the aircraft max gross weight? What is the stall speed?* And so on. As I answered the questions, I learned about the plane (which was the whole point).

It took me about thirty minutes to finish and then the man behind the counter graded it. Needless to say, I didn't miss a single question. As I filled out the rental agreement, another man entered the building.

"Hey, Doc," he said to the man behind the desk. "I'm supposed to have a ten o'clock checkride."

"This is him, Earl," Doc said, pointing to me. "Paul… Hughes," he added, reading my name from his copy of my pilot's license, "meet Earl Walker. Earl here will be your checkride instructor."

After Earl and I shook hands, we walked out to the waiting Cessna.

"How old're you?" he asked.

"Eighteen."

"And how many hours do you have?"

"Ninety-one," I said. My father had several *thousand* flight hours, but I was proud of my ninety-one. It might not seem like a lot, but for a young pilot, it was more than twice the required hours to get a license.

Earl asked me about my experience, but as soon as I told him my father was an airline pilot, he grew wary.

"Did your father teach you to fly?" he asked.

"No, sir. I went to ground school and had a regular flight instructor."

"Your father's got good sense, then," he said. "Too many guys think they can teach their kids to fly. And there's a reason some guys are instructors and some guys fly busses. No offense," he added.

"I'm sure my father would agree," I said dryly.

As Earl and I went through the Cessna's preflight inspection, he quizzed me on the plane. What was the correct fuel grade? What was the proper fuel color? Where were the fuel tank drains located? And so on. He was gruff, but conscientious and thorough. I answered his questions, and he seemed satisfied with my answers.

The checkride itself was fairly straightforward. Earl and I spent an hour in the air, going over stall speeds, emergency procedures, and more. My landing was a little rougher than I would have liked, but it was still pretty good.

"Well," Earl said when I rolled to a stop and killed the engine, "I reckon you pass."

"Thanks."

"You should come out and fly more often, though," he said.

"I wish I could," I said. "But without my family's plane, I can't just go fly whenever I feel like it. Besides," I added, "I'm on a college student's budget."

"Why not join the Flying Club?" he asked.

"The Flying Club?"

He nodded. As we walked back to the FBO, he explained about UT's Flying Club. The students got discounts on aircraft rental, instruction, and more. Not surprisingly, he was one of the club's instructors.

"How much does it cost to join?" I asked.

"Fifteen bucks a quarter," he said. Then he gave me the name of the on-campus club sponsor. "And we can give you the club rate for your trip today," he added. "It'll save you ten bucks an hour."

"Wow, thanks."

"Don't mention it. I reckon you're just the type of person we want in the club. You're not a hotdog, and you take flying seriously."

"I try," I said, my cheeks warming.

"Sign him up, Doc," Earl said when we entered the FBO. "And give him the UT club rate."

"You got it, Earl," Doc said, grinning. Then he leaned forward conspiratorially. "He's a crotchety old coot," he said to me, "but he's got a soft spot for young pilots."

"Doc," Earl warned, "my hearin' ain't what it used to be, but you don't talk as quiet as you used to either."

With a friendly scowl at the man behind the desk, Earl shook my hand, nodded to Trip, and went into the office to fill out paperwork.

Twenty minutes later, Trip and I were airborne. He was a little nervous at first, but when he saw how serious I was, he relaxed.

I had originally planned on an hour and forty-five minutes flying time, but it was only 140 nautical miles to the airport closest to Trip's house. So the flight would actually take a little more than an hour. The plane didn't have an autopilot, but the day was bright and sunny, with enough chill in the air that there wasn't much turbulence. In other words, it was a *perfect* day for flying.

Trip's father, Frank, picked us up at the airport. Like Trip, he was tall and lean. We talked about school as we drove to his house. On the way, Trip pointed out one of the houses he'd bought and renovated.

"Trip tells me you two are going into business next summer," Frank said.

"Yes, sir. That's what Trip tells *me* too," I said, grinning at my friend.

"You don't have to call me 'sir,'" Frank said. "It makes me think you want a recording contract."

"I don't think I'd know what to do with one," I said. "I can't sing to save my life."

The rest of the way back to Trip's house, he and his father talked about music. Frank was a country music producer, and even though I didn't *listen* to country music, I did recognize some of the names he mentioned.

Trip's house was a little bigger than I expected, but definitely not a mansion. It was simply a

nice house in an upper middle-class neighborhood, just like any of the ones I grew up around.

Trip actually had a small apartment over the garage, which he and his uncle had built. His uncle was a general contractor, which explained how Trip had begun his home renovation business in the first place.

After Trip and I threw our things in his apartment—which his step-mother had prepared for our stay—I called Kendall to let her know that we had arrived safely. We talked for a minute and then said goodbye (I didn't want to run up Trip's long-distance phone bill). Next, I called Gina's room, but no one answered.

Finally, Trip and I headed to the main house. When Trip was mobbed by his two younger brothers, Frank introduced me to his wife, Darlene. She was an attractive brunette in her late twenties or early thirties.

"Paul," Trip said, "I want you to meet Dale and Josh."

"Hi, Dale," I said, dropping to one knee. "I'm Paul."

"I'm pleased to meet you," he said politely. Then he stuck out his small hand.

"Are you excited about your party?" I asked him as I shook his hand.

He nodded.

"How old are you today?" I asked.

"Five," he said. Then he got a mischievous look. "Did you bring me a present?"

"*Dale*," his mother chided.

"Of course we brought you presents," Trip said, coming to my rescue. "But you can't open 'em till your party."

I nodded seriously.

"Paul," Trip said, "this is Josh."

I stood up and held out my hand to the little boy Trip held.

He buried his face in Trip's shoulder.

"He's kinda shy around strangers," Trip said. Then he looked at his youngest brother. "Can you say hi to Paul?" he asked.

Josh shook his head.

"Well, we can get to know each other later," I said to Josh.

When Darlene offered to take him, Trip shook his head.

"I've got him," he said, "C'mon, Josh, let's give Paul a tour. D'you wanna go with us, Dale?"

"Sure!"

✧ ✧ ✧

I didn't know what to expect from the party itself, but I actually had a lot of fun.

A party for a five-year-old is actually a party for the *parents* of other five-year-olds, where the kids can play together, and the parents can rotate who's on duty to watch the kids. Consequently, I met a lot of Trip's parents' friends. They were all couples in their thirties, and they seemed like a nice group of people.

Trip and I spent most of our time in the backyard with the kids, roughhousing and generally having a blast. I didn't think about Kendall. I didn't think about Gina. I didn't think about Professor Joska. I didn't think about *anything* that weighed on my mind. As I dodged the horde of rampaging five-year-old boys, I silently thanked Trip for his foresight.

When it was time to open presents, we all trooped back inside. As Trip and I stood on the

periphery of the group, he leaned close and quietly explained that I'd gotten Dale a set of Legos. Trip had bought them, of course, but it was his "gift" to me for flying us from Knoxville.

"Besides," he said, "you've had a lot on your mind lately. I didn't wanna add buying a gift for a five-year-old to your list."

"Thanks," I said. "But when did you get to the mall to buy Legos?" As far as I knew, I was the only one of our circle of friends who had a car.

"Abby's parents let her use their car last weekend," he said. "We went shopping and then had dinner with Luke and Tara."

The weekend before, Gina and I had a big argument (about Kendall, and then Regan, and then too many other things to remember). Consequently, I spent the entire weekend in the design lab, the Sports Bubble, or alone in my room. I guess I shouldn't have been surprised that Trip had gone out with Abby and I didn't know a thing about it.

"She needed to buy something for her grandmother's birthday," he explained, "so it was a good chance for us to go to the mall. And when you said you'd come this weekend, I just chose a couple of my extra presents and put *your* name on the cards."

"Thanks, man. I really appreciate it," I said. Then, "Hold on… you had *dinner* with Abby? Like… a date? I thought you two weren't serious."

"We're not," he said. "She knows we're just friends. I know she wants to be more than friends, but… I guess I'm not ready for that. And…"

"And?"

"And she's not really my type. She's nice and all, but she's… well… she's too… conventional."

"Conventional?"

"I know this is gonna sound kinda weird," he said, "but I guess I like girls who're a little bit… I dunno… wilder. I don't mean a 'wild and crazy kinda girl,'" he said, "but a girl who's… exciting. That's not the right word, though. Abby's a really nice girl, but…"

"I think I know what you mean," I said.

Before he could say anything else, Josh came running toward us.

"Look," he said, holding up a Tonka dump truck.

"Oh, I forgot to mention," Trip said. "You bought Josh a gift too."

As I picked up the three-year-old—who had warmed to me—I looked a question at Trip.

"You can't have a birthday party for a five-year-old without getting presents for his little brother too," Trip explained.

"Look," Josh demanded again, holding up the truck.

"Do you like it?" I asked.

With a grin, he nodded. Then he hugged me. The little metal truck banged me in the head, but a hug from a happy three-year-old will make up for almost anything.

"I think you're gonna be a good daddy," Trip said, smiling indulgently.

At my shocked look, his smile turned to laughter.

"C'mon," he said. "Let's get back to the party. I think it's time for cake and ice cream."

"Yeah, time for cake!" Josh yelled. Then he looked at me. "Do you like cake?"

"I sure do," I said. "Now, let's go see if we can *find* some!"

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The rest of the weekend was blissfully relaxing. After the party, we hung out with Trip's parents. For dinner, we all went out to a nice restaurant in neighboring Brentwood. Josh insisted on sitting next to me, and I discovered exactly how talkative a three-year-old can be.

Later, after the boys went to bed, Frank and Darlene opened a bottle of wine and shared it with us. Trip and I brought in two loads of firewood and built a fire.

The next day, we had a *big* breakfast. Darlene cooked eggs, sausage, biscuits, gravy, grits, and pancakes. I ate too much, and I knew I'd have to work hard to keep the calories from going straight to my stomach, but it felt good to simply enjoy a meal.

We spent the rest of the morning doing a lot of nothing. Dale played with his birthday presents and Josh insisted on showing me his toys, one by one. When he was done, the playroom was littered with Tonka trucks, Weebles, stuffed animals, and more. I don't know what it is, but there's something mindlessly relaxing about playing with a three-year-old and his toys.

By the time Trip's family drove us back to the airport, I felt happier than I had in a month.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

When I got to Design class on Monday, I was the first to arrive. Over the next five minutes, the class slowly filled up, but a lot of people were missing. All of the members of our team had arrived, however, and we looked rested and refreshed. Everyone else looked haggard. Even Gracie Fisher and her team were hard-worn.

Trip's foresight had paid off. With Samantha's schedule, Antonio's encyclopedic knowledge, my design skills, and Trip's overall leadership (not to mention his attention to detail), we had finished our projects before the weekend.

"These folks look like death warmed over," Antonio whispered.

"We've got a good team," Trip said softly. "Which reminds me," he added, "Paul found out that Joska teaches most of the first-year design classes. And if we have to take Joska for the rest of the year, we should probably try to get in the same class. That way, maybe he'll keep us together as a team."

Samantha and Antonio both nodded.

Since the fall quarter was drawing to a close, we had advising and registration for the upcoming quarter. Trip and I had talked about it during the return flight from Nashville; we wanted to arrange our schedules so we could take classes together. I also had to consider Kendall and Gina's schedules, and I wanted to model for Siobhan's class.

Unfortunately, I didn't know where to start—I felt like a juggler with too many balls in the air. Regardless, I mentally worked on my class schedule until Professor Joska strode into the room. Several people straggled in behind him and then the bell rang.

"I hope you all enjoyed your weekend," he said.

I couldn't tell if he was being facetious or just sadistic.

"I noticed that the design labs were full of diligent students," he continued. "One notable absence this weekend, however," he said, fixing his gaze upon Trip, "was Mr. Whitman and team. So, Mr. Whitman, have you found a design lab you prefer more than the ones we provide for you? Perhaps one in your favorite pizza parlor?"

"No, sir," Trip said without hesitation.

I marveled at his aplomb. I would've been boiling if Joska had leveled his scorn at me.

"Perhaps you've come to your senses and decided to give up your dreams of becoming an architect?" Joska asked.

"No, sir," Trip said.

"Then where were you and your team this weekend, while all your classmates were industriously toiling away on their final projects?"

"Antonio went home for the weekend," Trip said. "Samantha was here on campus. And Paul and I went to visit my family in Nashville."

"Nashville?" Joska asked almost pleasantly.

"It was my little brother's birthday."

I got the strange feeling that Trip was actually *enjoying* himself.

"Your little brother's birthday?" Joska mocked. "How quaint. And I suppose you didn't feel the need to work on your project this weekend?"

"No, sir," Trip answered.

"And why *not?* What makes you and your team so special, Mr. Whitman?"

"We finished on Friday," Trip said.

I thought I detected a hint of a grin on my friend's face, but it was gone before I consciously realized it. When I glanced at Professor Joska, I expected him to react with shock or outrage. Instead, he simply studied Trip, as if waiting for him to crack.

"Miss Fisher," Joska asked suddenly, "what time did you and your team leave the design lab last night?"

"About midnight," she said.

"Mr. Giles?" Joska prompted.

"The same."

"Mr. Spaulding?"

"About three o'clock this morning."

"Mr. Ivey," Joska asked, "how long were you and your team in the lab?"

"Um… till about ten this morning, I guess."

"You guess? Or you know?"

"Yeah, we left about ten," Ivey said. He and his team looked like hell.

"And Mr. Vang and his team straggled in after I did," Joska said. Then he turned his merciless gaze back to Trip. "So, Mr. Whitman, do you think your team is better than the others?"

"Absolutely, sir," Trip answered.

"Don't you think that's fairly arrogant?" Joska asked.

"No, sir," Trip said without a pause. "We finished on Friday, and no one else did. So it doesn't matter what I think—the results speak for themselves."

I fully expected Joska to blow his top. Instead, he merely laughed. It was short and incredulous, but it was definitely laughter.

"We're ready to turn in our projects now, if you'd like," Trip said evenly.

"By all means, be my guest, Mr. Whitman," Joska said.

I don't know how he did it, but Trip looked supremely confident as he stood up and reached for his carrying tube. At his nod, the rest of our team stood as well. As a group, we walked to the front of the class and deposited our drawings and critiques on Joska's desk. The rest of the class looked at us like we were insane. I tried not to smile smugly. Antonio didn't even *try*.

"Well," Joska snapped at the class, "what are you waiting for? Turn in your projects."

When everyone returned to their seats, he reminded us that the grading would be the same as our midterm projects: fifty percent, technical quality of our drawings; ten percent, critiques; and forty percent, a competition based on artistic execution and attention to detail.

Even though more than half of the class was clearly exhausted, Joska launched into his lesson, firing questions left and right. He *did* seem to take pity on everyone else, however, since most of his questions were directed at Trip, Samantha, and me (he had long since learned that Antonio could quote chapter and verse from the textbook).

For the remainder of the hour, I felt like I was in the ring with an Olympic-class wrestler, and that I *always* had to be on my toes. It was exhausting, but when the bell finally rang, Joska stopped. Then he looked at his watch, as if in surprise. Finally, he leveled his inscrutable gaze at me.

I returned it with as much equanimity as I could muster.

And I'll keep coming back for more, I thought stubbornly.

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Later, our intramural football team headed to play the Pikes. Gina ran up to me as soon as I got there. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Kendall draw back. I sighed and then pasted on a smile for Gina's benefit. After all, I wasn't upset with *her*.

"Hey," she whispered, "good luck tonight. The rest of the girls are rooting for the Pikes, but I want *you* to win. I can't cheer real loud, 'cause… well… you know."

I nodded.

"But in my heart, I'll be cheering for you," she finished with a smile.

"Thanks."

"*God*," she said at last.

"What?"

"This whole girlfriend/best-friend thing stinks."

"Huh?"

"I wanna throw my arms around you and give you a big kiss," she said. "But the guys on your team know Kendall as your girlfriend, right?"

I nodded.

"Maybe that wasn't the greatest idea after all," she said. "I thought it would be easier than this. And I didn't think Kendall would— Oh, never mind. Anyway," she said, "good luck. You know I'm cheering for you on the inside, even if I'm not jumping up and down like the rest of your team's fans."

"I know," I said. I started to rejoin my team, but Gina stopped me with a gesture.

"Paul?"

"Yeah?"

"Do you think we could get together tonight? I… I want to spend some time with you."

"That sounds like a great idea," I said.

"Maybe…"

"Maybe…?" I prompted.

"Maybe we could invite Kendall?"

I raised my eyebrows in disbelief.

"Well," she said, "*one* of us has to extend the olive branch."

"I'd like that," I said. "I'll ask her."

"Thanks," she said. Then, "Oh, what the hell…"

With that, she threw her arms around my neck and kissed me soundly. When she drew back, she grinned shyly and then ran toward the sidelines. I smiled at her retreating back and then joined my teammates.

"*Mais*," Luke said with a grin, "you'd make a *fine* Cajun."

Before I could reply, the referee blew the whistle to summon the team captains. Kendall looked like she wanted to talk to me, but she knew she'd have to wait.

The game started a few minutes later. We won the toss, and elected to receive the first kickoff. T.J. caught the ball and dashed upfield. He dodged a couple of defenders but the Pikes finally tackled him.

Trip threw a couple of quick passes and I even made a run (for a first down, thank you very

much). Then we scored a touchdown on a quarterback sneak. After we kicked off, the Pikes quickly returned the ball and scored a touchdown. For the rest of the half, the game went back and forth. We scored again, but so did the Pikes.

Things turned around for us at the start of the second half. When the Pikes returned the kickoff, their player fumbled the football, and I somehow scooped it up.

"Christ, *run*, Loverboy," T.J. screamed. Then he blocked for me as the Pikes rushed us.

T.J. managed to take out two tacklers, but I wasn't the fastest guy on our team. It took two Pikes to bring me down, but they eventually dragged me to the ground.

On the next play, Trip threaded a pass between two Pike defenders to our receiver, who then ran for a touchdown. We celebrated wildly, and the referee had to blow his whistle twice before we settled down.

After we kicked off, we were still fired up. The Pike quarterback was clearly rattled, and he threw a wobbly pass that Luke picked off and returned to the Pike twenty-yard line.

In the huddle, Trip called a running play. As soon as our center snapped the ball, I started moving. Trip turned and pitched the ball to me. I caught it in stride and aimed for a hole in the Pike line. Somehow, I made it through, but when I looked downfield, I saw a Pike between me and the end zone.

It was Rod.

I lowered my shoulder and sprinted into overdrive. I hit him right below the breastbone and he immediately flew backward with a grunt. Then I thundered over the goal line to the cheers of my teammates.

"Are you okay, man?" I asked Rod as we walked back to kick off.

"Get the fuck away from me," he said, still rubbing his chest.

"Dude, take it easy."

"Man, shut the fuck up."

"No, *you* shut the fuck up," T.J. said to him.

Where had T.J. come from? I wondered, startled. A minute before, he'd been walking toward midfield with the rest of our team.

"Go kick the fucking ball," Rod said dismissively.

"I'll kick your fuckin' ass," T.J. said. "That's what I'll kick."

"C'mon, T.J.," I said, "let's go."

T.J. muttered about "rich dickheads" all the way back to midfield.

When the Pikes got the ball, they didn't fumble it, but they didn't make a first down either. So they ended up punting the ball back to us. The Pike defense was angry but effective, so we couldn't manage to score. We had a comfortable lead, however, and all we had to do was maintain it.

On one of our possessions, Trip tossed the ball to me and I started running, with Glen leading the way. The Pikes quickly tackled me in spite of his blocking. As I started to get up, however, someone shoved me to the ground.

"Stay down, asshole," Rod said.

"Man, what's your fucking problem?" I growled as I jumped up. I felt like taking a swing at him, but he had Neil and another guy with him.

Before Rod could say anything else, the ref came running over, blowing his whistle. The

Pikes and I glared at each other, but we returned to our teams.

On the next play, one of our receivers caught a pass and was immediately tackled. When the ref blew the whistle to end the down, someone ran into me from behind.

"Oh, sorry," Rod said sarcastically.

"No problem, buttfucker," I said.

"What'd you call me?!"

"You heard me," I said. Then I turned dismissively and walked back to my teammates.

After that, we scored another touchdown, extending our lead. When the Pikes got the ball back, they were enraged and uncoordinated, so we shut them down at every opportunity. Finally, the ref blew the whistle to end the game. We had won, 35–14.

Afterward, we shook hands with the other team. When I got to Rod, he didn't let go of my hand.

"What do you want, Rod?" I asked, my voice hard.

"*What* did you call me?" he grated.

Since he wouldn't let go of my hand, I decided to make him pay for the pleasure; I started squeezing. Rod tried to squeeze my hand in return, but I was far, *far* stronger than he was. As the tableau drew out, he started to look panicked. Then his panic turned to pain. At that point, I took pity on him.

"Good game, Rod," I said.

"Fuck you."

Out of spite, I squeezed his hand again.

He had to bite back a yelp of agony.

I snorted contemptuously and let go of him. Then I turned to walk away.

With a roar of fury, he hit me from behind.

I tried to turn and grab him to break my fall, but I hit the ground and then he hit me. In a flash, my wrestling-trained reflexes kicked in and I began to reverse on him. Before I could, however, someone knocked him off me. For a half-second, T.J. stood over me. I braced for his attack. Then, to my utter amazement, he pounced on Rod and started hitting him. A second after that, Glen jerked the spitting and swearing T.J. to his feet.

"What the *hell* is going on here?" the ref asked as he ran up.

"I'm gonna fucking kill you, asshole!" Rod shouted at me.

"You'll have to go through me first, faggot," T.J. snarled. Then, "Glen, lemme go, God dammit."

Glen and the referee moved between the opposing groups of players. To my surprise, Glen still held T.J. at arm's length (on *our* side of the circle, of course).

"Save it for the bar after the game," the ref said. "Now, everyone, break it up. I said *break it up!*"

After a tense moment, Glen calmly turned toward the edge of the circle. "We're *leaving*," the big man said, the voice of reason.

"Yeah, go on, you pussies," Rod taunted.

I turned and lunged at him, but Luke caught me before I got close.

"It ain't worth it, *chèr*," he said softly. "Just let it go. He ain't nothin'."

Rod's fraternity brothers didn't like losing any more than he did, and they jeered at us. To my

surprise, Glen practically handed T.J. to Trip.

"Don't let him go," Glen said to my friend. Then he turned and walked toward the Pikes. "Y'all just go on," he said to them. "We don't want no trouble."

"Pussy," Rod taunted.

Glen didn't react.

Unfortunately, Rod made the mistake of thinking that was a sign of weakness. When he swung at Glen, the big man simply stepped out of the way. As Rod overbalanced, Glen helped him along with a little shove. Rod landed face-first in the grass.

The referee tried to intervene, but Rod came up screaming for blood. He lunged, but Glen simply stepped out of the way. Again. Instead of giving him a shove, Glen caught Rod's arm. Glen's touch looked as light as a feather, but when he turned Rod's wrist, the Pike howled in pain and rage.

"I told you," Glen said evenly, "we don't want no trouble."

With Rod's arm in a wrist lock, Glen easily shepherded the belligerent Pike back toward his teammates. At that point, the referee asserted himself again. The Pikes glared at Glen—and largely ignored the referee—but they backed away, still muttering.

Our team gathered on our sideline.

"How the fuck did you do that?" Jeff asked Glen. "Karate?"

Glen slowly turned his head and looked at Jeff, regarding him silently. After a moment, he simply sighed and looked away.

"Kung fu?" Jeff pressed.

Glen must've realized that he wasn't going to dodge Jeff's question, but his curt headshake wasn't much of an answer.

"Judo?"

Glen didn't answer.

"Then *what?*" Jeff asked, his excitement undiminished by Glen's silence.

"It was aikido," Glen said at last.

"Ai-ki-what?"

"Aikido," Glen repeated.

"Fuckin' A," Jeff said. "Whatever it was, it was *cool!*"

Glen merely shook his head sadly.

"What started *that?*" Trip asked me, indicating the distant Pikes.

"I guess they don't like losing," I said as blandly as I could. Then I looked at Glen. I thanked him with a nod, which he returned. A moment later, my eyes came to rest on T.J. I hated the idea of thanking him, but he *had* come to my defense. Before I could say anything, however, he glared at me.

"Fuck you, Loverboy," he said.

I started to bristle, my fists clenched.

"Hey," Trip said quickly, "we're all on the same team here. Good game, y'all. We won, and that's what matters. So let's go celebrate."

"*Mais*," Luke said, "I need a beer."

The rest of the team tensely agreed.

T.J. glared at me for a moment longer. When the guys started making plans for a trip to one of

the bars on the Strip, he finally turned away.

Somehow, I didn't feel like celebrating. Adrenaline still coursed through my veins, and I was angry—angry with T.J., for being a prick, and angry with Rod, for being himself. Worse, Rod seemed like the type of spoiled rich guy who held a grudge. So I knew I'd just made an enemy who could cause me—and Gina—a *lot* of problems.

At the thought of Gina, I searched her out among the crowd of Pikes and Chi Os. When we made eye contact, she flashed me a worried look. I made an "I'll call you" gesture and she nodded. Then she discreetly blew me a kiss. Finally, she gave me another meaningful look and then turned to her sorority sisters.

"What does *she* want?" Kendall asked from right beside me.

Not, "Oh my goodness, Paul, I was so worried." Not, "Oh, Paul, are you hurt?" Not even, "What was that about?"

I sighed. I needed to get Kendall and Gina together so we could *talk* about our problems, because the hostility was tearing me up inside. Since Gina was willing to extend an olive branch…

"She wanted to get together tonight, just the three of us," I told Kendall. Then, "Hold on a second." I got Trip's attention and motioned him close. "Listen, I'm not gonna go with y'all tonight," I said.

"Why not, man?"

"I've got… stuff I need to do," I said. "With Kendall and Gi—"

"We can go out, if you want," Kendall interrupted.

"But what about Gina?" I asked quietly.

Her eyes darted nervously toward Trip.

"He's cool," I said. When she raised her eyebrows, I nodded. "He knows about the three of us. He figured it out a while ago."

Trip confirmed it with a nod.

"Invite Gina with us," Kendall said.

"Sure," Trip added.

I thought about it for a moment and then my stomach knotted as I realized that Kendall had neatly mousetrapped me. Gina could do something with us *in private*. But after the Pike loss and the near-brawl with Rod, Gina couldn't go out and publicly celebrate with us. The odds of someone seeing her with "the enemy" were simply too great. I knew it, Gina would know it, and Kendall *definitely* knew it.

"C'mon," Trip urged. "Invite Gina along. We'll have a few beers and then y'all can leave early."

"Sure, Paul," Kendall said. "I bet Gina would love to come with us."

"I'm sure she would," Trip agreed.

I glanced at Kendall. Did she know what she'd done? She *had* to. She wasn't an idiot. Far from it, as a matter of fact.

"Please, Paul," Kendall urged. "It'll be fun."

✧ ✧ ✧

"You want me to *what?!*" Gina practically shrieked.

I held the phone away from my ear.

"Paul, that has to be the dumbest idea you've ever had," she continued in a *slightly* calmer tone. "Your team just beat the Pikes. You almost got in a fight with Rod. I can't go out *in public* and celebrate with you. What were you thinking?" she asked. Then she grew deadly quiet. "This was *her* idea, wasn't it?"

"No," I said immediately. "It was mine."

"You're covering for her," she said. "Do you think I can't tell when you're lying to me?"

"I'm not lying."

"You are *too!* Paul, she knew I wouldn't be able to celebrate with you in public! I bet she was all smiles when she mentioned it, that conniving bi—"

"Gina! It was my idea."

"Is that what you want me to believe?"

I didn't want to lie to her—any more than I already was—so I kept my mouth shut. I *hated* lying, but I didn't know what else to say.

"That's what I *thought*," she said. "It *was* her idea."

"Gina, no one will see you."

"And what if you're wrong?" she asked acidly. "It won't be *you* that gets blackballed."

"They wouldn't do that to you."

"You wanna *bet?!* If they see me out celebrating with your team, you just watch them. Regan and Rod are *furious*. They were even trying to get me to break up with you. And you think they won't blackball me if I go out and party with you? Ha!"

"We'll go someplace discreet," I countered.

"On the *Strip?!* Have you lost your mind? There *isn't* anyplace discreet on the Strip. Paul, if a Pike or Chi O sees me with you and your team, I'm *history*. Don't you understand that?"

Unfortunately, I understood it all too well. But I was between a rock and a hard place. What could I do?

"Let's just stay in tonight," she urged. "We can sneak up to your room, and we don't have to worry about anyone seeing us."

"But what about Kendall?"

Silence.

"What about the olive branch?" I asked, my hopes dying quietly.

"The olive tree burned down," Gina said.

"What do you want me to do?"

"I want you to spend a quiet night with your girlfriend," she said. "Your *first* girlfriend. We don't have to do anything. I just want to spend some time with you."

"But I told the guys…"

"Paul, please…"

"But… you can come out with us for a little while. We don't have to stay long," I said.

"I can't," she said, tears in her voice. "You *know* I can't."

"But I told the guys…," I repeated lamely.

"This is all *her* fault," Gina fumed.

"Gina, please—"

"I *hate* her," she screamed.

I had to jerk the phone away from my ear as Gina hung up with a ringing crash.

✧ ✧ ✧

I ended up going to the bar with everyone, but things didn't quite work out the way Kendall had planned. I wasn't in a good mood at *all*, and I made sure that she understood why. She tried to coax me into a better mood, but I didn't want to be cheered up, especially by her.

"I gotta go," I said suddenly. Then I looked at my watch as I stood up. "If I get to the Bubble before ten," I said, "I can still work out."

"Work out?" T.J. asked. Then, "C'mon, Loverboy, stick around. I'll even buy you a beer."

"Paul, *please*," Kendall whispered.

"You can find your way home," I told her icily. Then I turned to Trip. "Make sure she gets home safe, okay?"

He nodded.

The guys raised a commotion when I threw five bucks on the table and turned to leave, but I didn't look back. They had their victory and their beer; they wouldn't miss me.

And Kendall certainly got her wish.

After all, I wasn't with Gina, was I?

✧ ✧ ✧

The next morning, Kendall tearfully apologized when we met for breakfast. I was still angry with her, but she *swore* that she hadn't thought about the consequences if Gina celebrated with us. I didn't believe her, but what could I do? I couldn't prove that she'd done it intentionally, and if I didn't accept her apology, it would be the same as calling her a liar to her face.

"Paul, I swear," she said, "I didn't even think about it."

Bullshit, I thought. She was too smart *not* to have thought about it.

"I *didn't*, Paul," she repeated.

"I know you didn't," I lied. What else could I do? Worse, I had to play the part of accepting—and believing—her apology. So I pulled her close and hugged her. I tried to relax, but inside, I was simmering.

We ate breakfast in silence. Kendall could tell that I was still upset, but I tried to play it off as anxiety about my advising for the upcoming quarter. We each had our charade to play, so she accepted my explanation.

How can people live like this? I wondered.

✧ ✧ ✧

The College of Architecture Advising Center was crowded, although not as crowded as it might've been. A lot of students had undoubtedly dropped out of the program, driven away by the difficult courses or their own misgivings.

As a freshman, I didn't have a regular advisor. After my first year—if I survived—I'd be assigned a permanent faculty advisor. But for the moment, I had to settle for whomever was available. In reality, I knew exactly which sections I was going to take, and I simply needed the advisor's signature.

It wouldn't be that easy.

I spent almost half an hour with a graduate teaching assistant who obviously thought he knew more about my course requirements than I did. Worse, he repeatedly told me how lucky I was to *get* to take classes from Professor Joska. The TA even said Joska's name with reverence.

Why does everyone worship the water this guy walks on? I wondered sullenly.

When the TA actually looked at my schedule, I had to explain why I didn't need to take English 102. *Then* I had to explain why I didn't want a class at three o'clock on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday (that was when Siobhan's class met).

To top it all off, my current project team had settled upon a Design 172 section that fit all of our schedules, so I had to explain to the advisor why I needed that *specific* section. By the time I had to tell him—for the third time!—that I didn't *care* which other sections were available, I was ready to chew the furniture.

"But there are several other Design sections that have more openings," the advisor said. Again.

At that point, my frustration finally boiled over. I stood up and slammed my palms on the desk. The boom was loud enough that the whole room fell silent.

"I don't fucking *care* what other Design sections are open," I half-shouted. "I've just spent the last *week* getting this schedule figured out. And if the classes are open, just give me the ones I want. All you have to do is sign the fucking card. How goddamned hard can that *be?!*"

"Is there a problem, Mr. Hughes?" someone asked from behind me.

Joska!

"Because that's hardly the way to get your advisor to sign your schedule," he said.

I whirled, murder in my eyes. Then I clenched my fists and set my jaw, my nostrils flaring as I contemplated what would happen if I took a swing at him—or if I even cared.

With reckless disregard for his own safety, Joska stared me down. "Relax, Mr. Hughes," he said after a moment. When I didn't move, his eyes hardened.

I glanced away, ashamed of my violent train of thought, and I hated Joska all the more for it.

Satisfied that I wasn't going to do anything foolish, he turned to the advisor. "Let me see his schedule, please."

"Yes, sir," the advisor said immediately.

Joska studied the card for a moment. Then he nodded.

"Sir, I was trying to tell him that there are other Des—" the advisor started to say, but Joska cut him off with a gesture.

"Young Mr. Hughes undoubtedly wants the same section as his current classmates," Joska explained. Then he turned to me. "Since Mr. Whitman is probably the only reason you're still *in* the Architecture program, Mr. Hughes, I'm inclined to see if you can make it on your own."

My face flushed hot and my jaw ached from clenching it so hard.

"But I think I'll let you have the class you want," Joska continued. "I have a perverse sense of charity."

I was so surprised—and relieved—that I didn't even react to his barbed "charity" comment.

"Which of Professor Ledbetter's Drawing sections are open?" Joska asked the advisor, who quickly read off a series of days and times.

Then, without even *asking* me, Joska told me that I was taking a different Drawing 122 section. The one I wanted was with a professor named Stiglitz (Trip and I had chosen the same section). I started to balk, but Joska silenced me with a look.

"It's a better class for you, Mr. Hughes," he said. "In it, you can get the guidance you need."

I looked at him defiantly.

He stared at me for a moment longer, his eyes unwavering. Then he turned to the advisor. With a snap, he gestured for a pen. He didn't even glance at me as he wrote in the new Drawing section.

"Was there anything else you needed, Mr. Hughes?" Joska asked.

Still fuming, I shook my head.

"Good," he said. Then he signed my registration card and handed it to me. "Enjoy your Thanksgiving break. When you return, I'm sure you'll be ready for your final exam," he said, "although I doubt you can repeat your performance from the midterm."

Just watch *me,* I thought defiantly. *You can beat me down all you like, but I'll keep coming back for more.* Count *on it.*

He dismissed me with a nod.

Without a backward glance, I handed my revised—and approved—schedule to the registration clerk. As I walked back to the dorm, I felt jittery as the adrenaline in my system slowly dissipated. But I knew that I had earned another kernel of respect from Joska.

Give them to me like hard-won little bricks, you arrogant bastard, and I'll turn them into a building, I vowed silently.

✧ ✧ ✧

Later that afternoon, the SAE football team pounded us for the second time. They didn't just win, they *beat* us (we were lucky to score at all). With our loss, the Carrick Fourth Floor Intramural Football Team's season came to an end.

Gina had come to the game, but she avoided Kendall. I couldn't really blame her, either. As our team walked off the field, our friends and girlfriends commiserated with us. I looked for Gina, but she was gone.

With a sigh, I pulled up my sweatshirt's hood to ward off the chilly November wind. Luckily, Kendall read me wrong, and thought my disappointment was because we lost the game.

I *was* upset about losing, but it was just a game. How could I compare a football game to the girl who'd been my *life* for three years? As we walked back to the dorms, I didn't see the need to correct Kendall's misinterpretation.

After all, it would only cause problems.

✧ ✧ ✧

As I was getting ready to walk out the door on Wednesday morning, the phone rang. It was Gina.

"What time do you want to leave this afternoon?" she asked. It was the day before Thanksgiving, and her afternoon classes were abbreviated. We planned to drive home in a two-car caravan.

"I dunno," I said. "I need to meet Kendall for breakfast and see what her plans are."

"Oh, her."

"Do you want to have breakfast with us?" I asked.

"No thanks," Gina said. "I don't need the hassle. Anyway, what do you need to talk to her about?"

"I thought I told you… she wants me to give her a ride to Chattanooga."

"Of *course* she does."

"What's that supposed to mean?" I asked testily.

"Poor Kendall, the strong feminist, can't do anything without *you*, her man."

"That's not fair," I said. "She doesn't have a car."

"So? Her parents do. Why can't they come get her?"

"Because I'm here and they're in Chattanooga."

"They can drive up."

"Why?" I asked. "I'm already here. Besides, we have to drive *through* Chattanooga to get home. So why shouldn't I take her home?"

"Lots of reasons," Gina said. Then she abruptly changed the subject. "I don't know why I ever wanted her *in* this relationship."

"What's *that* supposed to mean?"

"What do *you* think it means?" she asked tartly. "She's trying to break us up, Paul. And that little stunt after the Pike football game was just the opening move."

"She is *not*," I protested.

"Whatever. Anyway, I've gotta go. I still need to pack. And don't worry about me, I'll drive down by myself. When you get rid of Kendall and get home, call me."

"'Get *rid* of Kendall'?" I sputtered.

"I'll talk to you tonight," she said. "Bye." Then she hung up.

With a roar of frustration, I slammed the phone into the cradle and stormed out.

Trip was waiting for me in the hallway.

"Everything okay?" he asked.

I shook my head.

"What's going on?"

"Gina," I said. "And Kendall. And… the usual shit."

"That sucks, man."

"No fucking kidding."

With that, I fell silent and Trip didn't try to draw me out. He was a good enough friend that he knew he'd eventually hear the story.

As we walked down the hill to meet Kendall, I pulled up my collar. The Knoxville weather had turned blustery and even colder. Low, grey clouds scudded across the sky.

A storm was building.

In a malicious twist of fate, the weather fit my mood perfectly.

✧ ✧ ✧

I didn't mention anything to Kendall about my conversation with Gina. I was sure that she'd simply spout some psychology at me and blame Gina for being Gina. I wasn't in the mood for *that* argument either, so I simply avoided the subject.

Later that afternoon, Trip's father came to pick him up, and I helped them load the car. Trip was taking home about as much as I was—a big duffel bag full of summer clothes and other things. When they drove off, I waved goodbye and then headed back upstairs, where I met Luke and Jeff as they were leaving their suite.

"Where're y'all off to?" I asked.

"Jeff invited me to spend Thanksgiving at his house," Luke said.

"This dumbass was going to spend the weekend in the dorm," Jeff said. "Can you believe

that?"

"You weren't going home for Thanksgiving?" I asked Luke.

He shook his head. "It's a long drive from Louisiana, *mon frère*."

"Why didn't you just fly home?" I asked without thinking.

"Ha! That's *farce*," he said, chuckling. "I can't afford a plane ticket."

"Oh, yeah, right," I said, chagrined.

"Are you driving to Atlanta?" Jeff asked.

I nodded. "Kendall and I are headed out in about an hour."

"Yeah, Meredith's parents picked her up a little while ago," Jeff said.

"You shoulda seen the look on his face," Luke teased.

"Man, shut the fuck up," Jeff said.

"What about Tara?" I asked Luke, changing the subject.

"We broke up," he said simply. Then he shrugged.

"I'm sorry to hear that," I said.

"*C'est la vie, chèr*."

"C'mon, man," Jeff said. "We'd better get going. My mom's probably waiting for us already."

I waved goodbye to them and then headed into my room. Billy and his friend Jamie had been there earlier, but they were both gone. T.J. and Glen had already left as well, bound for Collierville, at the other end of the state.

Since I had the room to myself, I decided to do a quick workout before I had to meet Kendall. I had a lot on my mind, and the exercise would do me good.

✧ ✧ ✧

When we got to Kendall's house, her mother greeted us warmly. Drew was still at football practice and Adam was working late on a case. I wanted to get on the road and get to Atlanta before dark, but Melissa insisted that I stay for dinner. So I called my mom and told her that I'd be home later.

Adam arrived right as dinner was ready. He simply took off his coat, removed his underarm holster, and joined us at the table. Dinner was good, and it was nice to spend time with Kendall's family, but I wasn't in a talkative mood. I guess I was worried about Gina. I don't know if Kendall could tell exactly what was bothering me, but she knew I was in a funk.

"Are you okay, Paul?" Melissa asked.

I pasted on a fake smile and nodded in reply. *I guess Kendall wasn't the only one who noticed*, I thought ruefully.

"Do you want to spend the night and drive home tomorrow morning?" Melissa asked. "You're more than welcome to stay."

"We can put my dad's old cot in my room," Drew suggested.

"No, thanks," I said. "It's only an hour and a half to my house. I'm fine."

"Are you sure, son?" Adam asked.

I nodded again, my face a mask of false assurance. I wasn't worried about getting home; I was worried about what I'd discover when I got there. Would Gina be angry? Would she be sullen? Would we fight about Kendall? Would we talk at all?

I think that's what scared me most—not talking to Gina. I could handle her resentment about Kendall. I could handle snippy comments. I could even handle the occasional arguments. But I

couldn't handle the silence.

"Are you sure you don't want to spend the night?" Kendall whispered.

"I need to get home," I said.

She gazed into my eyes for a moment. Then her face softened and she smiled sadly.

Unfortunately, I couldn't tell if she was sad that I was leaving, or that I was going home to *Gina*.

After dinner, I discreetly got Kendall's attention and then glanced at my watch.

"We'd better let Paul get going, Daddy," she said.

He frowned, but then looked at his watch. "You're probably right," he said.

With that, we all stood.

"I'm gonna go freshen my makeup," Kendall said. "And then I'll walk you out."

While she was in her room, I said my goodbyes to her family. Melissa made sure that I planned to have dinner with them when I picked Kendall up on Sunday. Drew gave me a sympathetic look and then grinned at his mother's mothering.

After a minute, Kendall returned. I shook Adam and Drew's hands one final time. Melissa gave me a hug and then Kendall and I headed outside. The weather hadn't improved any—it was still cold, windy, and damp. A big storm was definitely moving in, and I wanted to get home before it hit.

"Do you mind if I sit in the Jeep with you while it warms up?" Kendall asked.

I hadn't planned on *waiting* for it to warm up before I left, but I agreed anyway.

We talked for a few minutes and then she looked at me longingly. Our kiss was tentative at first, but quickly heated up. A minute later, things had gone from warm to hot, and I was fumbling at my fly, trying to extract my burgeoning erection.

As soon as I pulled out my hard-on, Kendall descended on it, taking me as deep as she could. The Jeep's windows had fogged up, so I wasn't worried about her parents seeing us. Unfortunately, I came a lot quicker than I thought I would.

When I didn't go soft, Kendall kept sucking me. I reached around and unbuttoned her sweater. Then I popped the catch on her bra and freed her breasts. She moaned as I pinched and rolled her nipples.

Breathless, she sat up and looked at me, her eyes glazed with lust. Then she pulled up her skirt and spread her legs. To my surprise, she wasn't wearing panties.

"I took them off when I freshened my makeup," she said. Then she moistened her lips and gave me a sultry look. "Do you want to fuck me?" she asked.

"I'd love to, but…"

"But what?"

"But there's absolutely *no* comfortable way to have sex in these seats," I said. (Gina and I had tried, a lot.)

"What about the back seat?" Kendall asked.

I shook my head. My things took up more than half of the back seat already.

"Paul, please," she said. "I want you inside me."

"Gina and I usually kept a blanket in the back, so we could get out and—"

"I don't care what you and Gina did," Kendall snapped. Then her face softened as she realized what she'd said.

Before I could reply, however, she leaned forward and started sucking me again. When she came up for air, she sat back in her seat and spread her legs. In the muted light coming through the fogged-up windows, I could easily see how plump and moist her pussy was. She motioned me between her legs. After barely a moment's thought, I shifted in my seat.

When I entered her, she gasped. It took me a moment to find the right angle, and then another moment to work my dick into her. She moaned when I eventually ground my hips against her pelvis.

"Fuck me, Paul. Fuck me hard."

Who was I to refuse?

She leaned back against the fabric of the door, and I was worried that it was going to tear. I was also worried that I might knock the idling Jeep into gear with my leg. But I wasn't worried enough to stop thrusting. Her breasts bounced with each thrust, and she urged me on, her face a mask of ecstasy.

As I pounded into her, I tried to ignore how I didn't have a good place to brace my hands. I tried to ignore the way I had to prop one leg on my seat, while the four wheel drive lever was a painful reminder of where I had to position my other leg. I tried to ignore the sound as her shoe struck the dashboard every time I thrust. I tried to ignore a *lot* of distractions.

Thankfully, her pussy felt like a furnace, and the heat soon had me thinking of one and only one thing: my own need to get off. Finally, I buried myself deep inside her and felt the first rush of release. With a grunt, I filled her with my seed.

When my orgasm subsided, I collapsed against her, heedless of the soft-sided door that now had to support *both* our weight. She wrapped her legs around me and hugged me tight.

"Gina doesn't love you," Kendall whispered in my ear. "Not like I do."

✧ ✧ ✧

The drive home was uneventful, which was good, because my mind was a million miles away. Lightning flashed in the distance, and the Jeep rocked as wind gusts buffeted it, but I was on autopilot.

Kendall's words echoed in my mind.

Maybe Gina had been right, and Kendall's "stunt" after the Pike football game really *had* been the opening move of some Kendall versus Gina showdown.

By the time I got home, I hadn't come to any conclusion. If anything, I was more confused and frustrated than ever. I pulled into my driveway and turned off the engine. It pinged and popped as it cooled, and the wind howled around me, adding to the dissonance.

Finally, I cleared my head, grabbed my duffel bags, and left the relative warmth and comfort of the Jeep. My parents had left the porch lights on and the door was unlocked, so I stepped inside. I waited a moment, but no one came to greet me.

"Hello?" I called.

When Mom and Erin came out of the kitchen, their eyes widened in surprise.

"We didn't hear you come in," Mom said.

I dropped my bags as she ran toward me. She had a mixing spoon in her hand, but that didn't stop her from wrapping her arms around my neck. I hugged her and then lifted her off her feet. When I set her down, I put my arm around Erin as well.

"Where's Dad?" I asked.

"He's in the garage working on the Corvette," Mom said. Then, "Erin, run and tell Dad that Paul's home."

Erin grinned at me and then dashed off, her blonde ponytail bouncing behind her.

"Oh, Paul," Mom said, "it's good to have you home. How was your drive? Did you hit the storm?"

"Thanks, fine, and no."

A moment later, my dad and Erin emerged from the kitchen. Mom put her arm around my waist as we walked toward them. I shook Dad's hand and he smiled in greeting.

"Jeez, son," he said at last, "don't they feed you at UT?"

"*David*," Mom admonished. Then, "You *do* look thinner, Paul."

"Well, I haven't lost weight," I said. *Not really*, I added mentally, although I was down to 175 pounds (on the Sports Bubble scale). "I'm just watching what I eat and working out a lot," I explained. "And I've got lots of schoolwork, of course."

"You haven't lost weight?" Mom asked. "Your pants are practically falling off. We'll have to buy you some new ones at the after-Thanksgiving sales."

"Yeah," I said. "I was kinda hoping we could go shopping."

"Oh, great," Dad teased, "*more* of my hard-earned money out the door."

"*David!*"

"I can pay for it, if you want," I said.

"That's okay, son," Dad said. "I'll let you pay for everything that your mother *doesn't*."

That was the same as saying he'd pay for everything, and he nodded when I smiled gratefully.

"Can I go shopping too?" Erin asked.

"No," Dad said immediately.

"That's not fair," Erin complained, but her heart wasn't really in it. I think she was saying it more to see what she could get.

"You've got a birthday coming up," Mom said to her.

"Besides," Dad said, "you haven't gotten any bigger. You don't need new clothes."

Erin started to protest, but Dad picked her up and threw her over his shoulder. Then he swatted her upturned butt.

"Dad! Put me down!"

Instead of putting her down, he marched toward the kitchen.

"Do we still have that recipe for Roast Leg of Little Girl?" he called as he turned the corner. "I thought I saw it somewhere."

As Erin laughed and squealed in protest, Mom smiled up at me.

"Have you eaten?" she asked. "I could fix you a sandwich or two," she said. Then she glanced at my waist. "Or three."

"I'm fine, Mom," I said. "I had a big dinner with the Paytons."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm sure. Thanks, though."

"Okay. Well, come on in then. I've got clean sheets on your bed, and there are fresh towels in the bathroom. And…"

It was good to be home.

✧ ✧ ✧

"Gina called earlier," Mom said, after I called Kendall to let her know I'd made it home safely.

"Oh?"

"She wanted you to give her a call when you got in."

"Did she sound upset?" I asked.

"Not really. She sounded happy to be home. Are things still bad between her and Kendall?"

"How'd you know about that?" I asked, startled.

"Susan," Mom said in gentle reproach. "She told me a little about what was going on."

"Oh, yeah."

"And Elizabeth and I are friends, dear," she added. "Just because our children are off at college doesn't mean we stopped talking."

"I know," I said, although it hadn't occurred to me that Mom might know more about my life than just what I told her.

"Gina hasn't shared a lot of details with her mother, but Elizabeth can tell that she's not very happy."

I agreed with a sigh.

"You sound like you're under a lot of pressure too," Mom added quietly. "Do you want to talk about it?"

"No," I said curtly. "I'll deal with it."

"O-okay," she said.

I felt bad for cutting her off like that, but I didn't want to rehash the past month's misery. "I'd better call Gina," I said at last.

Mom nodded. Then she put her hand on my arm and smiled up at me. She looked sad, and I felt even worse.

In my room, I spent a few minutes gathering my thoughts. I really didn't know what to do about the situation with Kendall and Gina, and I had tried everything I could think of. At the moment, however, I was worried that Gina was still angry with me—or worse. When I finally I picked up the phone and dialed her number, Leah answered.

"Hey, Paul. Are you coming over tonight?" she asked.

"I dunno, kiddo," I said wearily.

"I'm not a kid," she said immediately.

Before I could apologize, Gina seized the phone from her.

"Sorry," Gina said, "Leah's being a real pest tonight."

Leah squawked in the background.

"It's okay," I said.

"Well, it's not okay with *me*," Gina said. Then she covered the phone and shooed away her sister. "Sorry about that. It's just me now," she said. "So, how was your drive?"

I analyzed her tone, trying to discern her mood. "The usual," I answered noncommittally. "How was yours?"

"The same, I guess," she said. Then, "Um… do you mind if I come over?" She didn't seem upset at all.

"Nope," I said, my mood brightening immediately. "Come on over."

"Um…"

"Yeah?"

"Well," she said, "if it's okay with your parents, do you mind if I spend the night? If you want me to, that is."

"Of course I want you to," I said. Then, "Hold on a sec, lemme ask my mom." A minute later, I came back to the phone. "It's fine with her," I said.

"Great! I'll see you in ten minutes."

It was raining by the time Gina's car pulled into the driveway, so I met her with an umbrella. She carried her familiar overnight bag, and smiled gratefully when she saw me.

"I thought I was gonna get soaked," she said. Then she tilted her face up for a kiss.

Her body felt warm against mine, and her lips were as willing as ever, so our quick kiss turned into more. In the span of a few heartbeats, all of the arguments and friction from the past month seemed like a bad dream. The rain beat upon the umbrella, and the chill seeped into our bones, but neither of us cared.

Eventually, we pulled back and shared a smile. Then she looped her arm through mine and we headed into the warmth and safety of the house.

"Does your mom need any help with the baking?" she asked. Then, "You know you're coming over to our house for Thanksgiving dinner, right?"

"No, I didn't," I said. I guess I hadn't been home long enough for Mom to fill me in on our plans.

Gina nodded. "We're cooking the turkey, dressing, and a couple of side dishes. You all are fixing the rest of the sides and the desserts."

"Sounds good to me," I said.

"Anyway," she said, "lemme say hi to your mom and see if she needs any help." After another kiss, she smiled and headed for the kitchen. A minute later, she returned. "She said she's got it under control."

With that, we headed to my bedroom to deposit her overnight bag. Once there, I closed the door behind us and she returned to my arms.

"I'm sorry I was so bitchy this morning," she said. "I guess I was just upset about… you know."

"That's okay," I said.

"To make matters worse, Regan and a couple of the other girls are giving me a hard time about dating a non-Greek. God, this'd be so much easier if the Sigma Chis had just offered you a bid," she said in frustration.

I kept my mouth shut about why they hadn't.

"And it'd be easier if I got to *see* you more often," she added. "You spend so much time with Kendall that it's like we're not even dating anymore," she said. Then she frowned. "Sorry. I promised myself that I wouldn't talk about her. I know you love her, but… well… she's driving me crazy. Anyway, enough about her. That's not what I wanted to talk about."

I looked a question at her.

"Yeah," she said, "it's Leah."

"Leah?"

"She's being a total pest."

"About what?" I asked.

"You, silly," Gina said with a grin. "What else would she be pestering me about? Anyway, she's been trying to wheedle me into letting you have sex with her. I know, I know," she said, holding up a placating hand. "I told her that I'd have to think about it."

"What *do* you think about it?" I asked.

"I think," she said, letting the word draw out, "that it's more important what *you* think about it. I mean, that's what you keep telling me, right? That I need to think before I act."

I nodded.

"Well, I thought that we might like to talk it over before I told Leah anything. I mean, that's what couples do, right?"

I nodded again.

"If you don't want to, I'll tell Leah no, and that it's *my* decision," she said.

"Won't she be upset?"

"Sure," she said. "But she'll be upset with *me*, not you. I'm her sister—she has to get along with me. But I don't want her to get upset with you, especially for something like this," she explained. Then she sighed. "Sometimes, she's like a guy."

"Huh?"

"If she had a dick, she'd think with it. Instead, she thinks with her pussy."

I chuckled.

"I know," Gina said with rueful self-reproach, "like someone *else* you know, right?"

"You said it, not me."

She batted her eyes. Then she flashed me a demure but disarming smile.

"What do you really think?" I asked. "About Leah, I mean."

She looked at me for a long moment, gauging my reaction. "I think it'd be fun," she said at last. "I mean, I love watching you with another girl. And I don't have to worry about Leah trying to break us up, unlike *some* people who used to be my friends," she added. Then, "Sorry. That was pretty catty."

I shrugged.

"Seriously, though, I think it'd be fun. But if you don't want to, we don't have to. I mean, it's not all about me. As much as I might want it to be," she added, sotto voce. Then she grinned to show that she was kidding.

"When?" I asked.

"I thought maybe you could spend the night on Friday, and…"

"And?"

"And fuck Leah silly, like she wants. God, you're such a goof."

"But I'm *your* goof."

"And I only share you with special people."

I nodded and then kissed her.

"So, do you want to do it?"

"Right now?" I asked facetiously.

"Maybe later," she said with a suggestive smile. "But you know what I mean."

I nodded.

"Don't you think it'll be fun?" she asked.

After a moment's thought—about Leah's lithe, nubile body—I nodded.

"Oh, Paul, *thank* you," Gina gushed. "God, I can't wait to go down on Leah after you come inside her. Oh, did I tell you that she's on the pill now? Mom let her start taking it after her birthday."

"I kinda figured," I said.

"She said she wants you to come inside her fifty times. I told her that fifty was probably a little high—"

"No *kidding*."

"—but that you were probably good for ten or fifteen."

"*Ten or fifteen?!*"

Gina nodded wryly. Then her grin turned into a warm smile. "Thank you, Paul," she said softly. "I'm the luckiest girl in the world."

"No, I'm the luckiest *guy* in the world," I said as I pulled her close.

"Of *course* you are, silly," she said playfully. "Your girlfriend just asked if her younger sister could join you for a threesome. Duh!"

"Okay, maybe you're right."

"Thank you," she said. Then she grew thoughtful. Finally, she looked up at me. "Did I do all right?"

I looked a question at her.

"Thinking before acting," she prompted. "I mean, I actually *do* listen when you tell me stuff."

"You did just fine," I said.

"Good. Now, do I get my reward?"

"Reward?"

"Mmm hmm. You know, my *reward*."

I arched an eyebrow.

"I believe you made me an offer," she said. Then she grinned and reached between us, where she opened my fly and then deftly extracted my limp member. "I'm here to collect," she said with a seductive look. We kissed for a moment as she stroked me to hardness. Then she sank to her knees.

When she wrapped her lips around me, her demeanor changed. Then she pulled back and frowned.

For a frantic moment, I tried to figure out what was wrong.

"Do you want to take a shower first?" she asked, her tone neutral (and guarded).

A shower? Huh?

"I could wash you, and then you could wash my hair while I suck you. Would you like that?"

At that point, I figured out what the problem was. Gina could taste Kendall on me, from earlier. Even though she hadn't said anything about it, I could read her facial expressions well enough to know that I was right.

"I'm sorry," Gina whispered. "It's just that…"

"I know," I said, lifting her to her feet.

"I wanted tonight to be about you and me, just the two of us."

"It is," I whispered.

"But—"

"Shhhh."

"I know you hate it when I get upset about… her. But—"

"It's okay," I said.

A few minutes later, we got in the shower, but the mood had changed. Instead of fooling around, we gently washed each other in silence. Gina was pensive and I was a little disappointed. I wasn't angry, but I definitely wasn't happy either.

"I'm sorry," she said at last. "I know you wanted a blowjob, but…"

"It's okay. I'll survive. I mean, if I get blue balls, I can always molest you in your sleep, right?" I wasn't entirely kidding, either.

She smiled wanly.

"I'm *okay*," I said.

"I'm so sorry," she repeated.

"It's okay. We don't have to have sex for me to be happy," I said.

"Thank you."

"I love you," I said after a moment.

"I love you too."

"Now, let's get dried off and see if we can find some pie. My mom usually makes an extra, because she knows that my dad can't keep his hands off them. She calls it her 'sacrificial pie.'"

"Okay," Gina said.

"And you *know* how I like to eat pie," I teased, trying to lift her spirits.

"You're so bad," she said. Then she grinned, a hint of cheerfulness peeking through her long, dark eyelashes. "But if you're good, I might just let you have as much pie as you can eat."

"As much as I can eat?"

"Mmm hmm. And maybe anything *else* you want to do with your pie."

I half-growled in anticipation.

"You're such a goof," she said. "But you're *my* goof."

✧ ✧ ✧

Later that night, Gina and I lay awake in bed. Even though we'd both driven from Knoxville, we weren't sleepy.

"I think this is what I miss most," she said. "I like just lying next to you and feeling your heartbeat."

I nodded and then squeezed her gently.

"Is it like this with Kendall?"

"What do you mean?" I asked, a little wary.

"I mean… well… is it like this with Kendall? Do you get to relax? Or is she always… you know… horny?"

"We relax," I said. "And she's pretty horny, but…"

"But what?"

"But not like you," I said.

"It's my curse. I mean, most of the time I like it, but… well… sometimes sex is all I can think about. And since I don't get to see you *half* as often as I want to, I end up…"

"End up what?"

"I end up playing with myself. A *lot*."

"What about Regan?" I asked.

"When she and Rod are boyfriend-girlfriend, we don't fool around much. And… I mean, she's probably my best friend, but… well… she can be pretty mean sometimes," she said. "I think Hayley's starting to rub off on her. But I've still gotta smile and be her friend," she added sourly. Then she sighed. "Guys don't have that problem."

"Huh?"

"Well, with guys, you either like each other or you hate each other. There's no in-between."

That's not quite *true*, I thought. *But it's close enough.*

"Girls can be friends one minute and bitter enemies the next. And then, a day later, they'll be friends again. I mean, the things that've hurt me the most have almost *all* been said or done by my friends. Heather and I used to get in these awful fights, and we'd say the most horrible things to each other. But then we'd be friends again, just like nothing ever happened. Does that make sense?"

"I guess," I said.

"One of the many differences between guys and girls," she said. "But I digress… What I wanted to know was, is it like this with Kendall? Do you two ever just lie in bed and talk?"

"More or less, but…"

"But what?" Gina asked.

"Well, Kendall's not very good at sleeping with someone else," I said after a moment's hesitation.

"*Tell* me about it," Gina agreed.

"She kind of thrashes around and steals all the covers. So I don't spend the night with her very often. Besides, Abby's usually there, and… well… you know."

"No kidding. I can't imagine what Miss Goody-two-shoes would say if you spent the night with me. I mean, she'd definitely get us in trouble with the RA," she said. Then, "God, I *hate* that girl."

I nodded in commiseration.

"But I don't wanna talk about *her* either," she said. Then she grew quiet, and I could feel her gathering her courage. "Paul?"

"Mmm hmm?"

"Do you mind if we just snuggle tonight? Instead of… you know?" she asked. "Or I can take care of you, if you want me to," she hastily added.

"I'm fine," I said with a chuckle. "For now."

"I just feel more in love with you," she said. "As opposed to…"

"As opposed to what?"

"As opposed to 'in lust,'" she said. Then she shrugged. "I guess I'm feeling in love, and that's nicer than lust. I like it," she added.

"Me too."

"I love you," she whispered.

"I love you too."

We talked for a few more minutes, but eventually, we drifted off to sleep.

The next morning, I woke up early. The storm from the night before had settled into a steady rain, and I could hear the faint tattoo on the roof. Gina was a warm and welcome presence next to me, so I spooned behind her and went back to sleep.

A couple of hours later, I woke up again. Even though it was after seven o'clock, my windows were still just vague outlines in the dim room. The rain had stopped, but the cloud cover still hid the sun. It didn't look like it was going to be a cheerful day.

"What time izzit?" Gina mumbled when she stirred, a few minutes later.

"About seven thirty."

"Do we hafta get up yet?"

"No," I said softly.

"But you're already up," she said, wiggling her ass against my morning hard-on.

"Mmm hmm."

"God, I like this feeling," she said, yawning.

I yawned in turn and then squeezed her gently.

"You know what I wanna do?" she asked.

"What?"

Instead of answering, she spread her legs slightly and reached between them. Her questing fingers immediately found my erection.

As she began stroking me, I kissed the back of her head, inhaling the scent of her hair. Then I let my lips trail over her delicate ear and down the curve of her neck.

"Oh, that's nice," she sighed.

While she played with my dick, I dipped my fingers between her legs and felt the warmth of her arousal. Her labia parted and then quickly grew slippery as I teased her hooded clit.

For several long, languorous minutes, we simply caressed each other. Both of us were still a little sleepy, so it was a slow, tantalizing buildup. Finally, she guided my manhood to her opening. I slid into her easily, and she sighed with pleasure.

I simply rocked my hips, leisurely moving my cock back and forth within her. As we held each other, our bodies moved together, perfectly synchronized after years of experience.

Eventually, I felt my orgasm welling up. Gina moaned softly when I buried my length inside her and it swelled. A moment later, I filled her with the liquid heat of my release.

"God, I love that feeling," she said, when my orgasm subsided.

"Me too," I half-gasped.

"And you're still hard."

"Yeah."

"Are you ready for round two?"

"Gimme a sec," I said.

She nodded and then gently caressed my arms, which were wrapped around her. After several minutes of recovery, I kissed her shoulder to signal that I was ready. She reached back to my hips, and at her gentle insistence, I started thrusting again. Since we were both more awake, I quickly picked up speed. Then I held her close and rolled to my back, pulling her with me.

She ended up on top of me, straddling my hips, her back to me. With her feet next to my knees, she thrust her arms back and braced herself above me. I put my hands on her hips and started pumping into her from below.

My hips slapped into her ass as I picked up my pace. Her hair dangled above my face, swinging as she rode my bucking thrusts. I slammed into her for several minutes, our tempo frantic.

Even though I'd come barely ten minutes earlier, I felt another orgasm building. With a low grunt, I launched my hips upward and buried myself inside her. She whimpered when she felt the first spurt bathe her inner walls. I clamped my eyes shut as ecstasy exploded within my brain.

I didn't shoot as much as the first time, but the pleasure didn't stop when the spurting did. Finally, my orgasm subsided and I relaxed, my hips sagging to the bed. Gina was worn out from holding herself above me, and she collapsed as well, her back resting on my heaving chest.

"Oh, God," she panted over and over again.

Then I felt her move. My cock was still buried inside her, but it was shrinking slowly. For a moment, I thought she might want me to fuck her a *third* time, but then I felt her hand at her pussy. With a grin, I reached up to cup her breasts. As her fingers danced over her clit, I pinched and rolled her nipples.

A minute later, I felt her inner muscles ripple around my cock. With a low moan that slowly rose in volume, she worked herself toward release. My hands molded her breasts, kneading them and squeezing her nipples. A moment later, I felt her body tense up as the first twinges of orgasm assaulted her. Then she went rigid and her moan turned into a half-scream.

Her pussy fluttered and then I felt a rush of heat and moisture. She cried out again, but bit it off in the middle. Finally, she sagged against me, completely spent and panting hard.

"Good?" I whispered in her ear.

She brushed a damp lock of hair out of her face and nodded.

I kissed her earlobe and simply held her as aftershocks coursed through her body. After several minutes, she relaxed completely. Then she tensed up again.

"Sorry," she said, her voice strained. "I've *got* to straighten my legs."

When she did, the angle of her hips changed and my semi-hard member slipped from within her. With my dick no longer acting as a stopper, I felt a rush of fluid run down my shaft. Gina moaned at the loss but just as quickly knelt between my legs.

"Oh, God," she said, "I love the taste of us together. And you came so *much*," she added between licks. "No wonder it ran out of me." After she finished cleaning my manhood, she held my shaft out of the way and kissed my balls. "Thank you, Mr. Testicles," she said to them. "You make all those cute little sperms. I can't see 'em, but I know they're in me."

I tried not to chuckle.

"And thank you too, Mr. Seminal Vesicles," she continued, "for making the yummy semen that warms my tummy." Then she lifted my balls out of the way and kissed the slight bulge behind them. "And thanks for doing your part, Mr. Prostate," she said. "Although let's not forget Mr. Cowper's Glands," she added. "I don't remember what you do, but I know you do *something* important. And thank you, Mr. Urethra, for delivering all that nice semen to li'l ol' me."

I propped myself on my elbows and gazed at her as she had a mock-serious conversation with my entire reproductive system.

"And finally," she said with a flourish, "thank *you*, Mr. Penis, for being the most incredible source of pleasure in the world. I'd kiss you, but I know you'd only spit on me." For a moment, she paused to consider my dick. Then she grinned. "On second thought," she said, "I guess I wouldn't mind if you spit on me. Just let me know, so I can open my mouth. After all, we wouldn't want to let all that semen go to waste, now would we?"

At that point, I lost it and started laughing.

"What?" Gina asked, trying to sound wounded.

"You," I said. "You're so crazy."

"I'm crazy for *you*," she said, crawling up my body. Then, "God, I'm *so* happy to be home."

With that, she kissed me, and I tasted myself on her lips. After several moments, she pulled back and gazed down at me, her dark eyes full of warmth.

"I love you, pitter-pat man," she said softly.

"I love you too."

✧ ✧ ✧

Later that morning, while Gina was helping in the kitchen, I quietly slipped back to my room and called Kendall. I wished her a happy Thanksgiving and then we talked for a few more minutes. She needed to help her mother with the cooking, though, so we kept our conversation short.

That afternoon, when we arrived at the Coulters' house, Leah almost knocked me over. Then she looked at Gina, her eyes hopefully wide. At Gina's nod, Leah threw her arms around me, and I had to scramble to keep from dropping the food I was carrying.

"Oh, thank you, Paul," Leah gushed.

"What about *me?*" Gina asked.

"What about you?" Leah asked.

Gina rolled her eyes.

"You'd better be nice to her," I playfully warned Leah, although I was only *half* joking.

"Thank you too, Gina," Leah said, for my benefit more than her sister's.

At that point, I heard Elizabeth's British accent from deeper in the house. "Is that you, Gina and Paul?" she called, emerging from the kitchen.

"Hi, Elizabeth," I said.

"My goodness," she said to me. "Don't they feed you at university?"

"I'm trying to lose some weight," I explained.

"You sound like a woman," she chided. Then she took the food from my hands, gave it to Leah, and sent the younger girl toward the kitchen. As she looped her arms through Gina's and mine, she started us toward the kitchen as well. "Where are your parents?" she asked.

"They're probably right behind us," I said.

"Beth couldn't find her pie carrier, so they sent us ahead," Gina added.

"Oh, dear," Elizabeth said. "If she has to let David carry the pies, they'll *never* get here intact."

"No kidding," I said.

When we entered the kitchen, we found Chris, who was basting the turkey.

"Not content with a lesser bird," Elizabeth commented to me, "Chris had to find a rare example of a *giant* turkey."

I had to admit, the turkey was enormous.

"Next year, I'm going to *smoke* a turkey," Chris said.

"But where are you going to get a pipe that's big enough?" Elizabeth asked sweetly.

"So, how's school, Paul?" Chris asked, ignoring his wife's barb.

"It's good," I said. "It's lots of work, though."

"Gina thinks she's going to be on the Dean's List," Chris said proudly. Then, "How 'bout

you?"

"It all depends on my Design class," I said. "But I'm doing well in everything else."

"Well, congratulations."

Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed Leah practically drag Gina away, no doubt to talk about me. Elizabeth noticed as well, and smiled indulgently. Chris, on the other hand, had already turned his attention back to the turkey.

When Gina and Leah returned, we made small talk for a few minutes, until my parents (and the pies) arrived. Mom had managed to find her two-tiered pie carrier, so the pies both arrived safe and sound.

Shortly after that, Kara and her boyfriend, Victor, came up from the guesthouse. They had driven home the night before. Victor was also a medical student, although he wasn't a medical-nerd type. He was from Virginia, and he seemed like a nice guy.

We sat down to eat at four o'clock, and Chris began carving the turkey. He might have been irreverent about a lot of things, but when it came to cooking meat, he was *extremely* serious.

In addition to Chris's massive turkey, the table was loaded with food: dressing, homemade cranberry sauce, mashed potatoes, gravy, corn, green bean casserole, creamed spinach, sweet potatoes (with melted marshmallows on top, of course), yeast rolls, and more. To top things off, Mom had made a pecan pie and a pumpkin pie. I tried not to eat too much, but the food was a lot better than the fare at school.

After dinner, Mom called Susan, who had a house full of people as well. Her son Kirk had driven from Kingsville to Austin, and then he, Doug, and Olivia had flown to South Carolina. In addition, Stacy and Jason—who were now engaged—had come out to Susan's house for Thanksgiving dinner. (It was their second of the day; their first had been with Jason's parents.)

When I talked to Susan, she sounded happy. We didn't get to talk about much besides Thanksgiving, but I did promise to call her after exams. We talked for a few minutes more and then she passed the phone to Stacy.

Stacy couldn't wait to tell me about Jason and their wedding plans. For a moment, I felt a pang of loss that she was so happy with another guy, but deep down, I was happy for her. I loved Stacy, but I was never *in* love with her. In a way, she was like the big sister I never had, so I wanted her to be happy. She said she'd send me a wedding invitation, and I promised to attend.

We talked for a few more minutes and then I passed the phone to Kara. Once everyone had a chance to talk to everyone else, Susan and Mom talked for a few more minutes and then said goodbye.

Afterward, we watched TV and loosened our belts. I could tell that Leah wanted to go somewhere and fool around, but I was so stuffed that having sex was the *last* thing I wanted to do.

"Hey, I've got an idea," Leah said (when she realized that I wasn't going to rise to her flirting). "Why don't we watch a movie? Dad got this cool Betamax machine," she explained. "We can watch a movie right here."

"Or out in the guesthouse," Elizabeth said, since Chris and my dad seemed reluctant to give up their football game for a movie.

"But we don't have a Betamax out there," Leah half-whined.

"But we still have *cable*," Elizabeth said reasonably. "I'm sure you can watch something on

HBO."

I wasn't really worried, since I knew that nothing was going to happen as long as Kara's boyfriend was around, but I really didn't want to move. Undaunted by our inertia, Leah talked us into going out to the guesthouse. Erin came along, naturally, as did Kara and Victor. Our parents stayed where they were, comfortable in front of the Detroit–Kansas City football game.

In the guesthouse living room, we turned on the TV and changed the channel to HBO. Gina, Leah, and I took seats on the couch. With Leah on my left, Gina curled up to my right and then covered the three of us with a blanket. Erin simply grinned at us, grabbed another blanket, and flopped into the easy chair. Kara and Victor turned out the lights and settled on the loveseat, covering themselves with an afghan. Luckily, we only had to wait five or ten minutes before *The Electric Horseman* started.

The movie was good, although I didn't really like Jane Fonda. She was pretty, but my dislike was inherited. My father *despised* her (he called her "Hanoi Jane"). As a matter of fact, the *only* time I ever heard my dad use the word "cunt," he'd been talking about Fonda. I knew why he hated her, of course—I'd seen pictures of her as she smiled and posed with North Vietnamese anti-aircraft gunners. Those were the same gunners whose job had been to kill my father and his fellow pilots. Not surprisingly, I agreed with my dad: Jane Fonda was a treasonous *cunt*.

Regardless of how I felt about her, however, I enjoyed relaxing with Gina and Leah. Leah's hands were busy under the blanket, but I was more than happy to let her rub my fabric-trapped erection. I wanted to return the favor, so I discreetly snaked my hand under her sweater and fondled her breasts. She even unsnapped her bra to give me better access.

After the movie ended, we composed ourselves. Evidently, Kara and Victor had been fooling around as well, although I hadn't noticed a thing. They wanted to go to bed, so the rest of us said goodnight and headed back up to the main house.

After fits and starts of rain all afternoon, the weather was still cold, blustery, and overcast. Once we reached the warmth of the house, we helped pack leftovers for my family to take home. Then we made our plans for the next day (shopping at the mall). Finally, my family headed home.

✧ ✧ ✧

"Leah's totally hot for you," Erin said after my parents went to bed.

"Oh?" I knew she was, but I didn't want to seem like a cocky jerk by agreeing too quickly.

"She's been talking about all the things she wants to do with you," Erin said. Then she rolled her eyes.

"Doesn't she have a boyfriend at school?" I asked.

"No way. She's actually kinda shy around guys. Besides, most of the guys our age are nerds, or dumb jocks, or whatever. And they think they know so much about sex and stuff, but they're all talk."

I nodded.

"Upperclassmen are usually cool, but you don't wanna get a reputation. You know?"

"Yeah."

"So we've got a couple of friends who're guys, but…," she finished with a shrug.

"What about you?" I asked. "You haven't mentioned any special guy…"

"Duh?! Sean?"

"Sullivan?" I asked.

"Duh, I'm completely in love with him."

"Still?"

She nodded, her blue eyes full of teenage-girl love. "He writes me twice a week," she explained. "And Mom lets me call him on the weekends. Well, every *other* weekend. We switch off. He calls me one weekend, and I call him the next."

"Oh, yeah, I knew that," I said. (I guess I'd been wrapped up in my own problems lately.)

"Anyway, Dad said he'd fly me to Charlotte if I get all As on my report card."

The chances of that were good. Unlike me, Erin had always done well in school. Gina had finally molded me into an above-average student, but Erin had made straight As for as long as I could remember.

"And since I'll be sixteen," she continued, "he and I can… you know."

"Really?"

"Mmm hmm. Mom said she'd let me start taking the pill after my birthday."

"Wow."

"What?" she asked.

"I just can't believe you're talking about getting on the pill and having sex and all."

"Why not?"

"I dunno," I said with a shrug. "I guess I still think of you as my little sister."

"Well, I'm still your little sister," she said, "but I'm not a little girl anymore."

"No kidding," I said, scenes from the end-of-summer party playing through my mind.

"I'm a young *woman*," she said. Then, "Are you feeling *old* yet, big brother?"

"Ha!"

"Because you *are*, you know. You're practically decrepit. Another few years, and you'll be a senior citizen."

"As old as grandma and grandpa," I said.

"Older," she shot back. Then she grinned girlishly, her eyes laughing. A moment later, she turned serious.

"What?" I asked.

"I guess I'm just glad you're home," she said.

"Miss me?"

"No," she said, too quickly. Then, "Okay, maybe a little."

"Yeah, I missed you too," I said. Then I spread my arms. The top of her head barely reached my chin as I hugged her. "It's good to be home, Er," I said softly.

She nodded wordlessly and hugged me tighter still.

✧ ✧ ✧

The next day, the Coulters came over around eight in the morning. My dad and Chris planned to work on a new smoker, made out of two 55-gallon steel drums, while the rest of us went shopping (although Kara and Victor had stayed at the Coulters').

Six of us piled into my mom's station wagon, and we drove into the city to go to Lenox Square Mall. The stores were *crowded*, but we had fun. Gina, Leah, and Erin helped me pick out new clothes. My shirts were bigger—proving that I'd still have to watch my weight—but my pants were all smaller than before.

Leah flirted with me all day, and it took a lot of effort not to react. She wasn't as experienced as Wren, especially at teasing, but she made up for the lack with sheer enthusiasm. Once, she even slipped into a dressing room with me. I blithely took off my shirt and tried on one of the ones I'd brought into the little room.

"That looks nice," she said.

"Thanks," I said. Then I grinned at her and headed back to the store (to show Gina and my mom what the shirt looked like).

Back in the dressing room, Leah was holding the next shirt for me. She gave me a suggestive look as I took off the one I was wearing.

"It's too bad you didn't need to try on pants," she said.

I merely arched an eyebrow at her.

She pointedly glanced at my crotch and then waggled her eyebrows.

With a chuckle, I buttoned the shirt and then stepped out for Gina and Mom to give me their opinion.

"Have you seen Leah?" Elizabeth asked a few minutes, and two shirts, later.

"She's in there," I said, nodding toward the dressing room.

Elizabeth's eyes widened.

"I wonder where she gets it?" Mom teased her. Then she grinned at me. "So you've had your own little changing room valet?" she asked.

"Well," I said facetiously, "you know *I* can't hang anything on a hanger."

I tried on four or five more shirts, and Leah seemed to enjoy watching me change. When we finally emerged—with all the new shirts neatly re-hung on their hangars—she simply held her head up and ignored her mother's semi-reproving look.

At that point, Mom and Elizabeth broke into laughter. Even Gina smiled at her sister's antics. Erin simply grinned at me and rolled her eyes.

The rest of the day was less eventful, but just as fun. We had lunch at a restaurant in the mall and then continued shopping. All in all, Mom spent a small fortune on new clothes for me. I got shirts, pants, sweaters, and a new leather bomber jacket. Gina even talked me into choosing some new underwear: plaid boxer shorts. I was a little skeptical about them, but she thought I'd look cute in them (and she could be *very* persuasive).

Erin also got some new clothes, but Mom was going to wrap the majority of them for her upcoming birthday. Not surprisingly, Gina and Leah got quite a bit as well. When we finally left the mall, we were laden with shopping bags, and it was well after six o'clock. On the way home, we stopped at a pay phone and called my house. Mom suggested that we pick up some pizzas on the way home, and Dad and Chris readily agreed.

Leah could barely contain her excitement all through dinner. Both our families knew what was going on, of course, but they acted innocent. Even Gina pretended not to notice how worked-up Leah was.

"Could you give Leah and me a ride home?" Gina asked me after we finished eating.

"Why don't you just ride back with your parents?" I suggested (which made Leah shoot me an incredulous look).

"I guess we could do that," Gina said, having as much fun as I was. "But we've got all the stuff we bought," she added.

"It'll all fit in your station wagon," I said. "There should still be room for the four of you."

Gina and I went back and forth for another moment or two before Elizabeth took pity on her youngest daughter.

"I think we're going to stay here for a while, Paul," Elizabeth said. "Chris and your father want to put the final touches on their newest toy. So why don't you take the girls home?"

"*Please,* Paul," Leah begged.

"I guess I could do that," I said.

Elizabeth rolled her eyes at me, and I could almost hear her clipped British accent in my head, *"You are incorrigible."*

"And you said you'd spend the night," Leah added.

I almost laughed at her apprehensive look. "Yeah, I'll spend the night," I said. Then I decided to tease her a little more. "If it's all right with your parents," I added.

"Use caution when baiting a Coulter woman," Chris said.

"You've got *that* right," my dad agreed with a laugh.

"Of *course* it's okay with us," Elizabeth said.

Mom merely looked at me and shook her head in wry amusement.

"C'mon, let's go," Leah said, before I could change my mind (as if there were any possibility of *that!*).

✧ ✧ ✧

At the Coulters' house, Leah wanted to get in the hot tub. Since Kara and Victor were in the guesthouse, we'd have to be quiet, but I agreed. The weather was still damp, cold, and windy, but the hot tub felt wonderful, especially after a long day of shopping.

Since the tub was surrounded by a tall privacy hedge, we turned on the hot tub light. The water glowed bluish-white, illuminating us from below. None of us wore bathing suits, of course, and Leah started playing with my dick almost immediately. Gina slid closer, pressing her breasts against my arm.

"Do you still think you're the luckiest guy in the world?" she asked quietly.

"Oh, *yeah*," I replied.

Leah quickly stroked me to erection, while I played with her pussy. It took me a moment to realize it, but I didn't feel any pubic hair as I slid my fingers over her slit.

"Did you shave?" I asked her.

"I thought you liked it that way," she said, her voice full of uncertainty.

"He does," Gina assured her. "He was probably just surprised," she added. "I didn't tell him that you shaved. I wanted it to be a surprise."

"Oh," Leah said. Then she looked at me tentatively. "Do you like it?"

"Very much," I said.

"I don't shave all the way," Gina explained to her sister. "So it's a treat for him to have a bare Coulter girl."

"Cool," Leah said. "It's kind of a pain, but if you don't do it for him, then *I* can."

"Exactly," Gina said. Then she gave me a look, as if to say, "See how *I* take care of you?"

"Are you ready?" Leah asked me.

My grin was answer enough.

"What should I do first?" she asked her sister.

"Why don't we suck him?" Gina suggested.

When Leah enthusiastically agreed, I lifted myself out of the tub and sat on the side, my erection jutting up from my lap.

"God," Leah breathed, "I've been wanting to do this for *so* long."

With that, she slid between my legs and started kissing the tip of my cock. Gina stroked my leg, her eyes searching out mine. When they met, she blew me a kiss. I returned it and then closed my eyes as Leah wrapped her lips around my glans.

The two girls took turns sucking me, but after about ten minutes, I was shivering from the cold, so I slipped back into the hot, bubbling water. Leah started to complain, but I lifted her and then set her on my lap. She straddled my hips, my erection bumping her clean-shaven mound.

With a grin, I started sucking her nipples. As I did, I felt Gina playing with Leah's pussy. At Gina's urging, her sister lifted her hips. Gina set the tip of my cock at the younger girl's opening and then Leah sat back.

"Oh, God," she groaned as my dick spread her open. Then her eyes popped open and she looked into mine. "I'm on the pill," she said. "You can come *inside* me."

"I know," I said.

With that, she closed her eyes again, smiled blissfully, and sat back on my cock.

"It feels good, doesn't it?" Gina whispered.

Leah nodded.

As she rode me, Gina played with her breasts from behind. Gina and I occasionally made eye contact, but I saved my attention for Leah. I could tell from her facial expressions what she liked, so I made sure to repeat what I was doing whenever she grimaced in pleasure.

"Come inside her," Gina urged as she massaged my balls from behind Leah. "I want to suck your come from her pussy."

"Oh, *yesssss*," Leah breathed.

A couple of minutes later, I felt my balls grow tight. Gina felt it too, and started urging me on. I gripped Leah's hips and began thrusting harder, my cock plowing into her smooth pussy. Finally, I felt my orgasm welling up. With one final jab, I buried myself inside her and loosed a torrent of semen.

"Oh, my God," Leah whimpered, "I can feel it. I can feel you coming inside me."

I merely grunted in reply, my whole body wrapped up in the pleasure of release.

After several long, wonderful moments, I opened my eyes and swallowed hard. Leah was panting from the exertion, but she sported a euphoric smile. A moment or two later, I wrapped my arms around her and stood up. Then I climbed onto the seat and set her on the edge of the tub. She lay on the deck and I felt Gina move behind me as I eased my hips back. Leah groaned when my cock slipped from within her, but she just as quickly moaned in pleasure when Gina replaced me between her thighs.

Gina pressed her lips against her sister's dark, swollen labia, and Leah bucked with pleasure. Gina began teasing her sister's clit. I moved behind the older girl and rubbed my semi-hard dick along her channel.

Gina put her hands on Leah's thighs and spread them open. Then she licked her sister's pussy for several minutes, until Leah got too cold to continue. Her teeth were chattering when she slipped back into the hot water. But she looked happy.

We fooled around in the hot tub for another twenty minutes, but we were all getting waterlogged, so we wrapped our towels around ourselves and dashed into the main house.

Upstairs, we headed toward Gina and Leah's shared bathroom and then crowded into the shower to rinse off. There, I washed the girls and then let them lather me. Leah paid special attention to my dick, of course, and I was more than happy to let her.

Finally, we dried off and headed into Gina's room.

"Lie on your back," I suggested to Leah. "I want to get reacquainted with your pussy. I mean, you *did* go to all the trouble of shaving for me."

Gina's dark eyes sparkled in amusement at how swiftly Leah vaulted onto the bed and spread her legs.

"Why don't you sit on her face," I suggested to Gina.

"Yeah," Leah quickly agreed.

With Gina kneeling above her sister's eager lips, I lay between Leah's thighs and began teasing her pussy. I could still taste faint traces of the chlorine, as well as the salty taste of my own semen, but that didn't stop me from enjoying her smooth labia. She writhed in pleasure as I ran my tongue along her slit, circling the bud of her clit at the top of each stroke.

I continued licking and sucking for several minutes. Then I knelt between her thighs and rubbed my bulbous glans along her slit, spreading her juices. When the crown of my dick was completely coated, I lowered my hips and eased forward.

Leah gasped into Gina's pussy as I spread her open. She was hot, wet, and ready, and I easily slid inside her. Fascinated, I watched as my cock spread her shaved lips. When I withdrew, they clutched at me, as if trying to hold me inside. Gina and I shared a grin as I slowly thrust back into Leah's steamy pussy.

For the next five minutes, I simply rocked my hips, sliding my cock in and out. Leah whimpered with each thrust, the sound muffled by Gina's pussy. Gina and I kissed, and then I lowered my lips to her breasts as my hips worked between Leah's thighs.

A few minutes later, Gina tensed up, and I could tell that she was having a series of mini-orgasms. When Leah tasted the flood of juices from Gina's pussy, she arched her back. She was close. I quickened my pace and started teasing her clit with my thumb.

A minute later, I felt the first flutters as her internal muscles contracted around my invading member. I continued thrusting as her orgasm built. Finally, her muscles clenched and I had to force my way inside her. My cock battered through her spasms, adding to her pleasure.

With a muffled scream, she came, her pussy gripping my cock. I kept right on thrusting, my own orgasm near. Leah's climax subsided, but she gasped as I thrust as deep as I could, intent upon my own release.

Gina urged me on with a look and then began caressing my shoulders. My head bobbed in the valley between her breasts, my hips rising and falling as I pounded into Leah. Finally, I ground my hips against her upturned pelvis and then closed my eyes in bliss. Spurt after spurt of white, hot come filled her. She groaned as she felt my semen lashing her insides.

At that point, I clamped my eyes shut and the world went dark.

When I opened my eyes, Leah was grinning from ear to ear. Gina had swung her leg to the side and was sitting by her sister's shoulder. My nostrils flared as I sucked in air, a grin quirking my lips. Finally, I swallowed hard and took a deep breath.

"Fun?" I asked Leah.

"God, yes!"

After we took a little break, the girls started getting frisky. I pushed Gina to her back and began licking her swollen slit. In turn, she spread Leah's legs and began lapping her sister's pussy. Leah completed the daisy chain by sucking my resurgent erection.

We spent the rest of the night sucking and fucking, of course. I came two more times, once in Leah's mouth, and once in Gina's pussy. I lost track of the girls' orgasms, but by the time we went to sleep, Leah was so sensitive that I couldn't even touch her pussy without her crying out in pleasure/pain.

Gina's bed was so tousled that we decided to sleep in Leah's. At one o'clock, we turned out the lights and pulled up the covers. Gina was on one side of me and Leah was on the other, my arms around both of them.

Leah was asleep in minutes, but I could tell from Gina's breathing that she was still awake.

"Did you have fun?" I asked her softly.

"Mmm hmm. Thank you."

"No, thank *you*."

"Leah would thank you too," she whispered, "if she were still conscious."

"She's had a busy night."

"Mmm hmm. So have we," she said, her hand idly rubbing my leg.

"No kidding."

"Are you ready to go to sleep?"

"Yeah, I am," I admitted. Then, "Hold on." With that, I delicately extracted my arm from underneath the sleeping Leah. Then I rolled toward Gina. "Roll over on your side," I told her softly. When she did, I wrapped my arms around her, my body pressed against hers.

"I love you, pitter-pat man," she whispered.

"I love you too. G'night."

✧ ✧ ✧

The rest of the holiday weekend was relaxing. I spent Saturday morning with the Coulters and then drove back to my house. Mom washed all my new clothes, as well as my laundry from school (okay, so I brought clothes home for my mom to wash).

Gina and I had upcoming exams, though, so we got together Saturday evening to study. We pored over our books well into the night, and I ended up driving home a little after midnight.

Sunday morning, the Coulters and my family went to brunch at a nice restaurant, and lingered over the remains of our meal.

As much as I enjoyed the weekend, it came to an end soon enough. Gina and I had to return to Knoxville, so we went to our separate houses to pack our things. After saying goodbye to my family, I loaded the Jeep and drove to Gina's house. Once there, I helped her load the Bumble Bug.

Leah clung to me when we hugged goodbye. I gave her a chaste kiss on the cheek as we separated. Her facial expressions were enough like Gina's that I could tell she wanted more, and I had to hide a chuckle at her yearning smile. At last, Gina said goodbye to her family and then I added my final farewells.

A little after five o'clock, we got in our cars and headed for the interstate.

As we drove, I thought about the previous days. Surprisingly, Gina hadn't said anything else about Kendall (even though she knew I had talked to the older girl several times). I guess Gina was too happy. The long weekend had been a journey into the past, of sorts, since things between us had been like they were in high school.

At Chattanooga, I flashed the Jeep's lights at Gina. Then I waved to her as she continued on to Knoxville. I took the exit for Kendall's house and arrived about fifteen minutes later.

Kendall almost knocked me over when she greeted me. I was happy to see her, but I definitely *wasn't* looking forward to the tension when we got back to school. I didn't know what to do about it, though, so I kept my mouth shut. I felt like I was ignoring the problem, but what could I do?

I ate dinner with the Paytons, but once again, I was anxious to get on the road. After dinner, Drew helped me load the Jeep with Kendall's things and then he shook my hand, his grip strong and firm.

A moment later, Kendall and her parents emerged from the house. I shook Adam's hand and then Melissa gave me a hug. Following another round of goodbyes, Kendall and I hopped into the Jeep and roared into the night.

The storm front had passed the day before, so the night was crisp, cold, and clear. As we drove, Kendall told me about her Thanksgiving and I told her about mine. (I didn't tell her about having sex with Leah, though, because I knew it would cause problems.)

I felt a little guilty for hiding things from Kendall, but I had come to the conclusion that some things just weren't worth the trouble. Besides, she knew that I'd had sex with Leah before, and it was purely physical. I definitely cared about Leah, but I didn't harbor any deeper feelings for her. Fortunately, I didn't have to lie about it, since Kendall didn't mention Gina or Leah at all.

All in all, the trip from Chattanooga to Knoxville was enjoyable. I dropped Kendall off at her apartment and helped carry her things inside. Then I kissed her goodnight and drove back around campus (Andy Holt was a one-way street, and my dorm was the wrong way, so I had to make a circuit).

I finally parked my Jeep in the non-commuter garage a little after ten thirty. The walk back to my dorm was brisk, but the cold air cleared my head. I had a lot of work to do in the next two weeks, but after that, I'd have almost a month off before winter quarter began.

Christmas break was going to be another problem entirely, however. My family was planning their annual ski trip to Utah, along with the Coulters. I thought about inviting Kendall, even though I knew that wouldn't sit well with Gina. I wanted to spend *some* time with Kendall over the break, but that would pose its own challenges.

Before then, however, I had to survive exam week. Then I could figure out how to split my time between my two girlfriends. I hated having to keep them separate, but I didn't see any other way to do it.

When I got back to my room, Trip had taped a note to my door. He wanted me to come over when I returned. A few minutes later, I entered his suite. The door to his room was open.

"Hey, dude!" Luke called as soon as he saw me. "Welcome back."

Trip and Jeff greeted me as well.

"Thanks," I said. "It's good to be back. How were your holidays?" I asked them.

"Can you believe this crazy fucker puts *hot sauce* on everything?" Jeff asked, pointing to

Luke.

"I only put it on *some* things," Luke said. "But if anybody outside of Louisiana knew how to use spices, I wouldn't *have* to. The food up here is too bland, *mes amis*."

"You sure ate enough," Jeff countered.

"Your mom's a good cook," Luke said candidly. "But if she used some onions, bell peppers, and cayenne pepper… *oo-wee, bon appétit!*"

"How were *your* holidays?" I asked Trip, before Luke and Jeff could continue their friendly argument.

"Nice, man," Trip said. "Lots of fun. Josh asked about you. I told him you were with your family, but that you'd come visit soon."

I felt my face heating.

"Aw," Jeff said, "he's blushing."

As the guys teased me, Trip cleared a space on the foot of his bed and I sat down. Then he put a new record on the stereo and the four of us talked until well after midnight.

As much as I had enjoyed the holiday weekend, it was good to be back with my friends.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

"Welcome back," Professor Joska said as he strode into the room. He had his usual air of purpose about him, and he carried a roll of drawings as well as a stack of papers. "I hope you had an enjoyable holiday weekend. I, on the other hand, was mired in mediocrity," he said heavily, holding up our drawings.

I bet he's talking to me, I fumed silently.

"Some of you *still* don't understand that architecture is a serious business for serious people," he said. "Overall, your drawings were better than your midterm project, but they still lack discipline, focus, and attention to detail." Not surprisingly, he *was* looking directly at me when he said the last.

"The critiques were *slightly* better than last time," he continued, "but they still showed an alarming lack of critical thought. Superficial *will not do*," he said, pausing to let that sink in. "Your drawings were marginally better, but I expect an even *higher* level of precision from you. After all, you've made it this far—some of you on luck more than anything else—and you should have a better understanding of design concepts, much less drafting skills.

"At least four of you will *not* receive a passing grade for this course unless you somehow manage to earn a perfect score on the final exam. Many of you hang in the balance; your future will be determined by how well you do on the final. *None* of you are home free, however. Despite the improvement on this project," he said, brandishing the roll of drawings again, "your projects only count for twenty percent of your overall grade."

As he let that hang over us, several people glanced around nervously. Antonio looked sanguinely self-confident, of course. Trip did too. I tried to project an air of confidence as well, but inside, I was anything but.

Professor Joska started speaking again, but I wasn't listening.

Instead, I tried to suppress my growing panic. What if I flunked the final? Would I still be able to take architecture courses? Would I ever get a job as an architect? With an angry headshake, I suppressed my wild—and fruitless—speculation. *No matter what he throws at me,* I repeated to myself, as calmly as I could, *I'll keep coming back for more.*

"…and forty percent of your project grade is based upon in-team competition," Joska was saying.

I scowled in irritation. We *knew* how the grading worked; he'd explained it a half-dozen times, at least. Did he think we were idiots?

"Are there any questions?" he finally asked. When there were none, he started handing out drawings and critiques. With each one, he commented to the recipient. *None* of his comments were very heartening. He called my name somewhere in the middle. "A plebeian effort, Mr. Hughes," he said as he handed over my project. "You'll have to do better than this if you want to be an architect."

I felt my lips go tight with anger, but I merely nodded and accepted my rolled-up drawing.

Back at my desk, Trip glanced at me as I sat down. He'd been one of the first to receive his project, and he grimaced as he flashed me his grade—he'd gotten a 50, an F.

At that point, I started to panic. What if Joska had suddenly changed his grading standards? If Trip had gotten a 50, I didn't even want to *think* about what I'd gotten.

I dithered for less than a second, however. Morbid curiosity drove me to flip to the last page of my critiques.

Joska's note read, *Working with Mr. Whitman has sharpened your critiques, but you still need to focus more on details. People's lives might one day depend upon your analyses, and you need to grasp the importance of this fact. These critiques aren't personal, and you should stop treating them as such. An improvement, but I expect better. 6/10.*

I silently groused about his note, but at least it was better than the set of critiques I'd done for the mid-term project. Then, with a barely suppressed pang of anxiety, I unrolled my drawings. Joska had circled several areas on my plan drawing, and written short notes next to each one. In a rush to see my overall grade, I didn't even read most of them, but the consistent theme was, "lack of attention to detail." My elevation drawing was much the same.

Without reading the note, I flicked my eyes to the bottom of the drawing. My overall grade was…

…an 86?!

A little confused, I looked at Joska's note. It read, *You have a good grasp of the design as a whole, as well as the various architectural elements used to create the Jeffersonian effect. Regrettably, your drawings are lacking in precise execution of crucial details. I cannot stress this enough: details, details, details. Artists draw buildings, but architects* build *them. You need to decide which you are, an artist or an architect. Until you consciously make that choice, your drawings will suffer from defects which will spell disaster for anything you attempt to actually build.*

He followed it with a quote by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, *"God is in the details."*

"So *that's* where he gets it," I said under my breath, referring to Professor Ledbetter. Mies van der Rohe was a famous architect from the 1920s and '30s, and had even served as Director of the Bauhaus. I knew who he was, of course, but I guess I'd always thought that Professor Ledbetter simply had an odd turn of phrase. Instead, he was quoting Mies.

With a headshake, I refocused my attention on the drawings. Underneath the quote, Joska had written, *Technical merit: 40/50. Critiques: 6/10. Design: 1st place, 40/40. 86 points overall, B. Average, nothing more. You'll have to do better than this, Mr. Hughes.*

I sighed like a man given a reprieve from the executioner's axe.

"Congratulations," Trip said when I showed him my grade. "I managed to get third place," he added, which explained his grade.

Before I could commiserate, Samantha shrieked.

"Is there something you'd like to tell us, Miss Poole?" Joska asked laconically.

"No, sir," she said quickly, her cheeks rosy. "Sorry."

Joska merely looked inscrutable as the class went back to looking over their project grades. Samantha, however, whirled in her seat and practically lunged over my desk. Instinctively, I tried to dodge, but she wrapped her arms around my neck and squeezed. I was a little baffled, but hugged her in reply. She kissed my cheek and then pulled back.

"Thank you *so* much, Paul," she said, her eyes welling up.

"You're welcome… but… um… for *what?*"

She sniffed once, smiled, and then reached for her drawings.

When she shoved them at me, I stared at them blankly.

"Look at the grade," she said, with impatient excitement.

I flipped to the elevation drawing and looked at Joska's note. It said a lot of things about her drawing style and her need to focus on the design as a whole. At the bottom, however, I got a shock.

Joska had written, *Technical merit: 32/50. Critiques: 8/10. Design: 2nd place, 20/40. 60 points overall, D-. A definite improvement, Miss Poole.*

Before I could even look up, Samantha hugged me again. She crushed her drawing, but I don't think she cared. I couldn't breathe, but I don't think she cared about that either.

"I couldn't've done it without you, Paul," she gushed, followed by another kiss. "Thank you, thank you, thank you!"

"If you're quite finished with the hugging and kissing, Miss Poole," Joska said, "we have an exam to review for."

Samantha didn't even bother to hide her elation as she turned around and sat down.

With a half-smile, Joska began his lecture.

✧ ✧ ✧

"Well, I guess 'workmanlike' isn't a bad comment," Trip said after class.

I looked a question at him.

"Joska said my drawings were staid and workmanlike," he explained.

"I still can't believe I got second place," Samantha said. Then she glanced up at Trip. "Sorry, I didn't mean it like that…"

Trip waved off her apology and then smiled at her.

Antonio merely shrugged. His concentration was Historic Preservation, and he knew that he wouldn't need drafting skills as much as Trip and I would. I don't think he was *happy* with fourth place (a paltry 34, well short of even a D), but he knew that his exam scores would more than make up for his poor project grades.

"Thank you again, Paul," Samantha said.

"You're welcome," I said. "But I didn't do all that much. I mean, you actually did the work, I just gave you a few pointers."

"Let's go celebrate," Trip said. Then he glanced at me. "Do you have your… um… drawing class?"

(I had told him about my modeling, but not that it was *nude* modeling. I think he figured it out anyway, but he hadn't said anything. In any event, Siobhan didn't need models for the last two weeks of the quarter. So the Wednesday before Thanksgiving had been the last time I went to her class.)

"No," I said at last. "I'm done with classes for the day."

"I'd love to hang out, y'all," Antonio said, "but I've gotta haul ass to English. So I'll see y'all Wednesday."

We waved and he dashed off.

"I *still* can't believe it," Samantha said, staring at her carrying tube. "Second place!"

"Congratulations," Trip said. "You deserved it." Then, "C'mon, I'll buy you a Coke to celebrate."

✧ ✧ ✧

I spent the next two days studying. With all of Professor Ledbetter's "extra credit" work, I had mastered the basic techniques, so I wasn't worried about my Drawing exam. The Art History exam would probably be easy as well.

In addition, I finished my English paper, "Realism in Nineteenth Century American Literature." I had done an analysis of three authors' work: William Dean Howells, Henry James, and Mark Twain. Despite Jeff's offer to help me with my computer, I still hadn't taken the time to do it. So I spent several hours at Kendall's apartment, typing the paper's final draft. It was a pain, but it gave me one last chance to proofread it.

I spent the bulk of my time, however, studying for my Design exam. I was bound and determined to do *better* than I had on my midterm. But I had a lot of work to do, since the final would cover virtually everything we had learned so far.

By Wednesday night, I was sick and tired of studying, so I cajoled Trip into an evening workout.

"What're you doing over the Christmas break?" I asked as he used the bench press machine.

"Same old, same old," he grunted, finishing his set. Then he stood up and wiped off the bench.

I decided to use his weight—220 lb.—and do a low-weight, high-rep set. That way I could actually *talk* while I pressed.

"What're you up to?" he asked.

I told him about my family's ski trip with the Coulters, and how I was looking forward to not having to deal with Joska or the rest of my classes.

"But what about Kendall?" he asked.

"I wanna invite her to come skiing," I said, taking a break between sets. "But I don't think Gina'd be very happy if I did."

He fell silent as I started pressing another set.

"I mean, I wish I could go back to how things were in high school," I grunted in between repetitions. "You know?"

"No you don't," he said flatly. "That's what memories are for. You know?"

"I guess," I said.

"Think about it," Trip insisted. "The past is… well… past. I know that sounds clichéd, but it makes sense. You can never go back, you know?"

"That doesn't mean I can't wish for things to be like they used to be," I ground out.

"Why? 'Cause you're not happy with the way things are?" he asked rhetorically. "Then fix 'em. I mean, I know you've tried to get the girls together, but that hasn't worked. So what have you done? I mean, really, *what* have you done to fix things?"

"What *can* I do?" I asked, trying not to sound plaintive.

"You can make a decision, that's what. I mean, why do you *have* two girlfriends?"

"It seemed like the thing to do at the time," I said.

"You were thinking with the little head," he accused.

In reality, I *hadn't* been thinking with the little head (much). If I had been, I would've simply had sex with Kendall, without the commitment of a relationship. But I couldn't really explain that to Trip, and my silence was an admission of sorts.

"Exactly," he continued. "So now it's time to fix things with the big head."

I looked a question at him and then started another set.

"Do you think Kendall and Gina are happy with the way things are?" he asked.

I shook my head and pressed the weight into the air again.

"And you're definitely not happy," he added.

"No… fucking… kidding," I grunted.

"So why drag things out? I mean, think about it for a sec. What Lori did to me hurt like hell, but it was quick. Yeah, it ripped my heart out, but she didn't linger over my dead body, if that makes sense."

I sat up and wiped my forehead. Then I paused as I considered his words.

"The three of you have a relationship that used to be pretty good," he said, "but none of you have been happy for a while. Right?"

"Yeah," I admitted heavily.

"So *do* something about it. If you can't fix things, you're only hurting everyone involved. You're gonna have to make a choice. You *know* it," he said, "but you don't wanna admit it."

I didn't want to answer him, so I started another set. Unfortunately, he fell silent and let me think. If I *had* to choose, who would it be?

Gina had been my first true love, but over the past months, we had drifted apart. True, our Thanksgiving weekend had been really good, but I wondered whether it was a sign of things to come, or simply a glimpse at the past.

My relationship with Kendall, on the other hand, had blossomed. We ate together, we studied together, we hung out together, and we talked a lot more than Gina and I did. Kendall seemed to understand me better. And she wasn't as mercurial as Gina.

"In a way," Trip said at last, "I don't envy you. I mean, yeah, Kendall and Gina are great, and I'm still jealous that you've got *both* of them, but I wouldn't trade places with you for all the tea in China," he finished. Then he laughed.

"What?"

"Well, I *will* say this… your sex life's gotta be better than mine. I mean, I'm ready to start calling my right hand 'mon chèr,' like Luke does."

We shared a rueful laugh.

"But I'm serious about you having to make a choice," he added softly. "If you keep going like this, the whole thing's gonna come apart at the seams. And you're going to kill me with your workouts," he added. Then he grinned to take the sting out of his words. "Although watching you work out while I do all the talking isn't bad."

"Says *you*," I shot back. Then, "Lemme do one more set and then we'll head home."

"No problem."

I did more than one set, but Trip understood that I was thinking. He stood by quietly, without complaint, and let me work through his advice.

In the end, I knew that he was right. I didn't want to admit it, but he was. Even more than I didn't want to admit it, however, I *really* didn't want to choose one girl over the other. I loved them both; how could I hurt one of them?

I couldn't.

But I'd have to. If things weren't going to get better, it was only a matter of time.

✧ ✧ ✧

Exams at UT weren't on the same schedule as classes. They were on the same *hourly* schedule—8:00 to 8:50, 9:00 to 9:50, etc.—but they rarely matched the class day or time. In addition, *Saturday* was on the exam schedule, so it was possible to have a test on the weekend (although I didn't).

My first exam on Thursday was with Professor Ledbetter, at eight o'clock. I breezed through the test and then went back to check my work.

Maybe God is *in the details,* I thought with a rueful chuckle.

When I turned in my exam booklet, Professor Ledbetter smiled at me.

"Do you think it's an A?" he asked.

"Yes, sir," I replied confidently.

"Have a nice break, Paul," he said with a smile. "I'll see you next year."

For Professor Feller's "exam," later in the day, we simply turned in our final papers and then left.

By coincidence, my Art History exam was also on Thursday, but at four o'clock. It was easy. Professor Dubois made us keep an empty seat between each student, but Christy, Wren, and I all sat in the back row, as usual. Surprisingly, Christy finished the exam before I did. Wren looked like she was struggling a little, but she finished well before the end of class.

As we walked back to Morrill together, we talked about our exams and the upcoming break.

Christy was spending Christmas in Hawaii with her brother Harry's family. (She had four brothers, all of whom were in the military. I'd picked up snippets of information about them, but I still didn't know much except their names: Harry, James, Danny, and Rich.) Since her father was on cruise with his Battle Group, Christy and her mother were flying to Honolulu for the holidays.

Wren and her parents were going to Florida. Her family owned a condo on the beach, and planned to spend the week of Christmas relaxing there. (Unlike Christy, Wren was an only child.)

Since the Art History exam was our final class together, we wished each other happy holidays and then I headed back to my dorm.

On Friday, my Intro to Architecture exam was a piece of cake. I'd known a lot of the material before I even started college, so I breezed through the test.

Afterward, Trip and I met the rest of our Design team to study for the final. Antonio quizzed us on the material, and we worked until well after dinner. Finally, around ten o'clock, we decided to call it quits.

My weekend was mostly consumed with studying as well, although I took a break to call Erin and wish her a happy birthday. She was glad that I called, but she was giddy and distracted; Dad had surprised her and flown to Charlotte to pick up Sean Sullivan and his parents.

After I talked to my mom for a few minutes—she wanted to make sure I was getting enough to eat—I said goodbye and walked across the hall.

"Whatcha listenin' to?" I asked Trip as I pushed his door open.

"The Beach Boys," he said.

"Really? It sounds like some weird hippy music."

"Yeah," he said, laughing. "It's 'Pet Sounds.'"

"Is that the name of the song, or the album?"

"In this case, both," he said. "But here, you'll recognize this," he added, lifting the needle and flipping the album.

When the music started, I immediately recognized "Wouldn't It Be Nice."

"This is their best album," he said. "And it's one of the best albums of *all time*, as far as I'm concerned. I guess it's a toss-up between 'Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band' and 'Pet Sounds,' although I think 'Pet Sounds' edges out the Beatles. Anyway, I'm sure you didn't come over to discuss the finer points of all-time great albums. So… what're you up to?"

"I just came to see if you wanted to go over that human sciences stuff for the Design final," I said.

"Sure, I'm game," he said. Then he turned down the music and reached for his textbook.

We studied until dinnertime. Then we met Kendall and Abby at the Morrill dining hall. Afterward, we all went to the library to study some more. While Trip and I studied Architecture, Kendall pored over her Organic Chemistry textbook, and Abby worked on the footnotes and bibliography for her Comparative Literature paper.

Sunday was more of the same. I tried calling Gina, to see if she wanted to have lunch with me, but she was out with Regan. I left a message and then called Kendall. We had lunch together—with Trip and Abby—and then headed to the library to study some more.

After spending the entire weekend studying, I got up early Monday morning to study some more. By the time I got to the three o'clock exam, I was sick and tired of the Design textbook, and I was *past* the point of worrying about the exam itself.

"I brought more McDonald's job applications," Professor Joska said as he entered the classroom. "Mr. Hughes, would you like one?"

"Yeah," I said, in an exhausted fit of pique. "I think my graduation speech might run long."

The rest of the class tittered nervously.

"Would you like an exam as well?" Joska asked.

"Sure, what the heck," I said flippantly.

"You're feeling punchy," he observed.

"I can't flip burgers anyway," I said with a shrug.

"Let's hope you take this more seriously than flipping burgers," he said. Then he turned to the class. "The exam is sixty questions—half multiple choice, half short answer—and… an essay question," he finished.

At that, we groaned. Essay questions are the bane of every college student's existence.

"The essay question will count for forty percent of your grade."

Without waiting for us to react, Joska started handing out the exams.

I flew through the sixty questions and then went over them again. After I double-checked my answers, I flipped to the final page, the essay question. As soon as I saw it, I felt a surge of adrenaline.

It read, *Why do you want to be an architect? (250 words or less.)*

In a flash, I knew what I wanted to write. But then I hesitated. As I stared at the question, I contemplated what I was about to do. Did I really want to put my entire college future on the line just to make a point? I must've been drunk with fatigue to even consider it. My pen hovered over the paper. Then…

I wrote six words.

With a deep sigh, I sat back and silently considered my future. Such a brief answer was bold—even reckless—but it was the truth. I capped my pen and simply stared at the test. Finally, I gathered my things and walked to the front of the classroom.

Do I really want to do this? I silently agonized. *Is it worth it? What if Joska doesn't Get It? What if he…?*

Joska glanced up as I loomed in front of his desk. His expression didn't change, but he seemed to be taunting me. In a flash of defiance, I mustered my resolve. Then I stood straight and looked him in the eye. Without flinching, I turned in my exam.

He gestured for me to stay and then took out his red pen. While I waited, he graded my test. I got four answers wrong. When he flipped to the essay question, he actually grunted in surprise.

Unconsciously, I held my breath as he read my answer. It took him only a few seconds, but as far as I was concerned, it might've been a lifetime.

When he looked at me, I almost made up an excuse for my answer, but my resolve held and I kept my mouth shut. His expression was Sphinx-like. My breathing quickened and my skin tingled with the desire to do something, *any*thing. Instead, I simply stared him down. After a long moment, his eyes flicked back to my exam.

In silence, I watched him write "40/40" under my six-word "essay." Then he flipped my exam closed and wrote "96, A" on the first page. Finally, he made a note in his grade book.

"Congratulations, Mr. Hughes. There may be hope for you yet," he said as he returned my exam. "Enjoy the holidays."

"You too," I said, too stunned to remember that I hated him.

With that, I clutched my exam and left. On the balcony over the atrium, I leaned against the rail and let out an explosive breath. Then I flipped open my exam and simply stared at the essay question.

Why do you want to be an architect? (250 words or less.)

My answer?

Because God is in the details.

✧ ✧ ✧

Later that night, the phone rang. T.J. answered it, but then shouted for me.

"Another girlfriend?" he asked when I emerged from my room.

I glowered at him.

"Just kidding," he said. Then he handed me the phone.

"Hello?"

"Paul? Hi, this is Wren."

"Wren?" I asked. I guess I was a little confused, since she had never called me before (I'd never even given her my phone number, although she probably got it from the campus directory).

"Yeah… hi," she said. "So, how're you?"

"Um… fine. How're you?" As we talked about inconsequential things for the next few minutes, my confusion only deepened.

"So," she said at last, "you're probably wondering why I called."

"I guess," I said. "I mean, it's nice talking to you and all, but… well… I *am* a little curious."

"I need a favor," she said. I could usually tell when she was flirting with me, and this

definitely wasn't one of those times. She sounded like she genuinely needed help.

"Sure, anything," I said without hesitation.

"My mom was coming to pick me up, but she was running errands today, and… well… to make a long story short, she was in an accident. You know how traffic is in Atlanta."

"Is she okay?" I asked.

"Oh, she's fine," Wren said hastily. "It was just a fender bender. But her car's in the shop, and my dad's out of town on business. So I was wondering… I mean, since our families practically live next door to each other…"

"Sure," I said, without waiting for her to ask the question. "I'll give you a ride home. I'm taking Kendall home to Chattanooga, so the Jeep'll be pretty full, but I'm sure we'll all fit."

"Oh, thank you," she said sincerely. "You're a lifesaver."

I was glad she couldn't see me blush.

"When did you want to leave?" she asked.

"I've got a Calculus exam tomorrow, and Kendall's last exam is late tomorrow afternoon, so we weren't planning to leave till Wednesday. Is that okay?"

"That's perfect," she said. "I've got a Journalism final tomorrow, but I'll be ready to go whenever you are."

We made arrangements to meet on Wednesday and then chatted for a few more minutes. Finally, we said goodbye and hung up.

✧ ✧ ✧

My Calculus exam was a major struggle, but after checking all of my work, I was pretty sure that everything was correct.

Of course, that's what I always *think,* I mused dryly.

I had studied hard, so I wasn't tremendously worried.

After the exam, I went to meet Gina for lunch. She was already through with her exams, and planned to drive home after we ate. (She knew that Kendall was riding home with me, and we had tacitly agreed not to discuss it.) When I kissed her, though, she seemed distant.

"What's the matter?" I asked as we sat down.

"Nothing," she said, affecting a smile.

I knew her well enough not to be fooled, so I arched an eyebrow.

"It's nothing I can't handle," she insisted.

"What?"

"It's *nothing*, okay," she said. "Why do you have to try to fix everything?"

"What's that supposed to mean?" I shot back.

"What do you think it means?"

"I'm just trying to help," I said, struggling to maintain my calm.

"If you really wanted to help, you would've— Oh, never mind. Forget I said anything."

"Would've what?"

"Never mind."

"Would've *what?*" I repeated testily.

"Do you really wanna know?"

I nodded.

"If you really wanted to help, you should've actually *tried* to get a bid from Sigma Chi. Then I

wouldn't have Regan and Hayley bitching at me about dating a non-Greek."

"'Should've actually tried…,'" I echoed angrily. "I *did* try."

"Not hard enough, evidently," she said.

"D'you know why I didn't get a bid?" I asked, doing my best not to shout. "I didn't get a bid because of *you!*"

"Don't try to pin this on me, Paul, I'm not the one who—"

"I don't think you understand," I said, interrupting her. "I'm serious. I didn't get a bid because I left the Sigma Chi rush party so I could meet you. Fucking ironic, isn't it?" I asked angrily. "You get bitched at because you're dating a non-Greek, but *you're* the reason I'm not a Greek."

She looked as if she'd been slapped.

"If I hadn't left early, they would've given me a bid, but—"

"That's not true," she said. "You don't know that. They don't tell you—"

"No, they don't," I agreed. "Not usually. But they called to offer a bid to Trip, and they told him."

"I don't believe you."

"Believe what you want, but that's the truth."

"I'll *bet* it is," she said, her face hard. "That's just too convenient."

I shrugged. We sat in silence for a long moment. Then she picked up her tray.

"I don't know why I even *came* to UT," she said spitefully.

"Me either," I muttered as she stalked away.

Back in my room, I threw myself onto my bed and stared at the ceiling. Billy had gone home on Monday, so I had the room to myself.

I tried to think about anything *but* the fight, but my mind kept returning to it. What was the matter with her? It had to be more than just Regan and Hayley. She'd stood up to worse pressure before. What was different then? I knew the answer, but I didn't want to admit it.

In high school, Gina and I had been together constantly, and we talked about things before they had a chance to fester. With the stress of college and our conflicting class schedules, we didn't see each other as often. We still made time for each other, but even then, we saw each other a few times a week, no more.

Maybe Trip was right. Maybe it *was* time to make a choice. And with the way I felt at the moment, the choice would be clear-cut and easy. But I wasn't going to make any decision in the heat of the moment; it wouldn't be fair to Gina. Besides, I still loved her, and the thought of living without her—even as frustrated as I was—left a pit in my stomach.

But if I didn't do *something*, my life was going to continue to be miserable. Worse, Kendall's and Gina's lives were going to be miserable as well. Neither of them was happy when I spent time with the other, and they let me know it.

Strangely, Kendall was more strident in her "complaints" about me spending time with Gina. Most of the time, Gina came right out and said what she felt. But she knew it bothered me, so she tried to restrain herself. With Kendall, however, I got heavy sighs, disappointed looks, and the occasional barbed comment. She always apologized when I called her out, but her behavior didn't change.

Consequently, I felt trapped.

I wanted to wave a magic wand and have things return to "normal." But what was normal

anyway? Had anything ever really *been* normal for me?

"Somebody made life difficult while I wasn't looking," I mumbled angrily.

Then I bounded to my feet and cast about for my weights. A moment later, I stripped to the waist and gazed at myself in the mirror as I did biceps curls.

An hour later, I was still working out. I hadn't solved any of my problems, but I guess exhaustion is a solution of sorts.

✧ ✧ ✧

"Oh," I said to Kendall, the next morning at breakfast, "I forgot to tell you…"

She smiled for me to continue.

For a moment, however, I guess I simply gazed at her.

"What?" she asked, growing nervous at my silence.

"Sorry… I was just thinking about how beautiful you are," I said.

"Thank you," she said, her cheeks turning rosy. Then she tucked a lock of hair behind her ear and smiled warmly. "But that's not what you forgot to tell me."

"Um… no," I said. "I forgot to tell you that we'll have company on the ride home."

"Oh?"

"Mmm hmm."

"Who?"

"Oh, a certain girl who's in my Art History class," I said as nonchalantly as I could.

"A certain brunette?" she asked.

Smirking, I nodded.

"Oh, really?"

"Mmm hmm," I said. Then I told her the story.

"Bless her heart," Kendall said. Then, "It's a good thing you live in Atlanta."

Our eyes met, and I could see that she was excited. I knew she was attracted to Wren, almost as much as I was (but I'd never admit that to Kendall, of course). With a roguish grin, I reached for her hand and pulled it to my thigh.

She spared a nervous moment glancing around to see if anyone had noticed, but the dining hall was mostly empty.

"With exams and all," I said, "we haven't gotten to spend much time together."

She shook her head and then shifted in her seat as I pulled her hand toward my rapidly expanding manhood.

"Billy's already gone home," I said. "Are you thinking what I'm thinking?"

"I hope not," she said.

I paused, confused.

With a grin, she leaned close. "If you're thinking about what it feels like to have your boyfriend throw your legs over his shoulders and fill you with his big, hard dick, then maybe we need to talk."

"Just for that," I said, suppressing a laugh, "I'm going to make you beg."

"Beg?" she asked artfully.

"Beg," I said. "And then I'm going to make you beg again. And again, and again, and again."

She moistened her lips and then arched an eyebrow.

"C'mon," I said. "Before I simply rip your clothes off and ravish you right here."

"But I'd *like* that," she teased as I grabbed her hand.

Without a backward glance at our half-eaten breakfast, I dragged her toward the exit. I think we made it to my room in record time.

✧ ✧ ✧

Kendall and I spent the rest of the morning in bed. Fortunately, T.J. and Glen had already gone home, so we had the suite to ourselves.

Eventually, however, she had to return to her apartment to finish packing her things. I kissed her goodbye and then hopped into the shower. Afterward, I got dressed and finished packing my own belongings. Then I called Wren.

"Hey, it's Paul. Are you ready to go?" I asked when she answered the phone.

"Just about."

"Okay. I'll be there in fifteen minutes," I said.

"Do you mind helping me bring my things down?" she asked.

"No problem."

"Cool, thanks. Just come on up when you get here. I'm in room 507."

✧ ✧ ✧

I probably should've had an escort, but the RA at Morrill's front desk didn't even look up as I walked past him. (The dorm was coed, with men and women living on separate floors, but everyone used the same elevators.) When I got to Wren's room, she opened the door and gestured me inside.

"Sorry," she said, "I'll be ready in a sec."

As she packed the last of her makeup, I looked around her room (I'd never been in one of the suites in Morrill). The beds were along the near and far walls, and the room's desks sat in the middle of the right-hand wall, facing each other. The closets were along the left-hand wall, opposite the beds.

"When did Christy head home?" I asked, making small talk.

"Yesterday," she said. "Simon's coming to visit her in San Diego and then she and her mom are flying out to Hawaii next week."

"Ah."

As Wren stuffed her makeup bag into her suitcase, I went back to studying the room. To the left, an opening led to the suite's shared bathroom and shower. The girls had hung a curtain across the doorway, but it was tied back. I couldn't see much of the room on the far side of the bathroom, but it was obviously the mirror image of Wren and Christy's room.

"Which bed is yours?" I asked.

"By the window," Wren said.

Like mine, I thought idly.

Her side of the room was decorated with swimming posters. I recognized Mark Spitz, but none of the others. Most of the guys were tall and lean, muscular but not bulky (in other words, they looked like swimmers).

Christy's side of the room was more feminine, but her eclectic choice of artwork immediately drew my eye. A poster of Michelangelo's *David* hung over her bed. Next to it, she had a picture of Rodin's *Kiss*, Myron's *Disk Thrower*, and a small picture of the *Venus de Milo*. In addition,

she had several other pictures of famous sculpture. Even though I recognized most of them, I didn't remember the artists or titles.

Curiously, the other wall over her bed was covered with traditional Asian art. To my surprise, her stylized "CMC" adorned the corner of each drawing. I was impressed. Her style was completely different from the charcoal and pencil sketches she'd done for Siobhan's class. I couldn't explain it, but the pictures "felt" Asian.

On Christy's desk itself, she had pictures of her family. With as many brothers as she had, there were several pictures. One of them, a picture of a Marine, was bigger than the others. The photo showed a younger, waiflike Christy as she pinned a pair of gold pilot's wings to the uniformed man's chest. A snapshot was stuck in the corner of that picture frame. It was of the same brother, this time wearing a flight jumpsuit and posing with his crew in front of a big Marine Corps CH-53 helicopter.

I wondered which brother it was before I let my eyes move to the wall above the desk. It was filled with charcoal drawings. One of them caught my eye straight away. It was of a guy with glasses and tousled hair. He looked bookish, and while his eyes were full of love, he seemed a little perplexed.

"Is that Simon?" I asked, pointing to the sketch.

Wren absently looked over her shoulder and then nodded. "Don't get me started about him," she said. "Christy says she's in love with him, but she's not. *I* think he's a loser." Then, "Crap, where's my hairbrush? Sorry," she added, "I really thought I was ready."

"Take your time," I said, eager for the chance to return to my not-so-casual inspection.

Most of the other drawings hanging over Christy's desk were of people I knew. I saw several sketches of Wren, in various poses. Surprisingly, there were almost as many sketches of *me*, also in several poses. I had seen some of them, but others were unfamiliar. I was positive that I hadn't posed for several of them.

Well, I mused, *if I can draw buildings from memory, then I guess Christy can draw* people *from memory.*

As my eyes slid over the sketches of Wren and me, I was surprised to see several of Siobhan. In them, the older woman was sculpting, her face a mask of concentration. From the drawings, I could easily tell how much Christy admired her mentor.

I wish I *could find someone like Siobhan,* I silently lamented, *someone who'd nurture and fuel my creativity. Instead, I've got* Joska, *who seems bent on testing the limits of my self-control.*

"I'm sorry that took so long," Wren said at last, interrupting my musing. "Are you ready?"

"Ready when you are," I said.

With that, I helped her carry her bags downstairs. A few minutes later, I parked the Jeep in front of Kendall's apartment building. Then Wren and I headed upstairs. Kendall opened the door and invited us inside.

"We've never actually met," Wren said to Kendall, before I even had a chance to introduce her, "but I've heard all about you."

"It's nice to finally meet you, too," Kendall said to the shorter girl. "Paul's told me a lot about you."

As the girls exchanged pleasantries, I gathered Kendall's bags. She had two, plus her overnight bag.

I had warned the girls to pack light, but we *were* going to be away from school for more than three weeks. When I finally loaded all of our things in the Jeep, half of the back seat was full from the floorboards to the roof. Wren wouldn't have anyplace to put her feet, either, since I had to wedge one of her bags behind my seat. Even Kendall would have her overnight bag on the floorboard beneath her feet.

Finally, we were ready to go. Five minutes later, I pulled onto the interstate and we roared toward Chattanooga. We hadn't gone a mile before Kendall loosened her seatbelt and turned to face Wren.

"Paul hasn't told me *every*thing about you, Wren," she said, with a self-deprecating smile. "So, what's your major?"

"Public Relations."

"I thought you were an Art major," I said, glancing at her in the rearview mirror.

"Uh-uh. Art History is just my minor."

"Is Public Relations part of the Business College?" Kendall asked.

Wren shook her head. "It's in the College of Communication," she said. "It's actually a concentration within the Advertising degree."

"How is it different from a regular Advertising degree?" Kendall asked.

As the girls talked, I listened with only half of my attention. I guess I zoned out longer than I thought I did, however, because when I started paying attention again, they were talking about modeling.

"How did you get started?" Kendall asked.

"Christy just asked me to do it," Wren said simply. "I mean, I'd never done it before, but I thought it'd be cool."

"What's it like?"

"For a figure model, it's really easy. And I don't have any problems taking my clothes off, which is good. Basically, I just sit there, or stand there, or lie there, or whatever they want me to do. It's actually kinda boring. Unless Paul's there, of course," she said, a grin in her voice.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Kendall smile and nod.

"The guy they had last year, Rock, was a real jerk," Wren continued. "He thought he was God's gift to women or something. I mean, he kept coming on to me and asking me out and all. Needless to say, I wasn't interested."

"Why? What did he look like?" Kendall asked.

"He was this Italian guy with a big Roman nose, and he wore more gold than most *women* I know," Wren said. "He had a nice body and all, but he was really hairy. Totally not my type."

"I know what you mean," Kendall said. "I don't like the hairy Neanderthal type either. I go for muscular guys with a smooth chest."

"I never would've guessed," Wren teased. Then, "But that's not *all* that's smooth on Paul."

I glanced up in alarm.

"I know," Kendall said. Then she leaned toward Wren after glancing at me. "He trims his pubic hair," she said in an ostentatious whisper. "And… he shaves the base of his dick."

In shock, I looked at her, nearly swerving off the road in the process.

When the girls stopped laughing at me, Kendall put her hand on my arm. My stomach dropped as I realized that she was Up To Something.

"He likes the shaved look," she said.

"I could tell," Wren said.

"But that's not all," Kendall added.

"Oh?" Wren asked, her curiosity piqued.

"Mmm hmm," Kendall said, still grinning. "He likes me to shave *my* pubic hair."

My jaw hit my chest. What was she doing?! She was usually discreet, but for some reason, she'd thrown caution to the wind. I stared at her, agog.

"Completely," she added, impervious to my reaction.

"Completely?" Wren asked, surprised. "So you're totally bare down there?"

Kendall nodded.

"Then I guess Paul doesn't have to worry about getting hair in his teeth," Wren joked.

"Oh, he likes it for a different reason," Kendall said.

"He does?"

"Mmm hmm. He likes how it looks, especially when we have sex."

I nearly choked.

"And," Kendall continued, "there's another reason he likes shaved women."

"Do tell," Wren practically drawled.

"Paul lost his virginity to a woman who shaved," Kendall said matter-of-factly.

At that, I *did* choke.

"Are you okay, Paul?" she asked sweetly. She seemed to be having as much fun as Wren.

I gave her a hard look, but then immediately had to return my attention to the road; traffic was slowing down. A moment later, it slowed further. Finally, it came to a stop. Ahead of us, cars packed both lanes, none of them moving.

"There must be an accident ahead," I said, hoping to change the subject.

"That'll give us more time to talk," Kendall replied. Then she flashed me an unrepentant smile and turned back to Wren.

I sighed in resignation and looked to see if the cars in the distance were moving. They weren't, so I pulled the transmission out of gear, released the clutch, and set the parking brake.

Then I shifted in my seat and tried to get comfortable. By then, my dick was completely hard. Fortunately, I was wearing a pair of my new boxer shorts, and my hard-on had simply expanded down the left leg. *Un*fortunately, it was obvious. *Very* obvious.

I breathed a sigh of relief when Kendall didn't seem to notice. Given her current mood, she probably would've pointed out my predicament. I was tempted to just haul out the little guy and see what happened. Luckily, my big head still had control of the situation, so I kept my dick in my pants.

"So, where were we?" Kendall asked Wren.

"You were telling me that Paul lost his virginity to a woman who shaved her pubic hair," Wren said helpfully.

I tried to glare at her in the rearview mirror, but she pointedly didn't notice. She'd spent too long trying to find an angle to tease me, and now that she had one, she wasn't going to simply let it go.

"Mmm hmm," Kendall said. "I think that's one of the main reasons he likes shaved women. Besides, I like shaving for him."

Wren sensed my aroused discomfort, so she ruthlessly moved in for the kill. “I’ve always shaved the sides,” she said, “because of my swimsuits. But some of the girls on the swim team used to shave before races. Shave completely, I mean. I did it a couple of times, but not all the way.”

“Oh?” Kendall asked.

“I used to do this ‘racing stripe’ thing,” Wren said. “You know, just a little stripe down the middle.”

At the thought of Wren with a small stripe of pubic hair, I surreptitiously tried to take some of the pressure off my erection.

“I’ve done that before,” Kendall said, “but Paul likes the totally smooth look.”

“I’ll *bet* he does,” Wren said. Then, “But let’s talk more about him losing his virginity.”

“Let’s not and say we did,” I countered tersely.

“Then we can talk about when you took *my* virginity,” Kendall said.

“Paul was your first?” Wren asked.

“Mmm hmm. We were on a hike with friends, and there was this beautiful pool at the top of a waterfall. Well, Paul and I…”

I stared at her in disbelief as she related most of the details from our first time together. I don’t think I’ll *ever* get used to the things that women are willing to share with each other. Guys would simply say, “Yeah, we did it.” Women, on the other hand, seem perfectly comfortable telling each other things like, “I did this and then he did that. Finally, we did this, that, and the other.” And then they’d share *details* of “this, that, and the other.”

Un-fucking-believable.

“I lost my virginity to a guy on the swim team,” Wren said. “Not surprisingly.”

“What happened?” Kendall asked.

My dick practically *pulsed* in anticipation. I glanced at it ruefully. I wasn’t going to get any relief any time soon, but it didn’t seem to care.

Treacherous organ.

“I was going with this older guy, a junior,” Wren said. “After practice one day, we were over at his pool. His parents weren’t home, so we started kissing and fooling around.”

“How old were you?” Kendall asked.

“Almost fifteen.”

“That young?”

“I was ready,” Wren said confidently. “*Boy*, was I ready. Anyway,” she continued, drawing out the moment, “I let him pull the top of my swimsuit down. My nipples have always been really sensitive, so when he started sucking them, I knew I was a goner. The next thing I knew, I was pulling off my swimsuit so he could play with my pussy.”

“Did he know what he was doing?” Kendall asked.

“Not really, but that didn’t matter. I really had the hots for him, so he could’ve fumbled around blindly and I still would’ve done it with him. But he occasionally brushed my button—by accident, I’m sure—and he *was* still sucking my nipples. What was I supposed to do?” she asked, feigning innocence.

At that, both girls tittered.

“I know what you mean,” Kendall said when they stopped laughing. “My nipples are pretty

sensitive too."

"It's a curse, isn't it?" Wren asked without conviction.

"Not with the right guy," Kendall said, glancing at me.

At that point, I began silently praying for cars to start moving. I was horny, and I wasn't going to get any relief as long as we were stuck in traffic. When we got to Kendall's house, however…

"Where was I?" Wren asked. "Oh yeah. Anyway, once I had my swimsuit off, he pulled his off too. I started playing with his dick, but I didn't really know what to do. He didn't seem to care, though, 'cause he started moaning and saying stuff like 'oh yeah, baby.' He kept sucking my tits, but the next thing I knew, I was on my back and he was pushing his dick inside me. It hurt at first, but then he started playing with my nipples again, and I didn't care."

"Did you use a rubber or anything?" Kendall asked. "Were you on the pill?"

"God, no," Wren said, laughing. "But believe it or not, that was the best part."

"Oh?"

"Mmm hmm," Wren said, glancing at me. "He didn't want to get me pregnant, so he pulled out when he came. And that's when I discovered that I *really* like having a guy come on my tits."

My dick throbbed sadistically.

"As soon as the first spurt landed," she added, "I came."

"Just like that?" Kendall asked, surprised.

"Not really," Wren admitted. "When he pulled out, the base of his dick was pressing against my button, and that kinda helped. But I swear to God, I didn't come till I felt a hot splash on my nipple. He didn't shoot much, but most of his jizz hit my tits," she added. Then she chuckled. "After my reaction, he thought he was the greatest lay in the world," she said. "He *was* in love with my tits, though. And he liked to 'spooge on my boobs,' as he called it. Every time he did, I went off like a rocket."

"Wow," Kendall said softly.

"No kidding," Wren said. "So now I like it when a guy comes on my tits. Crazy, huh?"

"Not really," Kendall said.

In a flash, I knew what she was about to say, and I looked at her in stunned disbelief.

"I like Paul to come on my face," she said, true to my prediction.

"Oh really?" Wren asked sweetly, looking at me.

I must've turned six shades of purple.

"He usually wants me to swallow," Kendall said, "but every once in a while, I can talk him into shooting on my face." Then she shrugged. "I don't know why I like it, but I do."

"I know what you mean," Wren said. "I used to think I was weird for wanting a guy to come on my tits."

"Well, we can be weird together," Kendall said.

"Exactly," Wren said. Then she glanced at me. "So, Paul, what do you have to say about all this?"

"Judging by the bulge in his pants," Kendall said, "I'd say he's enjoying himself."

"Is he hard?" Wren asked excitedly.

"Very," Kendall said.

"Oh, my God, do you mind if I look? I mean, I've never seen him hard."

"Never?"

"Never. I've *felt* it a few times, when I managed to get him excited in Siobhan's class, but he was always behind me when it happened. And I couldn't really turn around and look. Not without making it obvious, at least."

"Oh *really?*" Kendall asked me, teasing-sweet.

I'm sure my blush only deepened.

"Yeah, sorry," Wren said. "I guess I've been trying to give your boyfriend a hard-on. I dunno why, but I like teasing him."

"That's okay, so do I," Kendall said.

"And you'll pay for it," I muttered.

At that, both girls howled with laughter. When they stopped, Kendall looked at me, the very picture of sincerity.

"Do you mind if Wren looks at your hard-on, Paul, darling?" she asked.

"You don't have to take it out or anything," Wren said from the back seat. "I just wanna see how big it is."

"It's pretty big," Kendall said. "See for yourself," she added without even waiting for me to answer.

Before I could blink, Wren was out of her seat and perched between Kendall and me.

"See?" Kendall said, indicating my fabric-outlined erection.

"Oh, my," Wren said. "It *is* big. Bigger than I thought. I mean, you know how some guys don't get much bigger when they're hard? But others—"

"Get a *lot* bigger," Kendall finished. "Oh, yes. Paul's not exactly small when he's soft, but he does get a lot bigger."

"And thicker too," Wren added, mischievously.

"If we're done talking about my Johnson…," I said, a little irritated.

"But we *like* your Johnson," Kendall cooed, her blue eyes full of feigned innocence.

Then she and Wren looked at each other and broke into gales of laughter at my strangled reply. When they settled down, they seemed to come to some unspoken agreement to tease me mercilessly. To that end, they talked about everything from dick size in general, to spit or swallow, the taste of semen, their favorite positions, and more.

They decided that my dick was plenty long enough, but not *too* long. They also agreed that while they both liked girth, length was important too. I knew that Kendall swallowed (obviously), but Wren looked directly at me and smiled when she said, "I swallow too, of course." Kendall liked the taste of semen, but Wren simply tolerated it. Kendall's favorite position was on her back, with her legs over my shoulders, while Wren liked to be on top, cowgirl style. ("So the guy can play with my tits while I'm riding him," she said.)

I listened to the entire conversation with rapt attention. After all, they seemed to be having it for *my* benefit, although I'm sure they were enjoying comparing notes. I was enjoying myself as well, but I was getting hornier by the minute.

By the time the cars in front of us started moving, my nerves were thrumming with pent-up sexual energy. I was tempted to pull into a gas station and take Kendall into the restroom, where I could fuck her brains out. Unfortunately, the girls were still having fun teasing me, and didn't seem inclined to stop.

"So," Wren asked Kendall, "if your nipples are so sensitive, do you like tit fucking?"

At that point, I think I was immune to the shock of a question like that.

"We've never really tried it," Kendall said.

"Oh, you should," Wren said. "My tits aren't super big—not like yours—but I still like to push 'em together and let a guy put his dick between 'em. And then, of course, he's already in position to come on my tits."

"Or my face," Kendall said, her eyes flashing as she glanced at me.

I imagined what I was going to do to Kendall when I got her alone. Then I muttered something under my breath about paybacks being hell.

She blithely ignored me.

"You'll have to try it sometime," Wren said.

"Oh, I plan to," Kendall answered.

"You'll have to tell me about it after you do," Wren said. When I looked in the rearview mirror, she smirked at me. "You should give me your phone number at school, Kendall," she added. "I'm sure we'll have *lots* to talk about."

"I'm sure we will," Kendall replied. Then she turned thoughtful and flashed me a sly glance. "You know, Paul's never mentioned your boyfriend," she said to Wren. "He told me that Christy's engaged to a guy named Simon, but he hasn't said anything about you."

"That's because I don't *have* a boyfriend," Wren said simply. "Not at the moment, anyway."

"You don't seem like a shrinking violet," Kendall said. "So why aren't you dating anyone, if you don't mind me asking, that is? What do you do when you're… you know… in the mood?"

"You mean like after class with Paul?" Wren asked playfully.

I darted a glance at Kendall.

She merely grinned at me.

"I'm a modern girl," Wren said simply. "I've got my vibrator."

"You've got a vibrator?" Kendall asked, a little shocked.

"You mean you *don't?*"

Kendall shook her head.

"Why not?"

"I guess I never needed one."

"*Every* girl needs a vibrator," Wren said. "Even if you've got a boyfriend, he's not around all the time. Besides, most guys don't know what they're doing down there."

"Paul does," Kendall said.

"Still," Wren disagreed, "he's not always around, is he?"

"Not always," Kendall said, and I detected a sour note.

Sometimes he's with Gina, I filled in mentally.

"There you go," Wren said. "Every girl needs a vibrator."

"That still doesn't explain why you don't have a boyfriend," I said, speaking for the first time in several minutes. I wanted to know the answer to the question, but I also wanted to nudge the conversation back to Wren (and away from Gina). Kendall and Wren seemed to be feeding off each other's enthusiasm, and I was learning all *sorts* of interesting things. I didn't want that to end any more than I wanted Kendall to turn sullen at the thought of me spending time with Gina.

"I can take care of my own needs," Wren said abruptly. "Anyway, I haven't found a guy who can keep up with me. Besides, who said I need a *guy* in order to get off?"

At that, I raised an eyebrow. When I glanced sidelong at Kendall, I realized that she hadn't missed the significance either. Wren obviously liked guys, but did she *also* like girls? And if she did, did she like Kendall? My dick got even *harder* at the thought.

Flustered, Wren realized that she might've said too much in the heat of the moment, so she returned the conversation to Kendall and her lack of a vibrator.

Kendall glanced at me once—a very meaningful glance—and then turned her attention back to Wren.

By the time we got to Kendall's house, the girls had shared even more intimate details (about vibrators, masturbating, and fantasies, to mention a few). I tried to pay attention to the conversation, but I was too busy thinking about the possibility of a threesome with Wren.

As soon as I pulled into Kendall's driveway, however, I had another problem. My erection wasn't going away any time soon, so I needed to figure out a way to hide it. Fortunately, Kendall's mom was the only one home. Adam was still at work, and Drew was at football practice (his team was in the state finals).

In order to hide my erection, I made sure I held something in front of my crotch whenever Kendall's mom was around. But that brought up a bigger challenge: what to do after we finished unloading Kendall's things. Melissa would undoubtedly offer us a snack, or make small talk. I was so horny that I was thinking about simply fucking Kendall in front of an audience, no matter who it was.

I had just deposited her last bag in her room when she solved the problem for me. She shut the door behind her and practically knocked me over as she rushed into my arms.

"Oh my goodness, Paul," she whispered in between kisses, "I'm *so* horny. And Wren is incredibly cool. And hot. She's *both*, at once."

"I can't *believe* you told her all those things," I said.

"I trust her," Kendall said simply. "Woman's intuition. Besides, you know how I am."

I nodded. She had an uncanny knack for reading people, and she was rarely wrong.

"But now," she said, pressing her body against me, "we've got a minute or two. My mom's showing Wren her doll collection. So I was thinking…"

Instead of answering, I kissed her, hard. Then I slipped my hand under her sweater and quickly lifted her bra over her breasts.

A moment later, she opened my fly and extracted my dick.

I pushed her to her knees without a second thought.

She engulfed my cock with a whimper and then began sucking for all she was worth.

I put my hands on the sides of her head and directed her movements. After less than a minute, I felt my balls tighten up. With a barely suppressed groan, I erupted.

Kendall cried out softly as the first spurt caught her by surprise. She quickly recovered and started pumping my shaft, milking me. Three more hard spurts filled her mouth, and she tried to swallow. The following gushes were too much, and she pulled back, coughing. With tears in her eyes, she finally recovered and looked up at me apologetically.

"Oh my goodness," she said, breathing hard. "I didn't expect so *much*."

"Sorry," I said, panting as well, "I was pretty worked up."

With a rueful grin, she licked the back of her right hand (my final gushes had landed there). Then she used her finger to wipe the escaped semen from the corners of her mouth. Finally, she

licked her finger and smiled up at me. Before she could say anything, however, someone knocked on the bedroom door.

"Are you okay, Kendall?" her mother asked through the closed door.

"I'm fine, Mom," Kendall said, abashed. Then her eyes darted to the doorknob as we had the same thought.

Had she locked the door? Would her mother open it? What would she say if she did?

Thankfully, Melissa didn't open the door. Instead, she pointedly reminded her daughter that she had a guest.

"Okay, Mom," Kendall said. "We'll be right out."

When we heard her walk down the hallway, we both breathed a sigh of relief.

"Oh my goodness," Kendall said softly. "That was close."

"No kidding," I said, thinking back to the *last* time her mother had caught us. That time, Melissa had been so shocked that she cleaned my semen from her daughter's face and then grabbed my dick to clean it as well. I still had fantasies about what would've happened if…

"We'd better get out there," Kendall said.

"You don't want to do anything else?" I asked. I was still hard, and I guess I was hoping to actually fuck her.

"No," she said immediately. "We don't have time," she added. Then she chuckled.

"What?"

"Maybe I *do* need a vibrator."

✧ ✧ ✧

Once Wren and I said our goodbyes and got back on the road, she gave me an appraising look.

"So, did you enjoy your blowjob?" she asked casually.

My eyes flew wide and I reflexively glanced at her. I immediately got my expression under control, though. Then I tried to look innocent.

"I'll take that as a yes," she said. Then she smirked. "You didn't think I'd know what you two were up to, huh?"

"We weren't *up* to anything," I lied.

"Oh, yes you were, although you must've been *really* horny, because it was pretty quick."

I didn't answer.

"I could tell by the look in your eye that she'd taken care of you. Besides, I could smell it when she kissed me goodbye. Did you come on her face?" she asked sweetly.

I tried not to advertise my shock, but I don't think I succeeded. I hadn't actually come on Kendall's face, of course, but the question alone was shocking enough.

"I'll take *that* as a yes, too," Wren said, misunderstanding. Then, "And now I see why you said what you did."

"Said what? When?"

"When we first met, you told me that you weren't going to be tempted away from your girlfriend, or something like that. Now I see what you meant. Kendall's really cool; I like her. And she seems like a lot of fun."

"She is."

"Ha! I'll bet. I mean, not just any girl would slip away to give you a quickie blowjob, especially while her mother's in the next room."

No kidding, I thought. Normally, Kendall wouldn't do it either, but we'd both been horny. *Very* horny.

"Did you have a chance to take care of her?" Wren asked.

I silently wondered if my face was glowing or not.

"Evidently not," she said saucily. "And it's a shame she doesn't have a vibrator."

"Can we change the subject?" I asked.

"Sure," she answered, too quickly.

Uh-oh.

"Let's talk about when you lost your virginity."

"Let's not."

"No, I'm serious. Kendall said something; 'Paul lost his virginity to a woman who shaved.'"

"So?" I asked, as nonchalantly as I could.

"Kendall's very careful about the way she speaks. She uses proper English. Trust me, I notice things like that. Public Relations, remember? Anyway, she says 'yes' instead of 'yeah.' She says 'oh my goodness' instead of 'oh my God,' like most other people. She doesn't swear, and she's very… precise."

"Yeah, so?"

"Why did she say '*woman*'? She didn't mean some fifteen-year-old girl. If she had, she would've said, 'Paul lost his virginity to a *girl* who shaved.' So," she asked, grinning smugly, "do you have a thing for older women?"

I glanced at her again, out of surprise, but immediately jerked my eyes back to the road.

"So, who *was* this mysterious older woman? One of your teachers? A neighbor? A friend's mother?"

"That's none of your business," I said.

"I can just ask Kendall," Wren said.

I gave her a hard look.

"Okay, I won't," she said at last, to which I breathed a sigh of relief. "But I'm still curious," she continued. "I mean, you know about *my* first time."

"Maybe I'll tell you," I admitted after a moment. "Someday."

"I'm not very patient," she said.

"Then you'd better learn to be."

"We'll see."

The rest of the trip to Atlanta was more of the same. Wren was obviously horny—she kept shifting in her seat, and I caught her furtively squeezing her legs together a couple of times—but she didn't do anything more than flirt.

Do I want *her to?* I wondered. *Yes. No. Yes!* No! *No, no, no! I already* have *one wild girl in my life*—two, *judging by Kendall's recent behavior. But Kendall and Wren, together... lips… breasts… asses— Stop it!*

Despite my almost painful erection, the big head was firmly in control (more or less). Unfortunately, our conversation never strayed far from the subject of sex. As a result, I was as horny as she was by the time we pulled into her driveway.

"Do you want to come in for a few minutes?" she asked.

I sensed that she wasn't simply being polite, but I still had the problem of my erection. And

besides, I wanted to get home and jerk off.

"You've been a real lifesaver bringing me home and all," she said. Then she implored me with her eyes. "My mom said she wanted to meet you," she added. When I fidgeted, she seemed to notice my erection. "Oh, for God's sake, are you *still* hard?"

"I'm hard *again*," I said tightly. "We just talked about *sex* for an hour and a half," I added. "*Four* hours, if you count the drive from Knoxville and the traffic jam."

"Still…"

"Still nothing," I snapped. "You're horny too. I saw you squirming and squeezing your legs together."

She blushed, caught.

"Besides," I added, with a pointed glance at her breasts, "it's not *that* cold in the Jeep."

She suddenly looked down at her nipples, which threatened to poke through her shirt. Then she automatically crossed her arms, covering the evidence of her arousal. For a moment, I caught myself wondering if her pussy were wet as well. I couldn't *see* a damp spot at her crotch, but that was no guarantee.

I started to let my mind wander to what I knew her pussy looked like, but then I gave myself a mental slap. I needed to think rationally, but that was becoming harder and harder to do. Finally, I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. When I opened them, I looked at Wren, once again in control.

"Okay," I said, the voice of reason, "so I'm not the only one who's a little worked up."

She squared her shoulders and then set her jaw, daring me to make something of it.

I almost laughed. Then, "It's just that I can't hide it as easily. So I don't know if I wanna meet your mom in… um… in this condition."

"Can't you do something about it?"

I flashed her a deadpan look.

"Okay, okay," she hastily agreed.

"Listen," I said, "I can stick my hands in my pockets. That'll hide… it."

She looked up, brightening.

This would be so much easier if she'd just suck me off before we go inside, I thought. Then, *Stop it!*

"That should work," she said, nodding. Then she got out of the Jeep and came around to the driver's side.

As I got out, I thrust my hands into my pockets.

"I can't believe I'm helping you *hide* your hard-on," she muttered, scrutinizing me. "After all my hard work…"

I laughed out loud.

She shot me a faux-annoyed look.

"Hey," I said, still laughing, "*you* want me to meet your mother."

"Come on," she said, acting disgusted.

I might not have Kendall's insight, but I easily figured out that Wren didn't want me to realize how horny she was. I also realized that she wanted to jump me as much as I wanted her to, and she was covering it with bluster.

"And quit smirking," she snapped. "My mom'll think we've been up to something."

"Yes, ma'am," I said, doing my best to comply.

Wren's mother, Helen, was a nice woman in her late thirties or early forties. She was more full-bodied than Wren, but still slim and attractive. She wore glasses, and had her dark hair pulled back with combs.

"It's nice to meet you," she said as we shook hands.

I made sure to keep my left hand in my pocket, of course.

"Wren's told me all about you," Helen added warmly.

Wren blushed when I flashed her an inquisitive look.

"She says you're an Architecture major," Helen said.

We talked for a few more minutes—during which I was excruciatingly aware of my erection. Finally, I helped Wren unload her things.

Her bedroom was about what I expected. The walls were covered with posters, although a few were missing. They were probably the ones currently adorning her dorm room walls. She also had two shelves full of trophies and medals.

"Did you win those for swimming?" I asked, pointing.

"Uh-huh."

"Do you miss it?" I asked, glad for the opportunity to talk about something *besides* sex.

"Miss what?"

"Swimming."

"Sometimes," she said, with a twinge of sadness. "I mean, I still swim almost every day, but I miss the competition. I miss the…"

"Adrenaline," I said, completing her thought.

She nodded. "You used to wrestle, right?"

"Yeah."

"Then you know what I mean," she said, to which I nodded. "I'd still be doing it if I hadn't gotten mono," she added. "Although… well… I guess I can't be a professional swimmer."

"No kidding," I said. When she started to bristle, I quickly explained. "I didn't mean that like it sounded," I said. "My high school wrestling coach told me the same thing, more or less. But I'm like you, I really miss the competition. I miss the… I dunno… the…"

"The rush," she said quietly.

"Exactly. But I wanna be an architect more than anything in the world, so I'm sure I'll survive. Besides, I get my excitement in other ways."

"Oh?"

"Mmm hmm," I said, grinning. "I give rides to girls who talk about sex and make everyone horny."

"Do you do that often?" she asked archly.

"Not as often as I'd like," I said.

To my surprise, she sighed.

"What?" I asked, a little confused.

"I was just thinking about that older woman who shaved," she said. "I guess I'll have to take another ride with you to find out."

I'm sure I blushed suitably.

Fortunately, Helen saved me; she appeared in the doorway and offered us Cokes.

Wren grinned playfully at my obvious relief.

I made sure to keep my left hand in my pocket until I sat down on the couch. Even then, I crossed my legs to hide my erection. Wren grinned shamelessly.

After I finished my Coke, I stood up, careful to shove my hand back in my pocket. Then I thanked Wren's mother for her hospitality. Wren wrote down her phone number and handed me the slip of paper. I told her my number and she wrote it down.

"If you need a ride back to Knoxville," I added, "give me a call."

"That's very thoughtful of you, Paul," Helen said. Then she turned to her daughter.

"Yes, thank you," Wren said.

"When are you heading back?" Helen asked, in the same tone Kendall used when she was playing matchmaker.

"The Sunday before school starts," I said. "I think it's January 3rd."

"Are you sure you don't mind giving Wren a ride?" Helen asked. "We'd hate to impose."

"I wouldn't mind," I assured her.

"I'm good friends with Paul's girlfriend," Wren said, attempting to put a stop to her mother's matchmaking. "She lives in Chattanooga."

"Isn't that nice," Helen said.

I tried not to grin as I recognized the tone of voice that Southern women tend to use when they're stymied, but refuse to admit defeat.

"We'd better let Paul get home," Wren said. Then she turned to me. "Thanks again for the ride. It was… fun," she added, her eyes darting to my crotch.

At Helen's confused look (she hadn't seen her daughter's glance), Wren linked her arm through mine and escorted me out.

"Your mom seems to think you need a boyfriend," I teased her, once we were safely outside.

"She thinks a lot of things that aren't true," Wren shot back.

"Then why do you flirt with me?"

"I've got to keep in practice for when I *do* want a boyfriend," she said artfully. "Besides," she added, "you're cute when you blush."

As if on cue, I'm sure I got cuter.

"See?" she said, laughing. Then she sobered. "Are you sure about the ride back to Knoxville? I mean, if you don't want to, I can have my mom—"

"I'm sure," I said. "I don't mind at all. It'll be fun."

"Fun for whom? You?"

"Fun for all *three* of us," I said.

She looked like she wanted to reply, but she just smiled suggestively instead.

I cocked my head to the side.

"I can be mysterious too," she said softly.

"You're not as mysterious as you think you are, Beautiful."

"Oh, really?"

"Mmm hmm. But it's a good thing you've got all the right, ahem, equipment to be a 'modern girl,'" I said. As she squawked indignantly, I dug in my pocket for my car keys. "Give me a call sometime," I said.

"*You* are impossible."

"Mmm hmm. Seeya."

Her expression softened as I got into the Jeep and started the engine. She waved when I backed out of her driveway. As I turned around in her cul-de-sac, she waved again. With a grin, I watched in the rearview mirror as she turned and practically danced into her house.

I don't really remember the fifteen-minute drive to my house. Instead, Kendall and Wren cavorted through my imagination.

They were both nude.

They were both eager.

They were both beckoning to me.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The morning after I returned from Knoxville, Mom cooked breakfast. Dad was out of town on a trip, and Erin had decided to sleep late, so Mom and I were alone. She fixed too much food, so I felt obliged to load my plate with more than I usually ate. With a well-hidden sigh, I wondered how I'd eat even *half* of it.

"Have you called Gina yet?" Mom asked softly.

I shook my head. I had called Kendall the night before, when I got home, but I'd been leery about calling Gina, especially after our last conversation.

"Things haven't gotten better?"

I shrugged noncommittally.

"How're things with you and Kendall?"

Once again, I shrugged.

"Do you want to talk about it?"

"Not really," I said.

"Are you sure?"

I shrugged. "It's a really complex situation, and *none* of us are happy. I mean, it'd take me a while to explain, so…"

"I already know some of it," she said reasonably. "Besides, I'm not going anywhere."

Since explaining things would get me out of eating any more—I'd barely made a dent in my breakfast—I decided to do it. After a moment to marshal my thoughts, I started speaking. Fifteen minutes later, I was still going. Mom occasionally interrupted with questions, but for the most part, she simply listened.

"So that's more or less the situation," I said, summing up. "Kendall hoped Gina would go to UCLA instead of UT, and she wants her 'turn' as my only girlfriend. Gina's sorority sisters aren't really helping the situation, but she had her claws out before any of that flared up," I added. Then I shrugged expressively. "Now, Gina's fed up with Kendall, and Kendall's fed up with Gina. I'm in the middle, but nothing I do seems to make things any better."

"Elizabeth told me that Gina's pretty upset too. It sounds like you're in a difficult situation," Mom said.

"No fu— I mean, no kidding."

"And you've tried to talk about it? With the girls, I mean."

I nodded. "But nothing seems to work. I can't get them to talk to each other, and neither one wants to be the first to extend the olive branch." *Besides, Gina already tried that, and it didn't work,* I recalled with resentment.

"Then it sounds like you've got a tough choice to make."

"What do you mean?" I asked, although I knew the answer. I guess I just didn't want to admit it to myself.

"If none of you are happy, and you aren't communicating, then you'll only prolong the inevitable if you don't do *some*thing."

"Like what?" I asked, almost afraid of the answer.

"Well, if you've tried to fix things yourself, but things haven't improved, then…"

"I'm going to have to make a choice," I said heavily.

She nodded.

"Yeah, Trip told me the same thing."

"Sometimes it's easier to see things when you're not in the middle of them," she said, her voice soft and comforting.

"That doesn't make it any easier."

"No fucking kidding," she said. When I looked up in shock, she simply smiled. "Hey, I'm allowed to use that kind of language," she said, half-defensive, half-joking. "Especially if it's appropriate."

"Still…," I said.

"Still…," she echoed. Then, softly, "Do *you* know what you want?"

"I want things the way they used to be," I said.

"That's a start," she said, "but whining about it won't make it happen."

I shook my head, chagrined.

"Have you talked to Susan about it?"

"Sort of, but she wasn't any help."

"She can't *tell* you what you want," Mom said, softly incredulous. "You need to decide that for yourself."

"That's what everyone keeps telling me," I said.

"Because it's true," she said. Then she leaned forward. "No one said that being an adult was easy, Paul. I wish it were, but it's not. Sometimes, you have to make tough choices."

"But how can I make *this* choice, knowing that it'll make somebody unhappy?" I asked.

"Is it better than the alternative?" she replied matter-of-factly.

"That doesn't make it any easier."

"No, it doesn't," she said. "I wish I could help, but…"

"I'm going to have to figure this out for myself," I said. "Yeah, Susan told me the same thing."

"She's right, you know."

"That doesn't make it any easier," I said sullenly.

"Why don't you give Gina a call, to let her know you got home okay," she suggested. "No matter how you feel right now, you still need to be polite. Besides, Gina's just as frustrated as you are."

I nodded.

"You two always talked things out when you were in high school. Communication is vital to a good relationship. You know that."

"I guess," I said.

"No matter what, Gina will always be one of your best friends."

"I *wish*," I said, unconvinced.

At that, Mom stood and walked around the table. She leaned down and kissed the top of my head. "I'm sorry, honey," she said quietly. "I wish I could solve all your problems and protect you, but you're not a little boy anymore."

But I don't want to be an adult, either, I silently complained.

✧ ✧ ✧

"May I please speak to Gina?"

"Certainly, Paul," Elizabeth said, her British accent softly reassuring. "Just a moment."

A few seconds later, I heard a click as Gina picked up another extension.

"I've got it, Mom," she yelled. Then, to me, "Hi."

"Hi, yourself."

Our conversation started slowly, both of us feeling toward something, *anything* better than our angry exchange from a few days before. She apologized for snapping at me, and I apologized in return. Then we talked about something safe: the end of the quarter and our classes in general.

Gina was pretty sure that she had made the Dean's List; despite all of her extracurricular activities with the sorority, she *did* work hard on her schoolwork. According to my calculations, I'd earn an A in Professor Joska's class, and if I did, I'd make the Dean's List as well. (Kendall worried about her Organic Chemistry class, which she was sure would keep her from getting straight As, although I didn't share that with Gina.)

At that point, our conversation turned to our social lives.

Trip wanted to play intramural basketball during winter quarter, and he had recruited me to be on his team. Luke and Jeff were going to join us, and we were searching for a fifth man. Jeff had gotten better at football, but he was still hopelessly uncoordinated when it came to catching or holding on to the ball. I'd already seen him play basketball, so I didn't hold out much hope for him improving *there* either. In spite of that, I figured that we'd have fun anyway.

Gina told me about her sorority's Winter Formal dance, which they held in conjunction with a fraternity. I cringed until she said that ATO was the fraternity (the sorority rotated which fraternity they chose, and the Pikes had been the year before). She also talked about Greek Week, as well as the sorority's plans for Carnicus, a celebration at the end of the spring quarter. By a cruel twist of irony, Chi Omega and Sigma Chi were planning a skit for the Carnicus competition.

"Paul?" Gina asked finally, her voice small.

"Yeah?"

"Were you serious when you said that *I* was the reason you didn't get into Sigma Chi?"

"Listen," I said, "I'm sorry I said that."

"Is it true?"

"I don't know," I said at last. That wasn't strictly true, but I guess I didn't feel like beating Gina up for something in the past.

She knew me well enough to recognize my equivocation for what it was. "I'm so sorry," she said. "I never meant for that to happen."

"I'm better off not being in a fraternity," I lied glibly. "I mean, I don't know when I'd have *time* for one."

"That's true," she said, tears in her voice. She was trying to make the best of a bad situation, and I knew it.

"So," I asked, changing the subject, "what're you up to today?"

"Not much. Leah wanted you to come over, but…"

"But what?"

"But… we need to talk about it first," she said.

"Do you wanna come over here instead?" I asked.

"Do you mind?"

"See you in ten minutes?" I asked, by way of answer.

"Give me fifteen," she said.

"Okay, I'll see you then."

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The doorbell rang fifteen minutes later. Gina smiled wanly when I answered it. I invited her in and then shut the door. A few minutes later, my mom and Erin went grocery shopping, leaving Gina and me alone.

"Where's your dad?" she asked.

"I think he's in Boston," I said. "But I'm really not sure."

"I thought I saw his car in the garage."

"He takes the Karmann Ghia when he's got a long set of trips," I explained. "He doesn't like leaving the Corvette at the airport."

"Oh, yeah," she said. "That's right."

"So we're here alone," I said.

"Alone?" she asked.

"Uh-huh," I said. Then I sat on the couch and pulled her into my lap. "Alone."

I had jerked off the night before—twice—and once in the shower that morning, but that didn't stop my dick from stiffening as Gina and I started kissing. Our kisses were tentative at first, but we quickly moved beyond our initial hesitation. Soon, we were kissing like long-lost lovers (which, in a way, we were).

"God, I've missed this," Gina said, when we finally separated.

"Me too."

"I hate when we argue," she said. Then she kissed me again.

"Mrmph toh," was all I could manage.

"When will your mom and Erin be back?" she asked, breathless.

I shrugged and then drew her lips to mine.

"I want you," she panted, pulling back slightly. "Now."

"Did you wanna talk about Leah first?" I teased.

Gina could feel my hard-on through my jeans, and she wiggled her ass against it as she shook her head.

"Are you sure?" I asked facetiously. "I mean, you said we needed to talk about—"

She turned to straddle my hips and then kissed me, hard.

As our tongues sparred, I mentally smiled.

"If you don't shut up and screw me, Paul Hughes," she said, breathing hard, "I think I'll explode."

"I wouldn't want to be responsible for *that*," I said with a grin.

She flashed me an exasperated look and then crushed her lips against mine, her silken black hair tickling my cheeks.

As we kissed, I pulled her shirt out of her jeans. Then I tugged it up, hooking my fingers under her bra as I did. We had to break our kiss, but we quickly resumed once I tossed aside her shirt and bra.

We kissed for another minute or two and then I reached for the snap of her jeans. A moment later, she abruptly rolled to the side. Then she slouched on the couch and kicked off her shoes as

she unzipped her jeans. She skinned them off, along with her panties, in one motion. She didn't bother with her socks. When she rolled upright, she flashed me a pained look and then pointedly glanced at my still-fastened jeans.

"Do I have to do *everything?*" she asked.

I grinned like an idiot and deliberately laced my fingers behind my head.

She groaned in theatrical frustration and descended upon my belt. A moment later, she demanded that I lift my hips, which I did. She didn't even bother taking off my jeans and underwear; she simply shoved them down my legs and then reached for my erection. In one motion, she straddled my hips and set my cock at her opening. Then, with a sigh, she impaled herself on my length.

"Better?" I asked impudently.

"Shut up and screw me," she commanded. Then she tried to look stern.

It almost worked.

"You *are* incorrigible," she said.

Instead of answering, I kissed her, my lips locked against hers as my tongue invaded her mouth. Then I put my hands on her hips and lifted her. She started moving on her own a half-second later.

As she moved atop me, she rocked her hips, grinding her clit against the base of my cock. I cupped her ass and pulled her toward me each time she raised her hips. In ecstasy, she arched her back, her ebony hair swinging free behind her.

I captured one of her dark nipples and sucked. It hardened in my mouth, a crinkly little nub of pleasure. She gasped when I bit down gently. When I switched to her other breast, she ran her fingers through my hair and cried out softly.

She came a lot quicker than I thought she would—she must've been *really* worked up. Her pussy contracted around my cock and she began frantically bouncing up and down. With each downward motion, she arched her back, rocking her hips, rubbing her clit against my manhood.

Finally, her pussy spasmed and she cried out, her cries turning into a scream. I squeezed her ass cheeks as her pussy clutched at me, gripping and releasing, gripping and releasing.

With a long shudder, she collapsed against me, breathing hard and not moving. I merely held her, planting tender kisses along her shoulder as I did. Her pussy spasmed two or three more times, aftershocks sending shivers of pleasure through her body.

When she recovered enough to sit up, she looked at me, her eyes hooded.

"You told me to shut up and screw you," I said, grinning.

"Then shut up and kiss me," she said.

Who was I to refuse?

Ten minutes later, I was still very hard, and Gina was still impaled on my shaft. Unfortunately, she was too sensitive to continue, so she lay on the couch with her head in my lap. I simply closed my eyes and enjoyed the sensations as she ran her lips along my shaft. It didn't take her long to coax my balls into giving her what she wanted.

Afterward, we gathered our clothes and headed to my room. (I didn't know when my mother and sister would return, and I didn't really want to be fucking Gina on the living room couch when they *did*.)

I was still horny, so I took off the rest of my clothes and climbed onto the bed. Gina started

sucking me again, her tongue caressing my shaft as my erection returned. I pulled her toward me and then rolled her to her back. As I did, I moved between her legs, my hard-on hovering over her pussy.

"I'm still a little sensitive," she said. "So be gentle."

I nodded and then lowered my hips. When I entered her, she whimpered, but then sighed.

"God, you're so much better than my fingers," she said.

As I bottomed out, I looked a question at her.

"My batteries died a week before exams," she said with a small laugh. "I was so busy that I didn't have time to get more. And …"

"And?"

"Regan's been spending a lot of time with Margot, if you know what I mean."

For a moment, I imagined the two lithe blondes, their bodies entwined as they pleasured each other.

"Exactly," Gina said, reading my expression. "So I've been reduced to getting off the old-fashioned way. But that has its benefits."

"Oh?"

"Mmm hmm," she said. "Miss Goody-two-shoes can't hear when I'm just using my fingers."

I furrowed my brow.

"I have to be careful when I use Rocky, 'cause Faith is a light sleeper."

"Rocky?"

"My vibrator?" she reminded me. "Duh. I thought Rocky sounded better than 'The Pleasure Rocket.'"

"I didn't know you'd given it a name," I said.

"There are a lot of things you don't know about me lately," she said with a look of regret. "It seems like whenever we're together, we either argue or screw each other silly."

"You mean like now?" I asked, glancing down at where our bodies were joined.

"Are we arguing?" she asked disingenuously.

"Not really."

"Good," she said. "Then let's get back to screwing each other silly."

"In other words, 'shut up and screw you'?"

"You're such a goof," she said. "But… you're… my… goof," she added, her words coming out in gasps as I began pumping into her.

She was still too sensitive to continue for long, so I pulled out and she rolled to her hands and knees. I entered her from behind, gripping her hips as I slid into her. In that position, I wouldn't over-stimulate her clit. Instead, I hit her inner spot, and she started moaning in pleasure.

After several minutes, I quickened my pace, my climax imminent. With a guttural grunt, I slammed into her, burying my cock as deep as I could. Then I held on to her hips to steady myself as spurt after spurt of semen bathed her inner walls.

When I finally opened my eyes, I realized that I had collapsed forward, driving Gina to the bed. Beneath me, she was panting and moaning softly. I swallowed hard and pushed myself up.

With a groan, I pulled out of her and flopped to my back. She rolled over and hugged herself to my side, both of us still breathing hard.

"And we haven't even had our argument yet," she panted.

"Let's just lie here instead," I countered, wrapping my arm around her.

"Good idea. I'm too happy to argue anyway."

✧ ✧ ✧

"What did you want to talk to me about? " I asked Gina later. "About Leah, I mean?"

"She wants to have sex with you," Gina said, propping herself on her elbow.

"And you don't want me to?" I asked, a little confused, but sure that I understood her intimation.

"Is it that obvious?"

I nodded.

"I guess I want you to myself. I mean, I've been having to share for so long now that I'm…"

"You're what?" I asked.

"I'm tired of it," she said honestly. "You're *my* boyfriend. Leah can get her own guy."

I followed that line of thought to its logical conclusion: *And Kendall can get* her *own guy*. Had Gina meant it like that? Maybe, maybe not.

"I mean, *God*," she said, "Leah's not ugly or anything, and she likes sex, it's just… Believe it or not, she's shy around guys," she said. "Don't get a big head or anything, but you're a sure thing for her."

"A sure thing?"

"Yeah. Leah knows she can just *ask* you to have sex with her. She doesn't wanna get a bad reputation around her school. You know? I mean, she can't just walk up to a guy and say, 'Pardon me, but I'd like you to screw me silly.'"

"I guess," I said, chuckling.

"I'm serious," Gina said. "It's a big double standard, and it sucks. Guys are cool if they have sex, but girls are sluts. That's not fair."

"No, it's not," I said softly.

"So Leah's horny, but scared. Well, she's shy, too. I mean, she doesn't have much experience flirting with guys. Girls, on the other hand…," Gina said, laughing. "God, if high school girls weren't so scared of being lezzies, I think Leah would be having sex with about ten of them. She can flirt with girls. But the trouble is, most of 'em don't have a clue what's going on," she explained.

I nodded.

"But that's not what I wanted to talk about," Gina finished.

I gestured for her to continue.

"I guess I just don't want to 'lend' you to Leah, if that makes sense. I mean, if you *want* to have sex with her, then I guess it's okay, but…"

"But you don't want me to," I finished for her.

She looked into my eyes, trying to gauge my reaction.

"That's cool," I said. "I mean, I'm not the one who's gone looking for other girls."

"*Tell* me about it," she said ruefully. "You've already got one girl too many in your life." At my frown, she turned apologetic. "Sorry," she said. "I didn't mean it like that."

It was a thin excuse, but I let her off the hook. I didn't want to start an argument with her, if for no other reason than we were getting along at the moment. Besides, she had a right to feel that way, although I didn't think she saw things from Kendall's perspective. To be fair, Kendall

didn't see things the way Gina did, either.

"Is that really okay?" Gina asked, drawing my attention back to the question at hand.

"Sure," I said. Then I grinned cockily. "That means you'll have to take care of *all* of my urges, though."

"God," she said sincerely, "that's the *least* of my worries."

✧ ✧ ✧

Gina decided to spend the night with me, so she called home to tell her parents. She also talked to Leah, who wasn't exactly happy to hear that she couldn't have sex with me. Oddly enough, Erin seemed to think Gina had done the right thing.

"She needs to be more outgoing," Erin said, about Leah. "And another thing—she needs to understand that I'm *not* her property or something. I mean, she gets really upset when I talk about Sean. He's my *boyfriend*, but she doesn't seem to understand that. Yeah, I like fooling around with girls, but I'm not a lesbian or anything. I'm totally bisexual. I like guys too. But I guess it'd be easier if Leah had a guy of her own, or… whatever."

"That's easier said than done," I said.

"Why?" Erin asked. "She's cute, she's smart, and she's really interesting. Heck, she's charming. But around most guys, she just clams up. If she'd just have a little confidence, she'd have guys calling her all the time. But…"

"But what?" Gina asked.

"But… well… maybe she just needs to realize that she *is* cute, she *is* smart, and she *is* interesting. She just needs a little push, you know?"

"I'll talk to her," Gina said. After an ironic pause, she half-laughed.

"What?" I asked.

"I was just thinking…"

"About?"

"Kara had the same talk with me before you and I started going together," she said. "I hadn't thought about it till now. And you know what? I'd be willing to bet that my mom had the same talk with *Kara*." Then, "God, I'm turning into my mother!"

Erin and I chuckled.

Then Gina turned sober. "I'll talk to her," she repeated to Erin, who nodded.

"Cool. Thanks," Erin said. "In the meantime, I'm going to go finish writing a letter to Sean. I need to tell him what I'm gonna do to him the next time I see him," she added with a salacious smile. "So g'night."

"Night," Gina and I said together. Then Gina shook her head in thought.

"What?" I asked.

"I really *am* turning into my mother. I'm more worried about Leah than my own problems."

"It's because you're a good person."

"Tell *Kendall* that," she said.

"I have," I said softly.

"It didn't work," Gina said, her eyes sad.

What could I say that wouldn't be a lie?

✧ ✧ ✧

The next day, during breakfast, the phone rang. Erin must've stayed up late, writing to Sean, because she was still in bed. Consequently, Mom answered the phone.

"Oh, hi, Susan," she said. The two women talked for a few minutes, but then Mom said, "Sure, he's right here. Hold on a second." Then to me, "Susan wants to talk to you."

Gina had just finished peeling me an orange, but shooed me toward the phone.

"Hello?"

"Hi," Susan said. Then she gently upbraided me for not calling her after my exams, as I had promised.

"Um… sorry," I said. "I guess I got caught up in—"

"Life?" she interrupted, laughing. "That happens."

"Yeah, sorry."

"Don't worry about it," she said.

We talked for a few minutes about my exams and I proudly told her about my Design final. Then I gave her the highlights of my life for the previous month. Gina and Mom were within hearing range at the kitchen table, so I didn't go into too many details. Gina occasionally looked up and smiled, but she seemed content to let me talk as long as I wanted.

"So," Susan said at last, "are you ready to take a break from your Christmas break?"

"Huh?"

"I thought maybe you'd like to come over this weekend. You could spend a couple of days here and unwind, without any responsibilities."

"This weekend?" I asked. Then I Got It. I looked up at Mom.

She returned my stare with bland equanimity.

Was Susan's invitation a coincidence? Hardly. I'd been set up, and I knew it.

"Well?" Susan prompted. "I thought you could fly over tomorrow morning. I can meet you at the airport. If you'd like, you can help me around the house with Christmas decorating, or you can simply relax and do nothing. Whatever you like. I can drop you off at the airport on Monday or Tuesday, and you can fly home, rested and refreshed. What do you think?"

"I think I'm being set up," I said, shooting another glance at my mother.

"Set up?" Susan asked. She even managed to sound guileless.

"Set up," I repeated, without heat. "I *know* you."

"Yes, you do," she said, dropping all pretext, her voice warm. "I'd still like to see you this weekend, though," she said. "Your mom thought you might like someone to talk to. She also thought you'd like some time away from… things."

"Actually, things're going pretty good here," I said obtusely, but knowing that she'd catch the reference.

"Go already," Gina said from the table.

"You don't even know what I'm talking about," I said to her.

She rolled her eyes and then shook her head, as if to say, "Silly, of *course* I know what you're talking about."

Mom smiled artfully.

"Are *all* the women in my life conspiring against me?" I asked no one in particular.

"*Yes!*" Mom, Susan, and Gina answered at once.

Mom and Gina started laughing. When Susan heard them, she joined in.

"Okay, okay," I said at last. "I give." Then, to Susan, "Let me check the weather and file a flight plan. I'll let you know what time to pick me up."

"I thought you'd see it my way," she said. "Or rather, *our* way."

✧ ✧ ✧

Later that afternoon, Gina and I got together with my best friend from high school, Scott Anderson, and his girlfriend, Shannon. We talked about life at college, life away from our families, and life in general.

I was a little saddened by how much we'd grown apart. Scott was in Air Force ROTC (at Arizona State University), so his day-to-day life was very different from mine. Even Shannon and Gina, who had once been good friends, seemed to have little in common anymore. As if to underscore the differences, even our college cities—Knoxville, Tennessee, and Tempe, Arizona—couldn't have been more different.

Gina and I had a good time with Scott and Shannon, but I guess we both felt estranged from them.

"Heather Wellesley was the same way," Gina said as we drove back to my house. "We'd become so… different."

"When did you talk to Heather?" I asked, recalling fond—and sexy—memories of the busty blonde.

"I called her over Thanksgiving, but she's changed a lot. I mean, she's become a total party girl. She's pledging AO Pi… that's Alpha Omicr—"

"I know the Greek alphabet," I interrupted, trying not to sound testy.

"Oh yeah, sorry. Anyway, she's pledging AO Pi. I've heard they're one of the big party sororities at Georgia."

"Isn't Chi O one of the party sororities at Tennessee?"

"Well, yeah, I guess," Gina admitted. "But we also do a lot of community service. And they encourage us to keep our grades up. Panhellenic women have the highest collective GPA of any group on campus. So yeah, Chi O is a party sorority, but we know when to party and when to study. I know *I* sure do."

I wordlessly conceded the point.

"Anyway, when I spoke to Heather," Gina continued, "the *only* things she talked about were the parties and the guys. When I asked her about her classes, she basically bragged about how she skipped most of them. I mean, she still doesn't know what she wants to major in. As far as I could tell, though, it sounded like she's working toward an Advanced Party-ology degree."

I chuckled.

"I hope I never get like that," Gina said. "Sure, I like the parties and mixers, but my main focus is school. I mean, I know what I wanna do, and I'm *going* to do it."

I nodded in confident agreement.

"Speaking of which," she added with a grin, "I *definitely* wanna do you. Tonight."

I waggled my eyebrows at her.

"I think I'll force you to screw me silly," she mused.

"I don't think you'll have to 'force' me."

"Maybe not the first or second time," she replied, her whimsy turning to challenge, "but the fourth or fifth time, I—"

"'*Fourth or fifth time*'?" I half-squawked.

"Don't interrupt," she chided. "Now, as I was saying, the fourth or fifth time, I think…"

✧ ✧ ✧

True to her word, Gina basically attacked me when we went to bed that night. I was a willing victim, though. Our sex was hard and fast, and I was afraid that my family would hear.

Afterward, we sprawled across my bed, panting. Once Gina had satisfied her urge for aggressive sex, however, she turned affectionate. The second time we made love, we were quiet and gentle. She straddled my hips and rode me, rising and falling with a hypnotic rhythm, driving both of us toward orgasm.

It took me a while to come, but she followed close behind. Then we held each other, neither of us wanting the feeling to end. After ten or fifteen minutes of companionable silence, I brushed a lock of hair away from her face and gazed up at her.

"Why do you want me to go to Susan's?" I asked.

"Because she always gives you good advice," Gina answered without hesitation.

I cocked my head to the side.

"I know what I want," she said honestly, "but if I push you, I'll only push you away. Do you think I can't see what's happening with you, me, and Kendall?"

I didn't answer. I didn't need to.

"Your mom thought it'd be a good idea for you to talk to Susan. And when she asked me about it last night, I agreed with her."

"Even though it's not up to you?" I asked, a little piqued.

"No, Paul, it's up to *you*," she soothed. "But I love you. And this hostility between Kendall and me is destroying us. Something has to change."

"Do you know what you're saying?"

She nodded. "I might not like it, but I'm sick and tired of the way we've been living. I used to love Kendall, but now…"

I tried not to sigh audibly.

"Now, I guess I'm… desperate," Gina added quietly. "So if Susan can give you some useful advice, then *go*."

"What if she tells me that I should break up with you?"

"She'd never do that," Gina said with quiet confidence.

I knew she was right, of course, but that wasn't why I had asked the question. I wanted to see how she would react.

"She's never *told* you what to do," she continued. "She's not like that."

My silence was agreement enough.

"Paul," Gina said softly, "I love you more than anything, and I want you to be happy. I want *us* to be happy," she stressed.

I was quiet for a long moment, my eyes searching hers. Her version of "us" didn't include Kendall. At the thought, my stomach lurched almost painfully.

"In the meantime," Gina whispered, "I need you."

I rolled us over and came to rest between her legs, my dick surging back to life.

"I *need* you," she breathed as I slid into her.

✧ ✧ ✧

The next morning, I got up early and started packing my things. The weather report called for eight miles visibility and a 5,000 ft. ceiling. That was more than enough for flying VFR, but the weather forecast for the afternoon wasn't so cheery. A low pressure front was moving in, and the visibility would drop to five miles, with a 3,000 ft. ceiling. That was marginal for VFR, and I didn't want to risk getting caught by the deteriorating weather.

Gina woke up as I was putting the last of my things in my backpack. I wouldn't need much—I *was* going to a nudist camp—but even in South Carolina, December is a pretty cold month.

"Do you have time to come back to bed before you shower?" Gina asked.

I looked at my watch—it was a little after seven o'clock. Then I glanced at Gina. She had thrown back the covers, and the sight of her body stirred something within me.

"We don't have to do anything," she said.

I glanced down at my slowly stiffening manhood. Then I flashed her a hungry look.

"Then again," she added with a grin, "maybe we *do*."

✧ ✧ ✧

The flight to South Carolina was uneventful. With the low pressure front moving in, the air was a bit turbulent, but not more than I could handle. When I was ten miles from the airport, I tuned my radio to the Unicom frequency and listened for a moment. The frequency was clear, so I keyed my mike.

"Lancaster County Unicom, Cessna 4619 Tango," I said, to get the operator's attention. Several moments later, my headphones crackled with the response.

"One Niner Tango, Lancaster Unicom."

"Lancaster, One Niner Tango is ten miles southwest at three thousand, landing Lancaster," I said. "Request traffic advisory and runway in use."

The Unicom operator wasn't an air traffic controller—he was simply there as a convenience for pilots. Since the airport was uncontrolled, it was *my* responsibility to watch out for other planes in the area ("traffic"), and to call over the radio to advise other pilots of my position and intentions. So I paid close attention as the Unicom operator advised me that a Grumman Cheetah was on final, told me that the active runway was 24, and gave me a wind report.

"Roger, Lancaster. Thank you, sir. One Niner Tango," I replied. (My father was unfailingly polite on the radio, and he always used "sir." I grinned to myself when I realized that I had unconsciously mimicked his habit.)

My current heading was almost reciprocal to the runway in use, so I didn't have to maneuver much to enter the downwind leg of my approach. When I did, I pushed the transmit button on the control yoke. Then I broadcast in a measured cadence.

"Lancaster Traffic, Cessna One Niner Tango entering left downwind for Runway Two Four, full stop, Lancaster."

Any other pilots in the area would hear my radio call and know where I was and what I was doing. Midway through my downwind leg, a Piper Tomahawk called the Unicom operator and was advised of my position.

When I turned onto the base leg of my approach, I made another radio call, similar to my downwind transmission. A moment later, the Tomahawk called that he was entering the airport's

downwind. Shortly after that, I pressed the transmit button again.

"Lancaster Traffic, One Niner Tango turning final," I called, "landing Two Four, Lancaster."

With that, I banked the plane and lined up with the runway. The wind was out of the west-southwest, but I still had a bit of a crosswind. With a little rudder and aileron, I crabbed into the wind.

Once I crossed the runway's threshold, I floated the plane toward the asphalt, losing altitude slowly. At the last moment, I straightened the controls and lined up the nose gear with the runway centerline. With a chirp, my right main gear hit first, but the other wheels quickly touched down with chirps of their own. I braked to a stop and then goosed the throttle to turn onto the taxiway. Finally, I keyed my mike.

"Lancaster Traffic, One Niner Tango clear of Two Four, Lancaster," I transmitted.

I saw Susan's station wagon at the FBO as I taxied in. She waved to me and I waved in reply. Then I turned my attention to parking the airplane.

Susan walked up as I opened the plane's door. I stepped out and smiled at her.

"Is this how all the fashionable young pilots dress these days?" she asked with a grin.

I was wearing aviator's sunglasses and my new bomber jacket, along with jeans and a Polo button-down. I stood straight and tried to look impressive. Then I cracked a smile at my puffed up posture.

"It's good to see you, Paul," she said.

"Don't I get a hug?" I asked, spreading my arms.

When she wrapped her arms around my neck, I lifted her off her feet. After I set her down, I busied myself with the tiedowns. Once I had the Cessna secured, Susan and I walked back to the FBO, where I asked the operator to send the fuel truck out to the plane.

After topping off the tanks, I returned to the operations building, where I signed in. Susan insisted on paying for the fuel and tiedown fees. I knew it'd be pointless to argue with her, so I acquiesced. Finally, I slung my backpack into the station wagon and hopped into the passenger seat.

During the drive to camp, we talked about school, classes, exams, my schedule for the upcoming quarter, and everything *but* Kendall and Gina. I think Susan was letting me relax, without the pressure to immediately dive into what was bothering me. She'd always been good about that, letting me get around to things in my own time.

At the camp gate, I jumped out and opened the lock. When I lowered the chain, Susan drove over it and then waited while I refastened the lock.

The camp itself looked *very* different in the winter. Many of the trees around the camp were evergreen, but the deciduous trees had shed their leaves. In addition, the cabins above the clubhouse were closed and shuttered, and the RV and trailer parking areas were deserted (except for one lonely Airstream trailer). Even the clubhouse was different; plastic sheeting covered the screen windows, and tendrils of smoke rose from the stone chimney. The weather wasn't freezing, but it *was* cold enough that a fire would feel good.

"How many people live here in the winter?" I asked.

"More than a dozen," Susan answered. Then she mentioned several names that I recognized. They were all older couples, my grandparents' age. "And Jeremiah, of course," she added, referring to Gunny Kershaw.

"Not many winter nudists," I said.

"No," she answered, smiling. "It's a very seasonal recreation."

"How *is* Gunny?" I asked, changing the subject.

"He's as big a curmudgeon as ever," she said affectionately. "And… he's got a lady friend these days."

"Oh?" I asked, arching an eyebrow. Gunny was a lifelong bachelor. Despite that—or maybe *because* of that—he told some of the rawest, most bawdy stories I'd ever heard. Some of them were probably even true.

"Mmm hmm," Susan said, grinning. "Her name is Lenore, and she's about my age. She works at the beauty parlor in town, and she's very nice. She comes out on the weekends, so you'll probably get a chance to meet her."

"Gunny's got a girlfriend," I mused, nodding. I don't know why I thought he needed my approval to have a girlfriend, but I *did* approve, as weird as that seems. In reality, I guess I was happy for him.

When we pulled up to Susan's house, it looked the same as it always did. Her flowers and plants weren't blooming, of course, but the house *was* surrounded by evergreens, so little changed from season to season.

Inside, however, things were very different. I was used to entering her kitchen and feeling the chill of air conditioning, so it was a bit of a shock when warm air greeted me instead. The house also *felt* like winter: the dishtowels had dark red and green stripes (instead of cheerful summer colors), the decorations in the living room were for the holidays, and the air smelled of cinnamon and nutmeg.

I took in my surroundings and smiled. When I glanced at Susan, however, she seemed apprehensive.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

"I'm fine," she said, brightening. Then she tried to look nonchalant. "Would you like to put your things in the guestroom…?"

I sensed there was more. I *hoped* there was more. "Or…?" I prompted.

"Or in my bedroom?" she asked softly.

I thought about teasing her, but decided not to when I realized that she was genuinely nervous.

"Don't worry about it," she said in a rush. "I'm just being sentimental. You can put your things in—"

"Your bedroom," I said, interrupting her.

For a moment, my words didn't register. When they did, her eyes filled with relief.

"If you don't think I'm being presumptuous, that is," I added.

"Presumptuous? No, not at all. I don't mind. I thought you'd…" When she saw my grin, she rolled her eyes. "Now you're teasing me," she accused.

"Maybe just a little," I said. Then, "Where'd you *think* I'd want to sleep?"

"I didn't know, and…"

"You're as bad as I am sometimes," I said. Then I put my arm around her and pulled her close.

She looked up at me, her eyes full of love and gratitude. "I didn't know if I should treat you as a guest, or as a visiting lover," she said.

"Aren't I both?" I asked.

"Yes, but… I didn't want to take you for granted."

"Ha! Don't worry about that. I was well on my way to taking *you* for granted," I teased, trying to lighten the mood. "I mean, you wouldn't *believe* what I was thinking during the flight over."

She arched an eyebrow.

"Let's put it this way," I said, grinning, "I'm lucky I didn't pass out from blood loss to the brain."

"Oh, I've missed you," she said with a bright laugh. "You don't know *how* good it is to have you here."

"It's good to be here," I said. "Thanks for inviting me. But if you don't mind, I'd like to put my backpack down and get comfortable."

"Right this way," she said, playfully formal. Then she led me toward the back of the house.

Once there, I discovered that she had actually cleared a dresser drawer for me. I unpacked my clothes and then took my toiletries kit to the bathroom. I grinned to myself when I realized that she had cleared a space for me on the counter as well.

"Is there anything else you need?" she asked.

"Yep," I said.

When I didn't continue, she flashed me an inquisitive look.

I gestured for her to stand in front of me. As she did, I turned her to face the mirror.

"What?" she asked, her earlier anxiety returning, if only a little.

"This *is* still a nudist camp, right?" I asked.

She grinned and rolled her eyes.

"I mean, we're wearing a lot of clothes for supposed nudists."

"Would you like to do something about that?" she asked sardonically. "Or are you all talk and no action?"

"I'll show you action," I blustered playfully.

She merely arched an eyebrow in challenge.

I put my hands on her hips and ran my fingers under the bottom of her cable knit sweater. When she didn't move to stop me, I traced my fingers along her soft abdomen and then upward. Finally, I cupped her satin-encased breasts and watched her reaction in the mirror.

She sighed and leaned back against my chest, her cheeks darkening as the flush of arousal mounted. I kissed the back of her head and then moved lower, trailing my lips over her sensitive earlobe.

A moment later, I pulled her sweater over her head and tossed it aside. She was wearing a dark blue satin bra that made her breasts look fantastic. Her eyes were still closed as I popped the button on her jeans. I lowered them, but not her panties, which were also dark blue satin.

Over the years, I'd learned a thing or two about women and their underwear. When they didn't plan on anyone seeing their bra and panties, most women wore whatever was comfortable, or whatever suited their fancy that day. But when they *did* think that someone might see their underwear, they usually wore "the good stuff."

And "good stuff" wasn't anything frilly from Frederick's of Hollywood, which was mostly for show. Gina had a few exotic outfits from Frederick's, but they were uncomfortable, downright silly, or both. No, the "good stuff" that most women wore was sexy instead of silly. And they

wore it when they wanted someone to see it.

I grinned to myself as Susan stepped out of her jeans and kicked them aside. Her matching bra and panty set told me all I needed to know about what she was hoping for.

"Close your eyes," I said quietly, my lips close to her ear.

She nodded and then moistened her lips in anticipation.

As I kissed her neck and shoulder, I unbuttoned and removed my shirt. Then I switched to her other shoulder and kicked off my shoes. Finally, I unbuttoned my jeans and then removed them, along with my underwear.

Susan shivered as I ran my hands up her arms. When I cupped her breasts again, I felt her nipples harden through the satin. She smiled and then laughed softly.

"Do I have to keep my eyes closed?" she asked. "Or can I open them and look at you?"

"You can open them," I said.

When her eyes blinked open, she smiled at me. Then, with an impish grin, she reached back and captured my hard-on.

As she kneaded my cock, I returned the favor with her breasts.

Her eyes drooped closed again, and I unfastened the front catch on her bra. It parted, revealing the creamy skin beneath. Her rosy nipples winked into view as I peeled away the satin cups. She had to let go of my dick so I could pull off her bra, but she quickly picked up where she'd left off. I returned my hands to her breasts, giving them a gentle squeeze as I hefted them.

"Oh, my," she said with a sigh. "I've missed this."

"You don't have any other 'visiting lovers'?" I asked, half joking, half serious.

"None with penises," she said, slowly stroking mine. "Well, none with *real* penises."

I arched an eyebrow at her reflection.

She must've felt my inquiring look, since she opened her eyes. "I have a friend in town with an extensive collection of toys," she said without elaborating. "But that's all."

"How about your friends in California?"

"They're friends," she said, "not lovers."

"I'm sorry to hear that," I said. Then I teased her nipples, rolling them between finger and thumb.

"Oh, that's nice," she said, distracted. After a moment, she seemed to gather her thoughts. Then she grinned wryly. "Oh, I occasionally call an escort service and request a young stud."

"Oh, you do?"

"Mmm hmm. I like a guy with a nice body, and a big dick, of course."

I felt my jaw drop involuntarily.

"I'm serious," she said. "I can be a demanding woman."

"So," I asked, still incredulous, "how's the… um… escort service working for you?" I couldn't tell if she were serious or not, which had me worried.

"So far, so good," she said. "The most recent young stud seemed promising, with everything I like: a nice smile, a good sense of humor, a great body, and a long, thick dick, with big balls. But…"

"But…?" I prompted, hanging on every word.

"But he left my panties on too long," she said pointedly.

It took me a moment to realize that she was talking about *me*. Sometimes, I'm a little slow on

the uptake. I laughed and then quickly hooked my thumbs in the waistband of her panties.

"That's better," she said. Then she grinned wryly. "I'll have to call the Hughes Escort Service and let them know that their man was just what I needed."

"You're horrible," I said. Then I muttered something about how it's not nice to tease a guy.

"But that would take all the fun out of it," she countered mischievously.

"Are you ready for me to take off your panties?" I asked, feigning impatience.

"I've *been* ready."

In one smooth motion, I stripped her bare.

"*Much* better," she said.

I stepped toward her and pressed my erection into her ass. Then I reached around and returned my hands to her breasts. As I cupped them, my eyes dropped to her smooth pussy.

Maybe Kendall had been right. Maybe I *did* like shaved women because of Susan. Whatever the reason, my dick swelled further as I gazed at her inviting slit.

A moment later, I ran my hands down her tummy. She shivered when I reached her labia. I gently pulled them apart, revealing her pink inner folds and hooded clit. For a moment, I simply marveled at how pretty her pussy was. Her milky white skin gave way to subtle shades of pink and red, along with a shiny hint of moisture. Her inner lips had begun to flush and plump with arousal. I grinned to myself when she sagged against me and moaned softly.

"You like?" I whispered.

"What's not to like?"

I continued playing with her pussy for another minute or two. Then I turned her around and pushed her against the counter. With a grin, I sank to my knees and inhaled the scent of her arousal.

Her labia were silky smooth when I pressed my lips against them.

She ran her fingers through my hair and spread her legs as I nuzzled her sex.

"Oh, Paul," she said softly, "I've missed you so much."

"Mmm hmm," I answered, my lips wrapped around her still-hooded clit. When she leaned back against the counter, I lifted her onto it.

She cried out softly, in surprise, but quickly adjusted.

I spread her legs and then draped them over my shoulders as I knelt before her. When I returned my lips to her pussy, she moaned softly and twined her fingers through my hair.

Her labia parted under my darting tongue, and I tasted the metallic-tangy flavor of her excitement. With a hidden grin, I licked between the folds of her inner and outer labia, making her squirm. Then I sucked her distended inner lips, flicking them with my tongue as I did.

As she became more aroused, her moans grew louder. I slowly pushed two fingers into her opening, feeling the inner ridges of her pussy and then crooking my fingertips to hit her spot. She gasped and gently tugged my head, pulling my mouth back to her clit. I obliged her, circling the hooded pink pearl with my tongue and then sucking it gently.

Once my fingers were coated with her juices, I began moving them within her, teasing her. At the same time, I returned my attention to her inner lips and clit. With short licks, I lapped at her slit, flicking my tongue under the protective hood of her clit at the end of each stroke.

She cried out softly each time my tongue grazed her sensitive button. I lavished attention on her for ten or fifteen minutes, making her writhe in ecstasy. Then, unexpectedly, she pushed me

away.

I looked up at her, my lips covered with her juices.

"I want to suck you," she said, her voice husky with desire.

I nodded.

"Let's get comfortable," she said, nodding toward the bed. "I want to take my time and enjoy it."

Once again, I nodded.

She smiled, her composure returning. "I think I want to suck you for the next hour," she said. "Would you like that?"

I nodded like an idiot.

When I slid my fingers from her pussy, she closed her eyes and swallowed hard, her face a mask of pleasure and yearning.

"Can you walk?" I teased. "Or do you want me to carry you?"

"Carry me, you young stud," she said breathlessly. She probably didn't think I actually *would*. Consequently, she yelped when I scooped her off the counter. "Oh, my," she said. Then she grinned. "I'll give you a generous tip, young stud, if you take care of all of my needs."

"I'll give *you* a tip," I muttered playfully. "And then I'll give you the shaft."

"Oh, no," she said, her eyes wide, "not the shaft."

"If you're good to the shaft, I'll give you the balls too."

"Are we playing golf or having sex?" she asked, trying to look innocent. Then she squawked as I unceremoniously dumped her on the bed. "I'll have to talk to someone at Hughes Escort Service about you," she muttered.

"Don't bother. I know the owner. She's a hard woman. She's also scheming and devious. I wouldn't trust her," I finished flatly, suppressing a grin.

"I'll tell her you said that," Susan shot back. Then her eyes softened and she gazed up at me affectionately. "I really *have* missed you," she said.

"I've missed you too," I said softly, meaning it more than my words conveyed. Kendall and Gina were sometimes immature (as immature as I was, I guess). I didn't have that problem with Susan. She was mature and wise, and—

She reached up and stroked my erection.

—and sexy as *hell*.

"I believe I promised you a blowjob," she said, her eyes smoldering with anticipation.

"A *long* blowjob," I stressed.

"Mmm hmm."

She scooted toward the center of the bed. Then she patted the bedspread, inviting me to join her. When I did, she climbed between my legs. I leaned back against the headboard and simply relaxed, enjoying the view.

She took her time, kissing and teasing my dick. By the time she finally captured the tip between her lips, I thought I was going to explode. She deftly gripped the base of my shaft and squeezed. Then she simply held my dick in her mouth, waiting for me to calm down. When I did, she looked up at me, her blue eyes twinkling, her lips an "O" around my shaft.

"Take me deep," I gasped. Neither Kendall nor Gina could swallow my entire length. Kendall came a lot closer than Gina, but she still couldn't take all of me. Susan, on the other hand…

…swallowed half my length in one lunge. When she adjusted, she sucked gently, caressing the underside of my shaft with her tongue. Then she opened her lips and engulfed another couple of inches. To my disappointment, she pulled back, dragging the tight oval of her lips along my length. I knew she was just warming up, though, so I tried to be patient.

She took me into the back of her throat several more times, but never quite swallowed the final inch. It felt wonderful, but I wanted to see her lips wrapped around the base of my shaft. I wanted to feel her chin against my balls, her nose pressed into my pubic hair. I wanted her to swallow *all* of me.

She rewarded my patience several minutes later. With her lips wrapped around my shaft about an inch from the base, she took a deep breath, her nostrils flaring. Then she opened her mouth and closed her eyes. I watched, enraptured, as she slowly impaled her throat on my cock. When her lips closed around the very base of my shaft, I shivered in pleasure.

Susan swallowed, and the convulsive ring of muscles at the back of her throat squeezed my cock, sending waves of pleasure along my shaft. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath, the feeling so intense that I thought I might pass out.

When she pulled back, I almost sighed in relief. But then I immediately wanted her to swallow me again. As if by mind control, she obliged me, her lips gliding along my saliva-slick shaft as she deliberately forced my manhood into her throat. It was tight, caressing the sides of my shaft and sending tingles along my spine. A moment later, she wrapped her lips around the thick base of my dick and then sucked gently.

"Oh, God," I groaned. "That feels *incredible*."

She made a noise of agreement, the vibration buzzing my cock. I shut my eyes and leaned my head against the headboard. Then I ran my fingers through her hair, incoherently mumbling my approval.

She took me into the back of her throat several more times and then let my dick slip from her lips. It was shiny with her saliva, the glans bulbous, swollen with arousal. Her breath cooled my cock as she kissed along the underside ridge. Then she nuzzled my balls, my hard-on resting against her cheek as she did.

For the next forty minutes, she made love to my dick. She sucked it. She kissed it. She licked it. And she swallowed it all, her throat squeezing me gently as her lips caressed the base.

Sometime during all of that, she thrust a hand between her legs and started playing with her pussy. Throughout the extended blowjob, however, she paid attention to my level of arousal. When she sensed that I was getting too close to release, she slowed down, or squeezed the root of my shaft. As she drove herself toward her own climax with fingers busy on her clit, she expertly worked me into a near-frenzy.

By the time she was ready to let me come, I felt like my eyeballs were swimming in semen. My balls felt ready to burst. My cock, deep red and incredibly hard, practically vibrated with the need to climax.

Susan pulled back, her lips around my shaft, just under the crown. With one hand still on her pussy, she used the other to bring me off.

The sensation blossomed deep in my loins, building and building until I thought I was going to pass out from pent-up sexual energy. As the feeling spread, a warm glow suffused my senses. I wanted to warn Susan to get ready, since I knew I was going to shoot gallons, but I couldn't

convince my voice to do anything other than groan incoherently.

With a rush, I felt the first spurt of semen racing up my shaft. Time stood still, and I tried to concentrate on every sensation: Susan's lips on my shaft, her tongue caressing the bottom of my glans, her fingers as they rhythmically stroked me. Finally, the world went white and I erupted, my hips launching upward in the spastic jerk of orgasm.

When I returned to my senses, Susan was still sucking my dick, milking it with her lips and hand. She pulled off and swallowed—again—but quickly returned her mouth to my shaft.

I didn't go soft immediately, but I could feel the blood draining from my erection. Susan kept right on sucking, her hand busy between her own legs.

Her face slowly turned a darker shade of pink, shiny with a thin sheen of sweat. As my cock slowly deflated, she lunged forward, swallowing it all. With her lips wrapped around the base of my turgid member, she moaned softly, her orgasm imminent.

She groaned deep in her chest, the sound sending vibrations through my dick. Then she stiffened, her face turning redder still. A moment later, she cried out, the sound muffled by my semi-hard dick.

Her orgasm seemed to last for minutes on end. Her tongue stopped moving on my shaft, and she simply held me in her mouth. A moment later, she squeezed her legs together, her buttocks clenching.

When she finally relaxed, she pulled her hand from between her legs. My dick slipped from her lips as she rested her head on my thigh. I ran my fingers through her sweat-damp hair. With a grin, she scooted forward and recaptured my shrinking dick. Luckily, I wasn't too sensitive, so I simply enjoyed myself as she nursed me quietly.

✧ ✧ ✧

Later, we lay in bed and held each other. I didn't really feel like talking—about *anything*, much less my problems—and Susan sensed that. When I put her hand on my dick, she took the cue and started stroking me.

Once I reached full erection, I gestured for her to sit up. Then I scooted toward the head of the bed, using pillows to prop myself against the headboard. When she started to lower her head to my lap, I gestured for her to straddle my hips instead.

She arched an eyebrow.

"I want to fuck you," I said simply. In reality, I wanted to watch her shaved pussy as she impaled herself on my shaft, but the distinction wasn't worth mentioning.

She smiled in reply, swung her leg over mine, and set the tip of my shaft at her opening. Then she sank onto my erection, the heat and wetness of her pussy enveloping me.

Instead of letting her start moving atop me, however, I held her hips in place.

She cocked her head to the side.

"I guess I want to talk after all," I said, smiling quizzically at my own revelation.

"I got the feeling you weren't in the mood for conversation," she said. "But…"

"Yeah. Go figure."

"Was there something specific you wanted to talk about?" she asked, settling back on my hips, my shaft still buried in her depths.

I shrugged.

As the silence drew out, she gazed at me in anticipation. Then she seemed to come to a

decision. “Have you lost weight?” she asked. At the question, she ran her fingertips down my chest. Her touch was light, but not light enough to tickle.

“Not really,” I said.

“You look like you have. Your chest and shoulders look bigger, but you look like you’ve lost weight everywhere else.”

Thank God, I thought.

“But I can really tell in your face.”

I looked a question at her.

“Your cheeks look sunken, and you’ve got dark circles under your eyes,” she said bluntly. Then, “Are you eating enough?”

“I guess,” I said, hoping to avoid further questions.

“Your mom said you’re watching your weight.”

I looked at her sharply, reminding myself that she probably knew more than she was letting on. After all, she and my mom talked to each other on a regular basis.

“She also said your pants are two inches smaller now, but they’re still a little loose.”

“I don’t wanna gain the Freshman Fifteen,” I said, trying not to sound defensive.

“No,” Susan agreed reasonably, “but *losing* the Freshman Fifteen would be just as unhealthy. Besides, self-esteem comes from within, *not* a bathroom scale.”

“Can we talk about something else?” I asked semi-petulantly.

“Okay,” she said softly, the word drawing out. Then, “Like what?”

For a moment, I sat there sullenly. When the conversation turned to my weight, my erection had softened to the point where it slipped from her pussy.

She followed my glance and then slid backward. When she took my slippery manhood in her hands, she grinned at me. “Do you want to ‘not talk’ about this?” she asked, which was a clever way of saying, “Do you want me to get you hard again?”

I nodded.

When she began stroking my flaccid shaft, I watched her breasts sway. Something about their movement tickled the back of my brain, but I couldn’t pin it down.

As soon as I was hard enough, she scooted forward and rose on her knees. A moment later, she rested on my hips, my erection filling her completely.

“Was this the kind of ‘not talking’ you had in mind?” she asked, smiling whimsically.

My cheeks warmed as I nodded. Then, completely out of the blue, I asked, “Do you like to have your tits fucked?”

“Sometimes,” she replied, laughing musically. “Why?”

“I dunno,” I said with a shrug. “I guess I was just wondering what it would feel like.”

“I think we’ve done it before,” she said. “But it’s been a while.”

“Yeah,” I said, “I guess I remember… but not really, if that makes sense.”

She nodded.

“Does it feel good for you?” I asked.

“I enjoy doing it, if that’s what you mean.”

“But does it *feel* good?” I pressed.

She gazed at me for a moment, as if trying to decide on a diplomatic answer. “Not really,” she said at last. “It doesn’t feel *bad*, but it’s not something that particularly excites me. Not like

sucking you," she said frankly. "Maybe it's because my nipples aren't nearly as sensitive as they used to be."

I furrowed my brow.

"I nursed two babies," she said. "Breastfeeding toughens a woman's nipples."

I nodded in understanding.

"Besides, there aren't a whole lot of nerve endings in the breasts themselves."

"Then why do some girls like it?" I asked.

"Why do I like giving head?" she asked rhetorically. "Why do you like shaved pubic hair? Why do some people like anal sex? Why do others like bondage, or submission, or whatever?"

I shrugged.

"Who knows? I think I like giving head because of my first lover, Greg. Whenever I sucked him, he played with my pussy, and he always got me off right after he came. To this day, I get wet whenever I think about giving head. That's just the way I'm wired."

"I guess," I said, unconvinced.

"You like shaved pubic hair, right?"

I nodded.

"That's probably because of *me*," she said candidly. "The first time you ever saw my pussy, you were hard for *hours*."

My blush was agreement enough.

"First impressions are usually pretty powerful," she said. "And if those impressions are reinforced…"

"Pavlov would be proud," I said aloud.

She gave me a funny look.

"Sorry," I said, shrugging. "It's just something I heard once."

"Well, it makes sense. Positive reinforcement is a strong motivator," she said. Then she laughed.

"What?"

"I didn't think we'd be having a conversation about Pavlov and sexual preferences," she said. When I started to apologize, she shushed me with a finger on my lips. "It's okay. It's just a little… unusual."

"No kidding."

"I think we started this whole conversation with tit fucking, though," she said, her eyes flashing playfully. "Do you want to fuck my tits?" she asked, pushing them together for emphasis.

"I dunno," I said. "If you don't enjoy it…"

"I didn't say that. I said I *do* enjoy it, but that it doesn't particularly excite me. There's a difference. If it'll give you pleasure, then I'll definitely enjoy it. But I probably won't get off from it."

"In that case—"

"Paul," she said, cutting me off gently. "Not everything is about an orgasm. You know that."

I nodded.

"Doing something your partner enjoys is part of the fun."

"You're right," I said.

"Don't sound so down about it," she said, lifting my chin. "It'll be fun."

When she grinned, I couldn't help but smile in reply.

"Reach into the top drawer on the nightstand," she said, throwing her leg over my hips, her pussy pulling free of my shaft. "There's a bottle of lotion in there."

I playfully held up the vibrator that I discovered next to the lotion.

"I said I didn't have any *real* penises," she said, half defensively, half jokingly.

I grinned and reached for the lotion. Then, "Do you think I could… um…?"

"Could what?" she asked, rolling to her back and gesturing for me to straddle her chest.

"Do you think I could come on your tits?"

"Sure," she said, her eyes flashing in anticipation. Then she watched as I squirted lotion on my cock. "This should be fun," she said.

I spread the creamy—and cold!—lotion over my hard-on, coating it liberally.

"Squirt some in my cleavage, too," she said, which I did.

Finally, we were ready. She pushed her breasts together and I slid my cock between them. They were warm and soft, and even though the feeling was completely different from a pussy or mouth, I liked it.

Susan smiled up at me as I began thrusting. Unfortunately, her hands grew slippery from the lotion, and she had a hard time holding her breasts together. I also discovered that tit fucking and regular fucking were vastly different. With a pussy, I didn't really have to worry about where I thrust; in and out was usually good enough. With breasts, I had to pay attention to each thrust, to make sure I didn't slip out of the valley; in other words, I had to *aim*.

It took me a while to come, and we cheated a little (Susan squirted more lotion in her palm and gave me a handjob), but I eventually coated her chest with pearly drops of semen. She grinned up at me and then looked back down at her coated breasts. Her finger circled one sperm-covered nipple before she glanced up, her eyes bright.

"That was fun," she said.

I sat back on my haunches, panting.

"I like watching you come," she added. "You shoot so much that it's a drawn-out event."

I swallowed hard and then nodded.

"Although you didn't shoot as much that time," she said. "I think I might've drained you earlier." She feigned a surprised look and tried to seem innocent at the same time. Then she laughed. "Come on," she said at last, patting me on the thigh in a gesture to move, "let's shower before I start dinner."

✧ ✧ ✧

While Susan fixed dinner, I used the living room phone to call Gina.

She teased me good-naturedly about not calling to tell her that I had arrived safely. She probably knew what I'd been doing, of course, but that didn't stop her from giving me a hard time.

We talked for a few minutes about the weather in Atlanta, which had turned foul. The weather at camp wasn't all that great either, but since Atlanta was to the west, the South Carolina weather was bound to get worse as the front moved through.

"Um… there's something I need to ask you," Gina said at last.

"Sure. Shoot."

"Regan called, and…"

I felt my expression harden. "And…?"

"She invited me to go skiing with her."

Gina's family and mine usually went skiing in Utah, the week between Christmas and New Year's.

"Before *our* trip," Gina hastily added. "Her family's got a chalet in Killington, Vermont. She was going up there next week, with Margot Seaford and a couple of the other girls. She wanted to know if I could go."

"What did you tell her?" I asked, trying to keep my voice even.

"I told her I'd have to ask my parents. But…"

"But what?"

"But I really wanted to ask you. If I want to go, my parents'll let me. You know that."

I silently nodded.

"But I wanted to talk to you first," Gina said. Then, quietly, "I know how you feel about Regan."

I tried to set aside my feelings for the blonde sorority girl. After all, Regan wasn't my girlfriend; *Gina* was. "Do you *want* to go?" I asked at last.

"It'd be fun," Gina said, "but… well… I kinda got the impression that Regan *expects* me to go."

"One of those 'pledge Gina' kind of things?" I asked.

"Exactly."

I tried not to seethe about Regan's casual manipulation of the people around her.

"I won't go if you don't want me to," Gina said diffidently.

"I didn't say that," I said. "It's just… well…"

"Yeah."

"Tell me something…," I said after a moment.

"What?"

"Are Regan and Rod together? I mean, they haven't broken up recently?"

"Not that I've heard," Gina said quizzically. "I mean, Regan usually calls me when she and Rod have a fight, so as far as I know, they're getting along fine."

"Then I say go for it."

"Go for it?" she asked, perplexed.

"Go skiing with the girls. Have fun."

"Oh, Paul," she said, brightening. "You're sure?"

"Sure," I said, affecting nonchalance. When Regan and Rod were broken up, Regan usually monopolized Gina's time, which made *my* relationship difficult. If Regan and Rod were boyfriend-girlfriend, then I shouldn't have to worry. Much.

"Oh, thank you, Paul," Gina gushed.

I tried not to sound too magnanimous. After all, Gina didn't really need my *permission* to do anything she wanted to. But I was proud of her for thinking of my feelings before agreeing to go.

With a bemused grin, I listened as she related the details of the trip and the girls who were going (Regan, Margot, Jessica Roedeffer, Hayley Devlin, and a couple of other girls whose names I recognized).

The girls planned to meet in Atlanta on Wednesday and then fly to Boston. From Boston, they'd take a commuter flight to Rutland, Vermont. Finally, they'd drive from Rutland to Killington. It seemed like a lot of effort just to get to the ski resort, but judging by the description of the chalet and the resort itself, the trip would be worth it.

"When are you coming back?" I asked.

"Two days before Christmas," she said. "I'm really looking forward to it, Paul. Thank you."

Gina was excited, and I was happy for her. We talked for several more minutes, but she needed to call Regan and make final plans, so we said we loved each other and hung up.

Then I called Kendall. Her mother answered.

"May I please speak to Kendall?" I asked.

"Sure, Paul," Melissa said. "Hold on a second."

"Hi," Kendall said cheerfully, a moment later.

"Hi yourself."

"What're you up to?" she asked.

We talked for a few minutes as I worked up the nerve to tell her that I was at Susan's house. I don't know why, but I guess I expected Kendall to be upset (since Susan was *another* woman that she had to share me with). Unfortunately, I knew that if I postponed the admission any longer, I'd only sound like I was hiding something. So I told her where I was.

"Oh, okay," she said.

That's it? I silently wondered.

"Did you drive over?" she asked.

"No, I flew."

"Oh." Her tone spoke volumes.

"It's completely safe," I said, trying not to sound exasperated.

"I didn't say anything."

"Oh… um… okay. Sorry."

"That's okay. So, how long are you staying? Just the weekend?"

"Probably," I said. "Although there's a low pressure front moving through, and I won't be able to fly back until it's past."

"You won't be able to…?" she asked, worry creeping into her tone.

I took a moment to explain VFR versus IFR, and why I wasn't certified to fly using only my instruments.

"So you're not going to fly until it's safe?"

"Of course not," I said. "That's a quick way to get into trouble. *Big* trouble."

"Would they take away your license or something?" she asked.

"No," I said, trying not to chuckle when I realized that she didn't Get It. "Worse," I continued, "it's a quick way to get dead."

"Dead?" she gulped.

"Yeah," I said seriously. "Dead. All sorts of things can happen if you do something stupid in an airplane." With an angry headshake, I realized that I wasn't helping with her aversion to flying. "Anyway, let's change the subject."

"Let's," she said, her voice subdued.

"I was thinking of heading back on Monday. And I thought maybe you'd like to come down

to Atlanta for a couple of days, next weekend. How's that sound?"

"What about Gina?" she asked, her voice carefully neutral.

I didn't want her to think that I invited her to come to Atlanta simply because Gina was going out of town, so I made sure it sounded like I was thinking about it *before* I learned about Gina's trip. In reality, I *had* been thinking about inviting Kendall to Atlanta, but I hadn't settled on a good time to ask. Gina's trip to Killington simply gave me the shove that I needed.

"So," I finished, "if you want to come down and spend a few days, I could fly in and pick you up on Thursday or Friday." I didn't think she'd want to fly, but I guess I was trying to cleverly coerce her into it.

"That sounds great," she said. "Except for the flying part."

"Why not?"

"Well," she temporized, "I'll have luggage."

"The plane's got room for luggage," I said.

"It won't be too heavy?"

"Nope."

For the next few minutes, we went back and forth. For every reason she brought up not to fly, I countered. Her arguments were mostly spurious, but I guess I was too stubborn to give up. Well, I was too stubborn for a minute or two.

"You just don't wanna fly," I accused at last.

"No, I don't," she said softly, surprising me. "I'm sorry," she continued. "I know you enjoy it, and I try to bite my tongue when you tell me about it, but if anything were to happen to you…"

"Nothing's going to happen," I said, my tone soothing.

"I know that, in my head. But I still worry about you."

"I'm a good pilot," I said. "I'm careful and conscientious. I've had good training, and I'm on the ball."

"I know you are," she said. "But please, for me, can you just drive up to get me?"

"Sure," I said at last.

"Thank you," she said, obviously relieved. After a pause, she changed the subject. "So, what're you and Susan doing, as if I couldn't guess?"

"Yeah," I admitted, my face heating, "some of that. But mostly, I guess I just wanted to get away from Atlanta. You know?"

"That sounds like a good idea," she said.

Is she talking about Gina? I wondered.

"The end of the quarter is always crazy. And then with the holidays…"

"Yeah," I agreed.

"Besides," she said, "Susan has always been a source of comfort for you." Then she laughed. "In more ways than one," she added.

We talked for another fifteen minutes, and she sounded happier than I could recall. When I finally told her I loved her and said goodbye, I felt really good. I bounced up from the couch and sauntered into the kitchen.

"That sounded like it went well," Susan said, wiping her hands on her apron.

"Could you hear?" I asked. I wasn't upset; I simply wanted to know how much of the conversation I'd need to repeat.

"Not really," she said, "but you sounded happy."

"Yeah, things with both girls seem to be going well. They're not going well *together*, but individually, things're great."

"That's a start," Susan said.

I nodded. Then I told her about Gina's ski trip and Kendall's plans to come to Atlanta.

When I finished, she nodded sagely.

"So anyway," I said, "that's my life in a nutshell."

"It sounds like things are getting a little better," she said. When I nodded, she changed the subject. "I thought we'd invite Jeremiah and Lenore to dinner tonight," she said. "Is that okay?"

"Sure," I said.

"Would you give him a call?" she asked.

It felt strange to actually call Gunny, but a cold drizzle had begun to fall, and I wasn't eager to walk through it to his house.

After he got over his surprise at hearing my voice, he quickly accepted our dinner invitation.

✧ ✧ ✧

Dinner with Gunny and Lenore was enjoyable. Lenore was attractive, if not as attractive as Susan. She had a nice body, and her breasts were small enough that they hadn't sagged much. She treated Gunny like a king, and while he was too hard-bitten to be completely infatuated, he certainly seemed happy.

After dinner, we braved the chill rain to soak in the hot tub. With the water up to our necks, though, we didn't *care* what the weather was like. About thirty minutes later, when Susan and Lenore headed inside to fix coffee and dessert, Gunny and I stayed in the hot tub for a few minutes.

"She's pretty nice, huh?" he asked.

"She sure is, Gunny," I said.

Then he leaned close. "She's so hot to trot that she could blister paint off a bulkhead," he said. "When she gets going, I think I've died and gone to heaven."

Fortunately, the darkness hid my blush.

"I'm no young recruit," he added, "but I think I do a pretty good job keeping up with her."

"I'm sure you do, Gunny," I said, embarrassed, but determined not to let him know it.

"And she may not have a big rack, but let me tell you, she's got the best ass I've laid eyes on since I retired from the Corps. I can't say I'm much of an ass-man, but I'm not about to turn it away if it's offered."

At that, I laughed.

The rest of the night was relaxing. We sat in the living room and had coffee and dessert. Well, Gunny and Lenore had coffee, and I merely picked at my dessert. (I had to watch my weight more than ever, since I wasn't doing regular workouts over the break.)

As we talked, the conversation turned to my college career. I was surprised by how much Gunny knew about my progress at school. I shot a glance at Susan, who blithely ignored me. Gunny then tried to talk me into joining the Marine Corps, but I think it was more out of habit. I tried not to blush as he sang my praises to Lenore, who smiled at his affection for me.

A little later, Lenore put her hand on Gunny's leg and suggested that it was getting late. Translation: "It's time to go." When Lenore discreetly wiggled her hips, Gunny practically leapt

up from the couch. After goodbyes, they put on their shoes and coats.

At the door, Gunny turned to me and then stood straight.

"You'd've made a fine Marine," he said. "And I'd've been proud to serve under you. But I suppose this country needs more civilians who know shit from Shinola."

"Jeremiah," Lenore chided, blushing.

With a grin, he shook my hand. Then he stepping into the rainy night and opened his umbrella.

Lenore thanked Susan for her hospitality and joined Gunny.

When the door closed behind them, Susan stepped close and I put my arm around her.

"It's interesting," I said, pausing for effect, "that Gunny knew so much about my life."

"Oh, I'm sure a little birdie told him."

"Little birdie, my ass," I grumbled good-naturedly.

"He's proud of you," she said unapologetically. "He should be. You've turned into a fine young man."

"I thought I was a fine young stud," I shot back.

"You *are*. When you're not being too clever for your own good," she added. Then she turned serious. "Did you have plans for the rest of the night?"

"Believe it or not," I said, "yeah."

She arched an eyebrow.

"I want to sit on the couch, do absolutely nothing, and read a book. I haven't been able to do that in a long time. Is that okay?"

"That sounds *perfect*," she said.

✧ ✧ ✧

The next morning when I awoke, I simply stared at the ceiling for a few minutes. When Susan rolled over and snuggled close, however, I put my arm around her. She was half awake, so I guided her hand to my morning erection.

"Mmmmm," she said softly. "I definitely miss morning wood."

"Do you remember what to do with it?" I teased.

"Just for that," she said, squeezing my erection for emphasis, "I'm going to make you wait."

"I can always take care of things myself," I said. "That's what I usually do."

"Even with all the sex you're getting, you still masturbate?" she asked, semi-incredulous.

"Oh, yeah," I said sincerely. "If I don't… um… relieve the pressure, sex is all I can think about. It's… distracting."

"I'll bet," she said, laughing. Then she sat up, her hair delightfully disheveled. As she brushed it back with her hand, her breasts swung gently. Then she turned back the covers.

"You weren't serious about making me wait, were you?" I asked.

She nodded. Then, as if to emphasize her point, she stood up.

"What am I supposed to do with this?" I asked, throwing back the covers to reveal my hard-on. I guess I was hoping to entice her into taking care of me.

"If you need *me* to show you," she said, grinning impishly, "then you're going to be pretty… distracted."

I made a sound of frustration. It was *playful* frustration, but frustration nonetheless.

"If you'd like," she said slyly, "I think I could arrange a B&B."

I raised my eyebrows.

"You like?" she asked.

I tried not to look like an idiot as I nodded eagerly.

"What would you like for breakfast?" she asked, laughing. "Because I *know* how you want your blowjob."

She ended up fixing me cereal and toast, since I wasn't willing to wait for her to make something else. Part of that was for her benefit—I wanted her to know how sexy I thought she was—but part of it was also because I was horny, and I *really* wanted her to wrap her lips around the base of my cock.

I barely touched my cereal and toast, but I didn't care. When I came, I gripped the edge of the table and grunted as I thrust my hips upward, impaling her with my shaft. She moaned as I flooded her throat with come.

When my orgasm subsided, I sagged in the chair.

Susan grinned up at me from between my legs. Then she wiped the corners of her mouth. "Ahhhh," she sighed. "The breakfast of champions."

My dick twitched in agreement.

✧ ✧ ✧

The next couple of days were relaxing, although Susan and I never did talk about my relationship problems. I sensed that it was by design. A couple of times, I thought she was going to say something, but she never did. I think she was giving me a break from my troubles.

Instead of talking about my problems, I helped her around the house. We packed up Thanksgiving decorations. We took Christmas decorations out of the attic. We moved furniture and rearranged the dining room. While she cleaned, I did little household projects like fixing squeaky doors and tightening loose fixtures.

In the evening, we relaxed. We read; she had her magazines and I had my science fiction. I took out my sketchpad and drew buildings from memory. I also dabbled at creating my own designs. My style was undisciplined and tended toward hodgepodge elements, but it was a step beyond simply reproducing what I'd already seen.

We also had sex. Unfortunately, after Sunday morning's B&B, Susan's throat was sore.

"It wasn't designed for something as big as your dick," she gently informed me.

That didn't stop her from sucking me; she just couldn't take me all the way. In addition, I enjoyed the simple pleasure of fucking her without worrying about what Kendall or Gina would think.

Each night, we soaked in the hot tub, letting the heat and water work its magic. On Sunday night, we had sex there, the bubbles caressing our bodies as I thrust into her. Monday night, our last together, we moved to her bed and finished what we'd begun in the tub.

Tuesday morning, the weather cleared, and we both knew it was time for me to return to Atlanta. We didn't talk about it, we both just *knew*.

After a B&B—with a *deep* blowjob, since her throat wasn't sore anymore—we took a shower and got dressed. I called my parents to let them know that I was coming home. At the airport, I filed my flight plan and checked the weather. As we walked out to the Cessna, we were quiet.

"We never did talk about Kendall and Gina," I said at last.

"No." She didn't need to say more.

"But in a way," I said, "I answered my own questions."

Her expression invited me to continue.

"I guess I *do* need to make a decision," I said. "I don't want to, but I've *got* to."

She nodded.

"You were waiting for me to come to that conclusion myself, weren't you?"

"Yes," she said. "I knew you would, though. Sooner or later."

"How come you always know what I need?"

"I don't," she said simply.

I looked at her skeptically, my brow creased.

"I don't know what you need," she elaborated. "But you've got a good head on your shoulders. If you had wanted to talk, we would've talked. But you've always been introspective when it comes to big decisions. You analyze the problem and look at it from all angles," she said. Then she turned and straightened my shirt collar.

It took me a moment to realize that she was using the gesture as an excuse to organize her thoughts.

"Sometimes," she said slowly, looking me in the eye, "decisions aren't easy. That's what being an adult is about. You're…" She cleared her throat. "You're an exceptional young man. You're my friend, my confidant, and my lover. But this is something you had to do on your own. I can't live your life for you. I don't have all the answers, Paul. No one does. More important," she said, "I can't *lead* you to the answer; you have to find it on your own."

I nodded.

"So this weekend was about letting you relax, and giving you time to think. And perhaps," she added with a poignant smile, "about letting you enjoy some… uncomplicated… sex."

I felt my face heat, but I nodded in agreement.

"Believe it or not," she said, "I think I enjoyed the relaxation more than the sex."

"Really?"

"Well, the sex was pretty good too," she said, which was an understatement. Then she looked up and smiled.

"Thank you," I said softly.

"You're welcome. And thank *you*," she said. When I arched my eyebrows, she feigned reproof. "Don't think I didn't notice how… oh… *enthusiastic* you were for my, ahem, feminine charms," she said. "Overly enthusiastic, perhaps?"

I shook my head with finality. "No," I added. "Weren't you the one who taught me that making love is more than just a physical connection?"

"Was that me?" she asked disingenuously.

"Yes, it was," I said. "So, no, I wasn't being 'overly enthusiastic.' I was being honest. Well," I said with a chuckle, "sometimes my *dick* was being honest too. The rest of me knows when to shut up and enjoy a good thing, though."

"You say the sweetest things," she said, her cheeks coloring.

"I mean them."

"I know," she said softly. "Thank you." Then, "Before I break down completely, I'd better see you off. I've had plenty of experience waving at departing planes, so I know what I'm doing."

I laughed softly.

"I'm serious."

"I know," I said. Then I bent to kiss her.

"You look so dashing in your leather jacket," she said, blinking back tears. Then she looked up, her eyes liquid and full of emotion. "I love you," she said simply. "I always will."

I caught her in an embrace and simply held her. When we separated, almost a minute later, her eyes were clear and bright.

"Fly along now," she said, affecting a stern look. "Shoo."

"Yes, ma'am."

She watched as I did a careful preflight. I hugged her again and then climbed into the plane, where I went through my checklist and finally started the engine. The radio was still tuned to the airport's Unicom frequency, so I monitored it for several moments and then announced my taxi intentions.

From the end of the runway, I could see Susan's tiny figure as she stood by the FBO and watched. She must have sensed me looking, because she waved. I knew she couldn't see me, but I waved in reply. Then I pushed the throttle to full open and began my takeoff roll. Shortly before I reached sixty knots, I put a little back-pressure on the yoke and the ground fell away smoothly.

After climbing forty or fifty feet, I glanced back at the FBO and waggled my wings in a final farewell.

The day was bright, crisp, and clear, with the cerulean sky of winter stretching as far as the eye could see. It was a beautiful day, and my spirits matched it. As the plane climbed, I was reminded of a poem by John Gillespie McGee.

I didn't know what would happen when I returned to earth—and my life—but at the moment, I had slipped those surly bonds, and I was happy.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

When our report cards arrived, Gina called me before I even realized that the mail had been delivered.

"I made the Dean's List, Paul!" she gushed.

"Congratulations," I said.

"I got an A- in Chemistry, bummer, but the rest were straight As. So, what did you get?"

"Hold on a second," I said. I covered the mouthpiece as I yelled for Mom, asking her where she'd put the mail. She hadn't gotten it from the mailbox yet, so I told Gina to hold on. Then I set down the receiver and dashed to the end of the driveway. I returned, winded, holding the mail. Mom and Erin gathered at my elbow as I cradled the phone to my ear and tore into the official UT envelope. In nervous silence, I scanned the computer-printed card. "Straight As," I finally said, pride swelling my chest.

"*Congratulations*," Gina, Mom, and Erin said simultaneously.

Gina and I talked for a few more minutes, both of us excited by our grades. When we said goodbye, I immediately called Kendall to tell her the good news.

"Congratulations," she said, albeit a little half-heartedly.

"What's the matter?" I asked. Then, "You got a C in O. Chem., right?"

"Yes."

"So? That's still good enough for the Dean's List." We'd done the math, and she could get a D and still make the Dean's List.

"But I also got a *B*- in French," she said miserably.

I did some quick math in my head. Her unexpected B- had dropped her semester GPA just enough to miss the 3.5 required for the Dean's List. "Oh, Kendall," I said at last, "I'm so sorry."

"I'm sure my term paper and final exam dragged me down," she said. "I was borderline anyway. I *hate* French. I'm never going to use it, so why do they even require a foreign language in the first place? I should've taken Latin instead."

"Why *did* you take French instead of Latin?" I asked.

"I thought it'd be romantic," she scoffed. "Some romance! Stupid language."

I commiserated with her for a few minutes, but then I turned the conversation to a more positive subject: her trip to Atlanta. She was as excited as I was, and we talked for another twenty minutes about what we wanted to do while she was in town.

When we said goodbye, she was still a little upset about her grades, but she was in a much better mood than when I first called. And from the sound of things, I was in for a fun weekend.

✧ ✧ ✧

That night, I spent the night with Gina. When we got up the next morning, I helped her pack. She was excited about the trip with Regan and her other sorority sisters. Leah was a bit jealous, but she wasn't huffy about it.

"Sororities do stuff like this all the time," Gina told her. "You can join one when you go to college."

"Do you think I'd get in?" Leah asked.

Gina grinned at me slyly and then turned to her younger sister. "I think you'd make a great

Chi O."

"What are some other good sororities?" Leah asked.

"Alpha Delta Pi is good," Gina said. "So is Kappa Delta. I almost joined the Tri-Delts, Delta Delta Delta, but…"

As the girls talked about sororities, I simply listened. Gina and Leah might have their sisterly spats, but they did love each other. And Gina was doing her level best to improve Leah's self-confidence.

When Gina finished packing, I loaded her things into her mother's station wagon. Leah wanted to drive, but she wasn't allowed on the interstate yet, so Elizabeth drove us instead.

At the departure gate, Gina ran toward the group of her friends. Then she introduced her mother and sister to her sorority sisters. Regan, Margot, and Jessica remembered me, of course, but Hayley greeted me as if for the first time.

Strike four, Hayley? I mused silently, suppressing a grimace.

Even though I was Gina's boyfriend, Hayley gave me an appraising look. Gina's eyes hardened, but when I didn't react to the unspoken offer, she seemed to relax.

As we waited for the flight to begin boarding, the girls talked to each other. Leah joined in, thrilled by the chance to talk with college girls. Elizabeth, Jessica, and I sat apart, talking about hotels.

Finally, the gate agent called for boarding to begin. I hugged Gina a final time and then watched as the gaggle of girls walked down the jetway.

Elizabeth, Leah, and I waited until the plane pushed back from the gate and then headed out to the car.

"Mom?" Leah asked. "Can I drive home? Please?"

Elizabeth glanced at me sidelong.

Leah was trying to appear grown up, which hadn't escaped her mother's notice.

"Oh," Elizabeth mused, "I think you're probably ready to conquer the Perimeter."

Leah practically jumped for joy.

Her mother flashed me a knowing smile.

I chuckled to myself. In the jaded way that only an eighteen-year-old can manage, I watched Leah and realized that I'd once been that young, too.

✧ ✧ ✧

That evening, the phone rang and I answered it. It was my dad; he was in Cincinnati. Another flight—from Atlanta to New York City—had a malfunction, he explained, and the plane was grounded. To make matters worse, the flight crew had gone illegal before the plane could be repaired.

(As a safety measure, the FAA regulates the amount of time that any aircrew can fly. If the pilots or crew go over that time, it's illegal for them to work. The airlines go to great lengths to schedule their crews so they don't "go illegal" before they begin their flights.)

With the grounded plane and illegal crew, the company had to scramble to find replacements. By some quirk of aircrew scheduling, the company had decided that the quickest solution was for my dad's crew to deadhead from Cincinnati to Atlanta and fly a rescheduled flight to New York City.

"But once we get there," he said, "we'll be illegal ourselves, especially with the air traffic

controllers' strike."

"I guess I'm lucky," I said. "Since I usually fly to uncontrolled fields, the strike isn't a big deal for me."

"No kidding. It took us more than two *hours* to get a landing slot the last time I flew into O'Hare," Dad said. "We spent the entire time circling over the lake. They had us stacked up every thousand feet, for miles. I swear, son, I've never seen so much commercial traffic in one place. Outside of an airport, I mean."

"That sucks," I said.

"No fucking kidding," he griped. "The controllers wanted more pay for less work? Hell, son, *I'd* like to get paid more for flying less. And they complain about *their* stressful jobs? Try being a *pilot* sometime, guys. Ah, fuck 'em all. Reagan was right to fire 'em."

I was a little shocked by my father's anger, since he was normally an easy-going guy.

"I'm sorry, son," he said at my silence. "I didn't wanna talk about the strike, but it's endangering passengers' lives and it's making my life more stressful. Besides, since the airlines have cut the number of flights, I'm not making— Sorry, there I go again," he said apologetically.

"That's okay, Dad," I said at last.

At that point, he took a deep breath. A moment later, calmer, he finished explaining the situation with the flight to New York. Airline scheduling is arcane, at best, but the end result was that my father and his crew would have a two-day layover in New York City.

"So I thought you, Erin, and your mom could come to New York," Dad said. "I can trade trips with one of the First Officers already there, and I think I can swing it so I've got the whole weekend before I have to work again."

"I'd love to, Dad," I said, "but Kendall's coming in for the weekend, so…"

"Ah…," he said knowingly.

"Um… yeah."

"Well, then," he said, "let me see if I can entice your mom and Erin into a little Christmas shopping on Fifth Avenue."

"I don't think you'll have to twist their arms," I said laconically.

"I think you're right, son," he said with a laugh.

"Hold on," I said. "Lemme get Mom."

When my mom got on the phone, she listened for a minute. Then her eyes lit up.

"What?" Erin asked, sensing Mom's excitement.

"Saks?" Mom asked Dad. "Tiffany? Harry Winston?" When Dad said something, Mom smiled knowingly. "Oh, don't worry, I'll make it worth your while."

"*What?!*" Erin asked impatiently.

I explained the situation, along with Dad's offer.

"New York?" Erin whispered to herself. Then she looked up, her eyes aglow.

"I'll call and get on the stand-by list," Mom was saying to Dad. Then they discussed where they were going to meet once in the city. Finally, "Okay. I love you too. Bye-bye."

"Are we really going shopping in New York?" Erin asked.

Mom nodded.

"Cool."

"You don't mind staying here?" Mom asked me after Erin ran to her room to begin packing.

I shook my head.

"Are you sure? We could get a ticket for Kendall, if you want to go."

It was tempting, but I didn't think Kendall was ready to get on a plane, even if it involved Christmas shopping in New York City.

To my surprise, Mom grinned when I shook my head.

"What?" I asked.

"You and Kendall will have the house to yourselves," she said.

"I hadn't thought about *that*," I admitted. Then, as I imagined the possibilities, I smiled.

✧ ✧ ✧

Thursday afternoon, I called Kendall to let her know I was on my way. The drive to Chattanooga was uneventful, but when I got to her house, there was a dark blue Ford Crown Victoria in her driveway. I'd never seen it before.

For a moment, I grew anxious, but then I shook off the feeling and went to the front door. To my surprise, Kendall's father opened it. He was wearing a coat and tie, obviously his work clothes.

"Hello, Paul," he said, his voice deep and even.

"Um… hi, Adam," I said, trying not to sound as nervous as I was.

"C'mon in. Kendall's almost ready."

Inside, I saw another man—also in a sport coat.

He stared at me, his eyes hard and flat.

"Is everything okay?" I asked.

"Yeah," Adam said, "everything's fine. This is my partner, Detective Dahlgren," he explained without elaborating.

The hair on the back of my neck stood up.

Adam turned back to me and said, "Maybe we should step outside after all." Then he grabbed his trench coat and gestured toward the front door.

As he put on his coat, I couldn't help but notice the holstered pistol beneath his left arm. He looked just like the cops in the movies, only bigger. When he shut the front door, he strolled toward my Jeep. He tried to look nonchalant, but I'd spent too many years as a wrestler not to notice the controlled tension in his shoulders.

"If Kendall knew we were having this discussion," he began, "I'd never hear the end of it. So let's just keep this between us men."

I nodded, my mouth going dry.

"It's time for you and me to have a talk."

"Um… sure."

"Are you sleeping with my daughter?" he asked bluntly.

At that point, I wondered how much it would hurt when he killed me.

He regarded me levelly, studying my emotions, his eyes flinty.

Even though the weather was windy and cold, I broke out in a sweat. My heart thudded in my ears. Then I swallowed hard and tried to get my emotions under control. Any minute now, he was going to…

"Relax, son," he said, his voice softening. "Just breathe."

My nostrils flared and I nodded jerkily.

"Are you sleeping with my daughter?" he asked again, a moment later.

If I told him the *truth*, he'd kill me. But if I lied to him, he'd know the lie for what it was, which meant that he'd kill me. Either way, I was dead. But I had to tell him *something*. I finally decided that if I were going to die, I wanted to die like a man. *Polonius was a pompous windbag*, I thought peevishly. "Yes, sir," I answered at last. Then I waited for the axe to fall.

"Keep breathing, son," Adam said, his voice oddly soothing. "I don't wanna have to explain why you passed out and cracked your skull." When I took a deep, jagged breath, he continued. "I didn't think you'd tell me the truth so quickly," he said absently. Then, "Don't worry. I'm not going to hurt you."

"You're not?" I tried not to sound amazed, but I don't think I succeeded.

"Of course not," he scoffed. "I'm just surprised that you came clean so fast."

"What would you have done if I'd lied?" I asked.

"I would've put the fear of God in you," he said frankly. "Believe me, I've spent the last ten years intimidating murder suspects," he explained. "And don't take this the wrong way, son, but you'd've been a pushover."

I started to bristle with foolish machismo.

"I said relax, son. There's nothing wrong with being scared. I know a thing or two about fear, and it's a healthy reaction. But that's neither here nor there. Right now, we need to come to an agreement."

"An agreement?"

"Son," he said, looking me in the eye, "my little girl hasn't been 'little' since she was fourteen. I've known that all along, but she's still my little girl. She always will be."

I nodded, my blood still singing with adrenaline.

"So you and me need to come to an agreement. And it's all about trust, son. If you were willing to face me down and tell the truth, then I guess you're a stand-up guy. Part of me doesn't really like it, but I don't have a choice, now do I? So I guess I have to trust you with my daughter," he said.

"Trust me with your daughter?" I repeated, a little—no, a *lot*—confused. "Whaddyou…? I mean, why…? Um… I don't understand."

"I told you, it's all about trust. And I wanted to see how you'd react when I confronted you. If I can't trust you to be a man and do what's right, then how can I trust you to treat my daughter right? I expected you to come clean… eventually. But you surprised me. I thought I'd have to grill you longer."

"So this was some kind of interrogation?"

To my surprise, he laughed humorlessly. "I guess it was," he said at last.

"Why?"

"Son, I've known that you and Kendall were sleeping together for a couple of years."

"You have?" I rasped.

"Of course I have," he said. "I'm not blind. I'm not stupid, either."

"I didn't—"

"Relax. I said I wasn't going to hurt you," he said. Then, "You want to know why I haven't done anything, if I've known all along that you were sleeping with my daughter, right?"

I swallowed hard and then nodded.

"In my line of work, it's best not to let on what you know and what you don't. I'm no Colombo, but I'm pretty good at it. I knew you two were… you know," he said. "But she seemed happier than ever, so I let it slide. Besides, I knew it was going to happen someday."

"But why ask now?" I asked after a moment.

"Well, to hear Kendall talk, you two seem to be getting pretty serious. So I figured it was high time that you and me had a chat about your future."

"My… future?"

"Uh-huh," he said. "She's a woman, and I know that. Women have… needs. I know that too. But you and me need to get one thing straight: as long as you treat her right, I'll let you live."

I laughed nervously.

"I'm not kidding," he said flatly.

"But…"

"Don't worry, this isn't a shotgun wedding or anything. I know you two have a ways to go before anyone mentions marriage, but I wanted to make sure you understood your responsibilities."

"Responsibilities?" *Marriage?!*

"Responsibilities," he said simply. "You're a good kid, and I like you, but she's still my daughter."

"Yes, sir."

"So you take care of her. And don't do anything stupid like get her pregnant. She's got big plans, and I want to see her accomplish them."

I nodded.

"If you end up as my son-in-law… I'd like that. If not… you're still a lucky little punk," he said, smiling for the first time since I arrived. Then he turned serious again. "One final word," he said. When I nodded, he continued. "Kendall never finds out we had this conversation. As far as she's concerned, I don't know a thing about you two sleeping together. Are we clear?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good. And you don't have to call me sir." At my confused look, he laughed. "Relax, son. You're wound tight as a drum."

"Yes, si— I mean, yes."

"Now," he said with a nod, "let's go back inside before Kendall figures out what we're up to."

I nodded, my skin tingling as my system purged the adrenaline. As soon as Adam and I stepped inside, Kendall came out of the kitchen, alerted by the sound of the front door. The man in the sport coat emerged behind her. At some unseen signal from Adam, the man's attitude changed.

Then Adam looked back at me as he took off his trench coat. "Have you thought about putting a winch on the Jeep?" he asked conversationally.

I had *no* idea what he was talking about.

"It'd be good for gettin' out of trouble," he continued. "I mean, sometimes four-wheel drive isn't enough." Then he looked at me expectantly.

"I hadn't really thought about it," I muttered.

"I was thinkin' about putting a winch on the Scout," he said. "But I haven't had the time to do it."

"Have you two been doing some 'male bonding,' Daddy? Is that why you had Uncle Lou running interference?" Kendall asked. Then she flashed me an apologetic look and rolled her eyes good-naturedly.

"That's what men do, baby doll," Adam boomed. Then he clapped me on the shoulder. "Paul understands what being a man is about. Don't you, son?"

I caught his meaning, even if Kendall didn't, so I nodded.

"Oh, Daddy," Kendall said indulgently, smiling.

I was shocked by how effortlessly Adam changed from hardnosed cop to genial father. He was a surprisingly good actor.

Note to self: Don't underestimate Adam.

Second note to self: Don't underestimate Adam. Ever. Really. I mean it.

"C'mon, Paul," he said. "I want you to meet Lou Dahlgren, my partner."

When Adam formally introduced us, Lou and I shook hands. He squeezed, and I tightened my grip in reply—hard, but not challenging.

"So," he said, smiling benevolently, "you're the guy who stole little Kendall's heart."

"Uncle *Lou*," Kendall said, her cheeks coloring.

Lou and I exchanged a few pleasantries, but I got the impression that he was a man of few words.

"C'mon," Adam said at last, to me. "I'll help you load Kendall's things. She's just like her mother; she doesn't know how to pack light."

I have truly stepped beyond the Looking Glass, I thought. Then I schooled my expression and reached for Kendall's suitcase.

✧ ✧ ✧

"What were you and my father *really* talking about?" Kendall asked as soon as we pulled out of her driveway.

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you," I said, still a little shell-shocked.

"He doesn't know that we'll have your house to ourselves, does he?"

I shook my head.

"Good. Because he and my mom think your family will be there." A moment later, she looked at me, panicky. "He doesn't suspect that you and I are sleeping together, does he?" she asked.

"Do you think I'd still be alive if he did?" I asked. It wasn't exactly a lie, but it neatly skirted the truth.

"Good point," she said, relaxing. Then, "So, what were you talking about?"

"Winches," I said glibly.

"I don't believe you for a second. You're up to something."

"Kendall," I said seriously, "don't ask. For the love of God, don't ask. I don't wanna lie to you, but I'm not gonna tell you what we were talking about either."

"Is it serious?" she asked, suddenly concerned.

"It's… between your dad and me," I said. "Just trust me. Okay? It's nothing bad. It's just… well… it's a guy thing."

Unfortunately, I think I piqued her curiosity more than put her off. A curious Kendall could be a bad thing or a good thing, depending on the circumstances. At the moment, it would be a bad thing, since I didn't know how she'd take the revelation about what her father *really* knew.

Drew had tried to warn me, in his own way, but I guess I'd never seriously considered that Adam might know the truth. He was a lot more perceptive than I'd first thought. (Susan had told me something similar.) And while he wasn't dangerous, per se, I definitely didn't want to get on his bad side.

"It's just a guy thing," I repeated quietly. I don't think Kendall truly accepted my answer, but it was the best she was going to get.

✧ ✧ ✧

At my house, I had taken a cue from Susan and cleared out one of my dresser drawers for Kendall. Her eyes welled up when I showed her. (Unfortunately, she'd brought a lot more clothes than one drawer would hold.)

"Oh, Paul, thank you," she gushed. "It's almost like we live together."

"Almost," I said faintly. Then, "Here, lemme clear out another drawer for the rest of your stuff."

After I did, she unpacked her things.

Later, she wanted to cook me dinner. So she shooed me out of the kitchen and told me to "go watch TV or something." A little while later, she stuck her head into the living room and asked if my parents had any white wine. We did, of course, so I grabbed a bottle from the wet bar. After Kendall put it in the refrigerator, she emerged from the kitchen.

"The chicken will take another thirty minutes," she said. "Why don't you go ahead and change for dinner," she suggested.

"'Change for dinner'?"

"I thought maybe we could dress up, and have a nice candlelit dinner."

"Sure," I said.

My Brooks Brothers suit was in Knoxville, but I had a couple of sport coats in my closet. Unfortunately, they were all too tight through the shoulders, so I settled on a dress shirt, tie, and slacks. A few minutes later, Kendall practically burst into the room.

"It's hard to cook a gourmet meal and get dressed at the same time," she said breathlessly. Then she ushered me out of the room so she could change clothes in private. "To maintain the mystique," she said. "And don't go into the dining room yet," she admonished.

I nodded and tried not to chuckle. She was going to a great deal of trouble to create a romantic evening, and I wasn't about to spoil it by snickering.

When she emerged from my bedroom, she was wearing the silver dress that Susan had bought her. She blew me a kiss as she rushed by, headed for the kitchen. Since I had skipped lunch, the scents wafting from the oven were starting to make my stomach growl.

Once Kendall was ready, she turned out the dining room lights and appeared in the doorway, a nimbus of candlelight surrounding her. I stood and smoothed my slacks. In her heels, Kendall was actually a little taller than I, so I stretched upward to kiss her. Then I pulled her close and kissed her harder.

"Thanks for fixing dinner," I said.

She lowered her eyes and smiled shyly.

"Although… the way you look in this dress, I might just decide to skip dinner and see how you look *out* of it."

We ended up having dinner after all. She had fixed roast chicken with new potatoes and corn,

along with a salad. I tried not to eat too much, but it was delicious.

Afterward, we let the candles burn down and finished the bottle of wine. Then we moved to the living room couch. From there, things quickly progressed to my bedroom. Kendall looked even better without the dress, but I didn't have much time to admire her body, since she knelt in front of me and began teasing my dick with gentle kisses.

"If you're a good girl," I promised, stroking myself as she kissed my balls, "I'll come on your face."

With that, she immediately opened her mouth and wordlessly begged me to let her suck my dick.

"Stick out your tongue," I directed, and she did. Then I ran the underside ridge of my cock along her tongue. The crown of my shaft entered her mouth, but I pulled back quickly, teasing her.

She moaned in frustration.

"Okay, you can suck me," I said at last. When she wrapped her lips around my glans, I sighed quietly. Then, "Oh, that's nice."

For the next several minutes, she sucked me, trying to swallow as much of my length as she could. Even though I had promised to come on her face, I wanted to take my time. So I relaxed and simply enjoyed myself as I watched her fellate me.

"Stand up," I said a little while later. "I want to fuck you."

"But…"

"I know," I replied. "But I want to fuck you first."

When she stood, I bent her over my dresser. Then I concentrated on the round, voluptuous curves of her ass. With a hand on each cheek, I spread her open. Then I eased my shiny cock between her alabaster thighs. I felt the warmth and heat of her pussy, which sent shivers of anticipation up my spine.

Finally, I pulled back and used one hand to steady my dick at her opening. She gasped when my bulbous glans spread her open. After I slid the first couple of inches into her, I stopped. Her pussy was tight, *very* tight, and I usually had to ease into her. This time was no exception, so I pulled back and prepared for another slow thrust.

Kendall moaned when I sank half my length into her pussy. When I went to pull back, her inner walls gripped me, their heat infusing my senses and making me lightheaded. Another thrust and I buried most of my length. With a grunt, I pulled back, the ridge at the crown of my cock making her shudder in ecstasy.

After teasing her for almost a minute, I finally jerked my hips forward and slammed home, her ass rippling with the impact. When I looked at her face in the mirror, it was contorted in pleasure.

As I began thrusting, my eyes were drawn to her pendulous breasts. Each time I slammed into her, they swayed in opposite directions, gravity eventually reuniting them in the middle. Their motion was hypnotic, and I soon fell into a rhythm.

In order to keep from coming too soon, I made a little game out of trying to influence the swinging of her breasts. The harder I thrust, the wider the circles. When I slowed down, her breasts slowed down as well, gently swaying side-to-side. I picked up my pace again, watching her hanging globes widen their arc and then slap together.

Suddenly, I remembered the conversation with Wren on the ride down from Knoxville. Even though Kendall's pussy felt incredible, I pulled out, causing her to grimace at the loss.

"Lie on the bed," I directed without explanation.

"Where are you going?" she asked as I headed for the door.

"Just lie down," I said. "I'll be right back."

In the bathroom, I quickly found what I was looking for. When I got back to my room, Kendall looked at me curiously.

"Lie down," I said, gesturing at the bed. "On your back."

"What're you—"

I rolled my eyes and simply pointed at the bed.

With a confused look, Kendall crawled onto the bed and lay on her back.

I flipped open the cap on the bottle I'd brought from the bathroom. Then I squirted a zigzag line of baby oil in the shallow valley between Kendall's flattened breasts.

"What're you doing?" she asked.

"I'm going to fuck your tits," I said.

Her eyes widened in sudden understanding. And anticipation.

"And *then* I'm going to come on your face."

"What should I do?" she asked eagerly.

"Just spread the oil around and then push your breasts together," I said as I straddled her chest.

Her eyes alight, she quickly complied.

I grinned as her fingers lingered over her sensitive nipples.

Then she grasped her pliant breasts and pushed them together, creating a mountain of tit-flesh with a crease in the middle.

I edged forward, my glans pointing at the crease. Then I gripped the base of my shaft and aimed. Finally, I eased forward and my dick slid between the warm flesh of her breasts.

When my pelvis finally brushed against her hands, I grinned at her. Then I tweaked her nipples, sending shivers of delight through her body.

Once I began thrusting, Kendall had a hard time holding on to her breasts. Her hands were slippery from the oil, and she had a *lot* of breast to hold on to. Nonetheless, I was getting worked up at the mere sight of my cock sliding between her mounds. I wasn't in danger of coming, though, since I kept getting distracted each time she lost her grip.

Finally, I decided that fucking her tits was a fun visual, but it wasn't the best way to have sex. So I squirted some baby oil into my palm and gripped my shaft. My cock was hard and red, and my hand glided over it. Kendall watched in fascination.

After stroking myself for several minutes, I hunched forward. Kendall sensed my impending explosion and lifted her head, her eyes glassy with lust. With a grunt, I arched my back, throwing my hips forward. My dick swelled, and I clenched my jaw in ecstasy.

When the first spurt arced out, Kendall gasped. My eyes were clamped shut, however, so I simply kept stroking myself. Three more hard spurts followed the first, and Kendall writhed as they splashed onto her face. Finally, the spurts slowed to gushes, and then the gushes to a trickle. I squeezed the base of my shaft and let out a final grunt.

Kendall captured my dick in her mouth, but immediately spit it out.

"What's the matter?" I asked, looking down suddenly. Her face, covered with droplets of semen, was twisted in disgust.

"Baby oil tastes… *yuck!*"

In spite of myself, I laughed.

"You try it," she said. "It's pretty gross."

"Sorry."

Once I stopped chuckling, I smiled to take the sting out of my reaction. She smiled in return and then delicately wiped an errant drop of semen from near her eye.

"Do you want me to get you a towel?" I asked.

She immediately shook her head.

I raised an eyebrow.

"Will you…?" she asked, flicking her eyes toward her pussy, her voice husky with desire. "I want to—"

Before she could finish, I practically leapt between her legs. She squirmed when I licked her slick channel. At the top of her slit, I wrapped my lips around the hooded bead of her clit. Tangy, fresh moisture assaulted my taste buds as I flicked my tongue against the protective hood.

Kendall thrashed and then moaned in pleasure. When I looked up her body, over her flattened breasts, I realized that she was spreading my come over her face. With her other hand, she started tweaking her nipples. I smiled to myself and resumed my attentions.

It didn't take me long to work her into a frenzy. Her hips bucked as I licked the slippery folds between her inner and outer lips. I held her in place with my hands on her inner thighs, but her spasms were too powerful for me to suppress without bruising her soft flesh. So I let her buck, my neck absorbing the shock as her hips shot upward.

When she grew quiet, I knew she was getting close. Moisture flooded my mouth as I sucked her inner labia between my lips. I flicked the sensitive folds with my tongue, driving her higher. Then I thrust my index finger into her opening, caressing her inner ridges.

As soon as I reached the final knuckle, I crooked my finger and felt the ridge of her pubic bone. Behind it, I teased her inner spot. She gasped once and then went rigid, her hips several inches off the bed.

I smiled to myself and redoubled my assault on her clit. The little pearl had emerged from its hood, but I merely circled it with my tongue, avoiding direct contact. The pressure from the retracted hood was enough to push her over the edge.

Her hips bucked again, but she didn't make a sound. Instead, I felt her pussy contracting around my finger as a rush of moisture flooded over it. I pursed my lips and sucked her clit, hood and all. Then I put pressure on her inner spot with my finger. She rewarded me by slamming her hips into my face, threatening to give me whiplash with the force of her orgasm.

I kept right on teasing her, though, driving her higher with lips and tongue and finger. When she finally sagged to the bed, she sucked in a huge breath. I kept teasing her clit, but she quickly pushed me away, her hand covering her pussy protectively.

I smiled to myself, her juices already cooling on my cheeks.

✧ ✧ ✧

On Friday, Kendall wanted to do some Christmas shopping. She bought presents for her family, and was secretive about one she bought for me. She didn't have a big budget—neither

did I, really—so we finished by mid-afternoon.

On the way home, I pulled into a shopping center and parked in front of a women's clothing store. I was familiar with it, since I'd been there to shop for Gina. (It was the store where the salesgirl had modeled a pair of stockings for me, more than a year before.)

"What're we doing?" Kendall asked.

When she unpacked her suitcase the day before, I noticed that she didn't have any matching bra and panty sets. Hers were nice enough, but they were an assortment of colors and patterns. So I wanted to get her some sexy underwear, some "good stuff."

Her eyes lit up when I explained.

"So, c'mon," I finished. "It'll be fun. Besides, I wanna watch you try things on. And then tonight…"

"Tonight…?"

"I thought you could model for me."

She practically leapt out of the Jeep.

Since the store wasn't at a mall, it wasn't very crowded. It *was* a Friday night, though—and before Christmas—so there were six or seven customers inside. I was the only guy in the place.

I looked around the store, searching for the salesgirl who had modeled the stockings. Luckily, she still worked there. She was just like I remembered her: tall, leggy, and platinum blonde, with dark eyes, a fantastic body, and full breasts. She was wearing a pink sweater dress that hugged her curves and showed off her amazing figure. As unobtrusively as possible, I steered Kendall toward her.

"Can I help you?" the salesgirl asked, smiling as we approached.

"My girlfriend's looking for a bra and panty set," I said, preempting Kendall. "Something sexy."

"Certainly," the salesgirl said, her eyes smiling. "Right this way." At the back of the store, she showed Kendall a rack of bra and panty sets. "What size are you?" she asked, professionally eyeing Kendall's chest. "I'd say… a 38D. Right?"

Kendall blushed, but nodded. "Sometimes, I'm a DD," she added, glancing at me sidelong. "But that depends on the bra."

"You don't need to measure?" I asked.

Kendall flashed me a startled look.

I tried not to appear as lecherous as I was feeling.

"I think you're right," the salesgirl said after a moment. "We'd better measure." Then she winked at me.

With a mischievous grin, I held Kendall's eyes as the blonde retrieved a cloth measuring tape.

"I need to measure without your sweater," the salesgirl said to Kendall. "Do you want to use one of the dressing rooms?"

"Why don't you just step behind the wall," I suggested. Then I nodded toward the floor-to-ceiling partition wall that screened the dressing rooms. Since the other customers were out in the store itself, we'd have the alcove to ourselves.

"You want to watch, huh?" the salesgirl asked.

With a comical and not-so-feigned leer, I nodded. I was trying to defuse Kendall's tension, but I also wanted to make the salesgirl laugh. Fortunately, I managed to do both. (I guess I was

flirting.)

"I'm Felicia, by the way," the salesgirl said.

"I'm Paul," I said. "And this is Kendall."

The girls exchanged pleasantries and then Kendall looked around to make sure the coast was clear. Then she took off her sweater. Even in a bra, her breasts were inspiring, and this time was no different. I wasn't in danger of getting a full-blown erection, but my dick stiffened at the sight.

Felicia reached around Kendall's midsection and then pulled the tape taut, *under* her breasts.

"Why do you measure down there?" I asked, genuinely curious. "I thought you'd actually measure… um… higher."

"You must not buy bras very often," Felicia teased.

"I quit wearing them back in the 70s," I said dryly. "Women's lib and all."

She laughed. "You measure under the breasts," she explained, "and then you add five inches." With that, she read the tape. "Thirty-two inches," she said to Kendall. To me, "Now add five."

"Thirty-seven," I said.

"Bras don't come in odd sizes, so you round up to the next even number."

"Okay, thirty-eight."

"Just like I said," she said with a smile. Then she loosened the measuring tape and raised it. When she tightened it around Kendall's bra-clad breasts, she surreptitiously glanced at me.

As I watched the two of them, I thought about Kendall's fantasy of sex with a stranger. Felicia certainly fit the bill, and I got the impression that she was interested in me. She *had* modeled the stockings for me, way back when, but it was more than that. I'm no lothario, but I could usually tell when a woman was attracted to me.

"Forty-two inches," Felicia said, her hands at the level of Kendall's nipples.

"What's that number for?" I asked, curiosity drawing my mind back to reality.

"The difference between the two numbers is the cup size," she explained. "One inch per cup size: A, B, C, D, etc."

"Thirty-eight D," I said, somewhat proud of myself.

"Just like I said," Felicia repeated. "But since we rounded up to get the bra size, she might wear a DD cup."

"Just like *I* said," Kendall said to me, her eyes smiling.

"I guess I need to buy bras more often," I agreed with a laugh.

"I still think he just wanted to watch us," Felicia said to Kendall.

"Why wouldn't I?" I asked rhetorically.

Felicia gave me an appraising look.

I arched an eyebrow in reply.

At that, Kendall grew anxious.

"Let me go get a bra for you to try on," Felicia said to her. "Just to make sure we got our measurements right. I'll be right back."

"What are you *doing?*" Kendall whispered when the blonde was out of earshot.

"Your fantasy," I said. "You, me, and a stranger?"

Her eyes widened. "But I thought…"

"You thought we'd do something with Wren?" I asked softly.

She nodded.

"We might. But right now, I thought…"

"With *her?*" Kendall asked, nodding toward the departed salesgirl.

I nodded. "Don't you think she's attractive?"

"*You* do," she said, dodging the question.

"Of course I do," I answered. "I mean… look at her. But do *you?*"

Her embarrassed blush was confirmation enough.

"And I think she's definitely interested in me," I said.

"Oh, she is," Kendall said, confidence banishing her nervousness.

"Do you think she's into girls?"

"I… I… I don't know," she said. "Oh, this is crazy, Paul," she said suddenly. "We don't have to do anything. We don't even *know* her."

"That's what makes it hotter," I said, reading the desire behind her apparent change of heart. I knew her well enough to know that she was simply suffering a bout of uncertainty. At the mention of a possible threesome with the lissome blonde salesgirl, Kendall's breathing quickened and her cheeks grew flushed. She was interested, all right, her protests notwithstanding.

"I don't know, Paul," she said. "What if she—"

"Here's one for you," Felicia said, returning. "Try this on."

With that, she handed a cornflower blue bra to Kendall.

Kendall gazed at me, her eyes full of doubt.

"Try it on," I suggested. "I'm sure it'll be like a *fantasy come true*."

She caught the subtle emphasis, and her nostrils flared as she drew a ragged, excited breath.

"Are you okay?" Felicia asked. "You look flushed."

"I'm okay," Kendall said after a moment. "It's just warm in here."

It wasn't, and we all knew it. When Kendall closed the dressing room door behind her, the blonde salesgirl leaned close to me.

"Why is she nervous all of a sudden?" she asked.

"She's not. She's excited," I said.

Felicia flashed me a questioning look.

Instead of answering, I smiled as mysteriously as I could.

"Excited, huh?"

I nodded.

"Do you think she'd like to try on some stockings and a garter belt?" she asked, all of a sudden. "If I remember, you liked the ones I showed you."

I looked at her, shocked. I remembered *her*, of course, but who wouldn't? (A beautiful salesgirl who models stockings and garter belt for a then-sixteen-year-old boy? It's the stuff of fantasy. Of *course* I remembered her.) But I never imagined that she…

"I *thought* I remembered you," she said.

"That was what," I asked, semi-incredulous, "a year and a half ago?"

"I don't model stockings for just anyone," she countered.

I raised an eyebrow.

She moistened her lips and flashed me a sultry look.

Before I could say anything, Kendall emerged from the dressing room. She looked good, but the bra was a little tight, and her breasts bulged above it.

"I was afraid of that," Felicia said, turning toward Kendall. "Those bras run a little small," she said. "Let me get you a different style."

"Oh my goodness, Paul," Kendall said, a moment later. "I don't think we should do this."

I pulled her close. "This is what you said you wanted," I urged quietly.

"But I don't know…"

"You know you want to watch me fuck her," I whispered. "And then I'll make you go down on her. I'll fuck you from behind as you lick her pussy," I said. In reality, I was horny. Worse, *I* wanted to fuck Felicia, so that probably clouded my judgment. For a moment, I worried that I might be pushing Kendall to do something she didn't want to do.

"She *is* pretty," Kendall admitted after a moment. Then, "Do you think she'd really do it?"

After a moment's hesitation, I nodded.

"Do you think she likes girls?"

"There's only one way to find out," I said roguishly.

"What're you going to do?" she asked, suddenly concerned.

"Trust me," I said. Then I kissed her, hard. My tongue forced her lips open, but then she warmed to the kiss and sighed in reply. I pulled her to me, her body soft against mine.

"Do you want me to leave you two alone?" Felicia asked from behind me. Then she chuckled as Kendall and I hastily pulled apart. "Here," the blonde said, grinning as she handed a black bra to Kendall. "This should fit better."

Kendall looked at me, her eyes glassy with lust.

I kissed her again, chastely, and then nudged her toward the dressing room.

"The black bra should go better with her complexion," Felicia said when the door shut behind Kendall. "And it's a demi-cup, so it'll make her cleavage look fabulous."

When Kendall emerged from the dressing room, I had to suppress a gasp. Felicia was right, the bra *really* made Kendall's breasts stand out. They were firm, but still jiggled enough to be enticing. I couldn't see the edge of her areolas, but they were barely hidden by the bra cups.

"What did I tell you?" Felicia asked.

"No kidding," I said at last.

At that point, two women entered the dressing area, intent on one of the rooms. We became businesslike. I stood outside the dressing area as Kendall tried on several more colors of the same style bra: white, turquoise, red, and beige. They all looked good on her, but she kept returning to the black.

"You look best in the black," Felicia agreed. Then she looked at me for confirmation.

"Sweetie," I said to Kendall, "I think you look great."

Before I could say anything else, the two women left the dressing area and headed toward the cash register.

"Really," I repeated to Kendall, "you look fan-fucking-*tastic*."

"We've got a pair of panties that match," Felicia said. Then she eyed Kendall's waist and hips. "Small or medium?"

"Probably small," Kendall said. As soon as Felicia left, she rushed over to me. "Oh my goodness, Paul," she gushed, "I can't believe we're doing this. Are you sure? Do you really think

she will? Has she said anything? What if she—"

"Whoa, there," I said softly. "Calm down. One step at a time," I added. Then, "Do you want to get dinner after we leave here?"

She looked at me, confused by the non sequitur.

"Maybe we could see what time Felicia gets off work…," I prompted.

"I hadn't thought of that."

That's because you've never tried to seduce a woman before, I thought. Then, *Gina would've figured out the dinner thing before* I *did.*

"Here you go," Felicia said, returning.

Kendall flashed me an excited look before retreating to the dressing room.

"She's so thin," Felicia said. "Especially with those big boobs. I wish *I* looked like that."

"Why? You look pretty hot already."

"Do you really think so?" she asked, eager for the attention.

"Absolutely," I said without hesitation. Then I let my eyes roam over her body.

She smiled and tried to look demure, but it was just an act. "Thank you," she said softly. Then she glanced at me from under lowered eyelashes. Her look was anything but shy.

I sensed an opportunity, so I quickly suggested that Felicia pick out some stockings and a garter belt for Kendall.

"You don't want me to model them for you?" she asked.

"Why don't you *both* model for me?"

"And what would your girlfriend think of *that?*" she asked, as if she'd caught me.

"I think she'd like it," I said smoothly.

Felicia raised her eyebrows.

"She's very… flexible," I said, mentally chuckling at my double entendre.

"Oh, she is?"

"Mmm hmm," I said. "I wish more women were like her."

"Uh-*huh,*" Felicia murmured speculatively. Then, "Will you excuse me for a moment? I'll be right back."

When she walked around the partition wall, I peeked after her and watched as she spoke to another salesgirl. Unfortunately, I couldn't tell what their conversation was about, but Felicia smiled as she turned and walked back to the lingerie section.

I ducked behind the wall and grinned to myself. As I did, Kendall came out of the dressing room. She looked stunning (even with her short white socks, which she hadn't taken off).

"Wow," I said.

"Wow," Felicia echoed from beside me.

"Do you like it?" Kendall asked.

I couldn't figure out if she were talking to me, or *Felicia*. Once again, I grinned to myself. Then I surreptitiously made sure my burgeoning erection wasn't noticeable.

"I like the belly chain," Felicia said, nodding at Kendall's waist. "That's cool."

"Paul got it for me," Kendall said.

"I like the pendant, too," Felicia said.

"It's like a road sign," I said, trying not to grin. "You know, in case I ever get lost."

Kendall tittered nervously, but Felicia laughed out loud. Still chuckling, she gestured toward a

rack of garter belts.

"Paul thought you might like to try on a pair of stockings," she said.

I shrugged playfully when Kendall looked a question at me.

With an excited, nervous smile, she nodded.

Felicia quickly fetched a pair of black stockings and a garter belt.

Kendall took them and returned to the dressing room.

"A road sign," Felicia muttered, shaking her head and still chuckling.

"This way to the promised land," I said irreverently.

"The promised land, huh?"

"Mmm hmm," I said, grinning. Then, as casually as I could, "Kendall and I were thinking of getting dinner after we left here."

Felicia gave me a speculative look.

"So… what time to you get off?" I asked. "Work, I mean." The last part was calculated, and she rewarded my gamble with a sultry smile.

"One of the other girls is closing," she said. "So I can leave anytime."

"Cool. Why don't we finish up here and then find someplace to eat?" I suggested.

"Your girlfriend is… 'flexible,' did you say?"

"She's very flexible," I agreed. Then, "So, are you up for it?"

"I don't know," she mused.

My heart started to sink.

"Are *you* up for it?" she asked coquettishly.

Instead of answering, I smiled and inclined my head.

"Uh-*huh*," she said doubtfully.

Before I could say anything else, Kendall emerged from the dressing room. With the matching bra, panties, garter belt, and stockings (seamless, with lace tops), she looked fantastic.

"Holy bombshells, Batman," I said absently.

To my surprise, Felicia frowned.

"What?" Kendall asked, suddenly nervous.

Before she could answer, a middle-aged woman and her daughter walked into the dressing area. The woman looked at me as if I were an interloper. When she looked at Kendall, she huffed derisively and then ushered her daughter into one of the dressing rooms.

In my mind, I flipped her the bird. But then I had a brilliant idea.

"Why don't we… um… step in there," I suggested, nodding to Kendall's dressing room. It was big enough for the three of us, but just barely. Even better, it would be a *lot* more private. Perhaps I owed the huffy lady a debt of gratitude after all.

Once inside the dressing room, I moved behind Kendall, while Felicia stood in front of her.

"Let me show you a little trick," Felicia said, smiling to reassure Kendall. "If you don't mind…," she continued, indicating the garter belt. When Kendall didn't object, Felicia knelt in front of her and began unfastening the clasps holding the stockings up.

As she did, Kendall looked back at me, her eyes wide with a combination of anxiety and excitement.

"If you put the garters straps on *over* your panties," Felicia explained, "then you can't take them off without undoing the straps."

"Ah," Kendall and I said in unison.

"Do you mind if I…?" Felicia asked, vaguely indicating Kendall's panties.

Kendall smiled nervously and then said, "No, go ahead."

When Felicia had all four clasps unfastened, she reached up and threaded one under the satiny fabric of the panties. Before she could pull it tight, however, I had another brilliant idea.

"Here," I said, "let me help." With that, I hooked my thumbs in the waistband of Kendall's panties and tugged them over her hips. Since the garter straps were undone, they didn't interfere.

Kendall gasped in shock as I deftly lowered her panties to her knees.

At that point, it was *Felicia's* turn to be shocked, since she was suddenly face-to-face with Kendall's perfect, hairless pussy.

From where I bent over, still grasping Kendall's panties, Felicia and I locked eyes. I smiled and arched an eyebrow, daring her to react.

With deliberate aplomb, she reattached the stockings to the garter straps and then flashed me a defiant—and aroused?—look.

I silently pulled Kendall's panties back into place.

"There," Felicia said, standing. "That's much better. Now you can go to the bathroom."

"Or do anything *else* you might want to do without your panties," I added cockily.

Both women blushed at that.

"Do you really like it, Paul?" Kendall asked, a little nervously.

"Turn around and show him," Felicia suggested. When Kendall did, the blonde flashed me an intrigued look.

I hastily shifted my eyes back at Kendall. "I think you look incredible, baby doll," I said.

She gave me a funny look—half surprised, half aroused—but then smiled.

"I invited Felicia to dinner with us," I said to Kendall. "If that's okay with you."

"Sure," she said, her cheeks coloring. "I'd like that."

Kendall looked over her shoulder at the blonde, and I surreptitiously shifted to relieve my straining erection.

"Why don't you change clothes and then we'll go," I suggested to Kendall.

"You can't make her take all that off," Felicia protested. "She looks so sexy, it'd be a shame."

Kendall looked at me, her eyes hopeful.

"And what good is sexy lingerie under a sweater and jeans?" Felicia continued. "She needs a dress."

"Please, Paul?" Kendall asked softly.

Who was I to refuse?

"Sure," I said at last.

"Perfect!" Felicia said. "I know just the one. I'll be right back." With that, she opened the dressing room door and dashed away without even closing it. A moment later, she returned with a wine-colored sweater dress, similar to her own pink one. "This is perfect," she said to Kendall. "With your figure, it'll make you look even hotter."

Her word choice—"even hotter"—didn't escape Kendall's notice.

Kendall and I shared a look that spoke volumes. Then she turned her attention to Felicia and the dress.

True to the blonde's prediction, Kendall looked even sexier. The dress hugged her curves, and

the sides were slit to mid-thigh, revealing her nylon-encased legs.

"Wow," I said softly, almost reverently. For a moment, I wondered how much Kendall's outfit was going to cost, but then I took another look at her and decided not to worry about it. I gazed at her for another few moments and then looked her in the eye. "You look beautiful."

She blushed suitably.

"You really do," Felicia agreed.

"Thank you," Kendall said.

We stood in silence for a moment, the sexual tension practically crackling between us.

"Let me get all the tags," Felicia said at last, "and then I'll ring you up."

When Kendall began to gather her street clothes, however, she realized that she couldn't wear her sneakers with the fancy outfit.

"Oh, we sell shoes too," Felicia said helpfully. "What size are you?"

"Eight."

"Okay. I'll be right back." With that, Felicia went to pick out a suitable pair of shoes.

Since the huffy woman and her daughter had left, Kendall and I emerged from the dressing room as well.

When Felicia returned, Kendall tried on the shoes. They were a little tight, she said, but they matched the outfit. When she stood up straight, however, she frowned. In a flash, I realized why: in the three-inch heels, Kendall was a good two inches taller than I.

"Don't worry about it, sweetie," I said.

"I don't like being taller than you," she said. "It's just not… right."

"I think you look fine," Felicia said.

"Exactly," I agreed. Then I pulled her close and gazed up at her. "This way," I said, my eyes darting to her ample breasts, "I'm closer to the parts I really like."

Kendall flashed me a faux-betrayed look, while Felicia merely chuckled.

"C'mon," I said, "let's go pay for everything and then find somewhere to eat. I'm starving." *And horny*, I added silently. Then I mentally grinned as I watched Kendall and Felicia walk to the front of the store.

As Felicia rang up the price tags, I started to get nervous. I had a grand total of fifty dollars on me, and the dress alone cost more than that. I began to outright panic as the total soared over a hundred dollars. Then I thought of my emergency credit card. Mom had left it with me when she and Erin headed to New York.

When the total flashed on the cash register, I tried not to gulp. Then I wondered how I was going to explain $288.40 worth of "emergency" clothing.

With barely a tremor, I handed over the Visa and prayed that Felicia didn't pay attention to the name on the card. Fortunately, she didn't, and I signed the receipt.

"Let me get my things and clock out," Felicia said.

Kendall hugged herself to my arm as the blonde headed toward the back.

"Wow," I said, more in shock at the price than anything else.

"Thank you, Paul," Kendall said softly. Then, "I love you."

"I love you too."

"Oh my goodness, you're going to get *so* lucky tonight."

✧ ✧ ✧

We ended up at a steak restaurant near the Perimeter. It was a Friday night, so it was crowded. I put my name on the waiting list and then we retreated to a corner of the waiting area.

Since our backs were to the wall, I put my hand on Kendall's ass and gently squeezed. Then I gambled and put my hand on the small of Felicia's back. When she didn't even flinch, I lowered it to the top of her ass.

She glanced at me and arched an eyebrow. We had a silent conversation with our eyes. When she didn't seem to object, I decided to go for broke—I lowered my hand to her ass itself. She moistened her lips and then pressed back against me.

With that, we both attempted to look innocent, but I kept my hands on the girls' asses. Occasionally, I rubbed them, the fuzzy wool of their sweater dresses tickling my palms. After several minutes, Felicia leaned close.

"Do you like what you feel?" she asked quietly.

I paused for a moment to savor the feeling as her breast touched my side.

"Hmmmm?" she pressed.

"I like it a lot," I said. Then I traced my finger along the seam of her panties. "Do you want me to stop?" I asked, as artlessly as I could.

"No, you're fine."

"Fine?" I asked.

"Okay," she admitted after a moment, "maybe you're more than fine."

"Thanks," I said, grinning.

We waited for almost forty-five minutes. The whole time, I played with the girls' asses. I never did more than that, though, but both of them seemed to be getting worked up. Felicia's breathing had quickened, and I easily recognized how horny Kendall was. When the hostess finally called my last name, I reluctantly took my hands off the girls.

As we followed the hostess, I hoped for a booth, since it would afford a little more privacy. Unfortunately, the restaurant was packed, so we had to settle for a table.

As soon as we sat down, I suggested a bottle of wine (and *prayed* that the waiter wouldn't ask for my ID, since I was still too young to drink). Felicia wanted red wine, while Kendall and I didn't care one way or the other. So I ordered a mid-priced bottle that had an interesting name.

Luckily, the waiter simply took my order and went to fetch our wine. After he poured it, we placed our dinner orders. Then we made small talk, mostly about the quality of the food at the restaurant, since Felicia had been there before.

When she drained her wine glass, I refilled it. A moment later, to my surprise, Kendall asked for a refill as well. Within fifteen minutes, we had to order another bottle of wine. I still had my original glass, but both girls had drunk two glasses apiece.

"Mmmmm, this is good," Felicia said. "You sure know how to pick a good wine."

"I have a talented tongue," I said.

Kendall nearly choked on her wine.

"I'll bet you do," Felicia said. Then she turned to Kendall, who was still sputtering. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," Kendall said, patting her lips with her napkin. Then she smiled at me a little drunkenly.

"Why don't we go fix our makeup before supper gets here," Felicia suggested.

Kendall readily agreed, and they headed toward the restrooms. When they returned, they both looked more composed. They both looked more excited too, so I wondered if they'd been up to something in the restroom. I couldn't come right out and ask, so I settled for pouring more wine. After I did, our conversation turned to clothes, music, and everyday things, but half of it had a sexual undertone. None of us were being overt, but sex was definitely on our minds.

When our dinner arrived, I poured the last of the wine into the girls' glasses. I had only managed to drink about two glasses, so they were both a little tipsy. Our steaks were delicious, although neither of the girls ate very much. I didn't eat very much either, but I did finish most of my filet.

"Would you like to see the dessert menu?" the waiter asked as he cleared our plates.

We looked at each other and then shook our heads in unison. With that, the waiter retrieved the bill and laid it by my elbow.

"So," Felicia said, letting the word draw out.

"So," I echoed. Then, "Do you have plans for later?"

She shrugged artfully.

Before I could say anything, I felt her foot run along my leg.

She leaned back and gave me a speculative glance, her eyes hooded from all the wine.

"Maybe we could do something," I suggested.

She arched an eyebrow. Then she glanced at Kendall, who smiled diffidently.

"I was thinking that Kendall could model her new lingerie," I said.

"Oh?" Felicia asked, taunting me.

I mustered my courage. "Maybe you'd like to watch," I said.

"Or maybe you'd like *me* to model too," she replied saucily.

Kendall's breathing quickened, and she reached for my hand under the table.

"Maybe," I said to Felicia. "Do you have nice lingerie?"

"Ha! I've got stuff that'll blow your mind."

"I've seen a lot," I countered. "So it'll take a lot to impress me."

Her eyes flashed at the challenge. Then, "My apartment's fifteen minutes from here."

"Is that an invitation?" I asked, letting my lips quirk up in a smile.

"I dunno, is it?"

"It sounded like one," I said.

"Then I guess it was," she said. At that, she took a sip of wine to cover her excitement.

I glanced at Kendall for confirmation.

Her face was flushed with arousal, and it took her a moment to notice me looking at her. When she did, her eyes said "yes" better than any words could.

"Sounds perfect," I said to Felicia.

"Let's take a powder before we go," she said to Kendall.

They shared a look and then stood. As they walked away, I admired their bodies. When I looked at the bill, however, my thoughts immediately turned apprehensive; I wondered how I'd explain $95 of "emergency" food and wine. Since it was my only option, I took out the Visa and laid it atop the bill. The waiter retrieved it a moment later.

When the girls returned to the table, they seemed excited. Kendall flashed me a wild look, her eyes full of sexual energy.

"I like Kendall's shaved pussy," Felicia whispered in my ear as she sat down.

"I like it too," I said.

"She said this is a fantasy of yours," the blonde continued, leaning close.

Kendall swallowed hard and returned my glance with a nervous blush.

"Something like that," I hedged.

"So, what," the blonde asked, "d'you wanna make it with two girls at once?"

I couldn't help myself—I chuckled. "No," I said at last.

She arched an eyebrow in question.

"I do that all the time," I said, more for shock value than anything else. At her surprised look, I nodded. Then I smiled, deliberately avoiding her unspoken question. "So," I asked instead, "are we ready to go?"

Underneath the table, Kendall squeezed my hand. I squeezed hers in reply and then flashed Felicia a suggestive look.

"All the time, huh?" she mused.

"Mmm hmm."

She looked at Kendall for confirmation.

Kendall blushed and then nodded tentatively.

"Oh, *really?*" Felicia asked me.

"Yep," I said. Then, "So, do you want us to follow you to your apartment?" I asked her. "Are you okay to drive?"

"Oh, I'm fine. You can follow me."

When we arrived at her apartment, I was surprised; it was an upscale complex, with tasteful architecture and nice landscaping (leave it to me to notice the architecture and landscaping). Inside the building, I got another surprise, since her apartment was a lot bigger than I expected.

"Do you have a roommate?" I asked.

She shook her head and then turned on the foyer lights.

"How do you afford a place like this?" I asked, momentarily forgetting that I was supposed to be seducing her. *Note to self: Questions about the rent are* not *sexy.*

"My boyfriend pays for it," she said.

"Boyfriend?" I asked, suddenly uncertain.

"Oh, don't worry," she said. "He doesn't actually live here. He just pays for it. Besides, he's not even in the country right now."

I looked a question at her.

"He lives in Argentina."

"Argentina?" I asked, a little confused.

She nodded, but didn't elaborate. Then she led us toward the kitchen. "Here," she said, handing me a bottle of red wine. "Open this. The corkscrew is in that drawer over there," she added, pointing. "I wanna go powder my nose."

Kendall looked at me, as if asking permission.

I nodded. She certainly didn't need my approval to go to the bathroom.

When the girls returned, they both looked a lot more excited. Kendall seemed a little embarrassed, though, so I figured that they'd been Up To Something after all. That suited me just fine.

I passed each of them a glass of wine and we drank.

"Why don't we get a little more comfortable," Felicia suggested, nodding toward the living room.

I strategically sat in the middle of the couch, with Kendall on my left. After Felicia adjusted the lights and turned on the stereo, she settled to my right. Then she kicked off her shoes, crossed her stocking-clad legs, and hooked her foot behind my calf. When I glanced at her, she smiled.

I put my arm around Kendall and pulled her possessively close. She tucked her feet beneath her and took a sip of wine. She'd had a lot more alcohol than she was used to, so I studied her for a moment. I was feeling the effects of all the wine, and the girls had drunk more than I had, but neither of them appeared to be drunk—just buzzed. That was strange. I wondered…

"So," Felicia said, drawing my attention back to her, "what's this fantasy of yours?"

"Just a fantasy," I said enigmatically. I couldn't figure out why neither of them seemed drunk, but when Felicia flashed me a sultry, almost smug look, my thoughts abruptly changed direction.

"Lemme guess," she continued, "you want to watch Kendall make it with another woman."

"That's part of it," I said, my erection throbbing in anticipation. "But I've seen that before."

"Oh, you have?"

"Mmm hmm."

"So you think I'll just fall into bed with you two?" Felicia asked, her eyes flashing in challenge.

"No," I said simply.

She arched an eyebrow.

"But I was hoping…"

She laughed.

"And we're *here*," I continued, gesturing at her apartment. When I set my hand down, I rested it on her leg instead of mine.

She took a sip of wine to cover her reaction.

"But we can leave, if you want," I said, toying with her. I could see the lust in her eyes, but I also realized that she didn't want to appear too eager.

"I think I'll let you stay," she said, a little quicker than she normally might have.

"Thanks," I said earnestly. I really *did* want to stay, because I wanted to have sex with her, but I didn't want *her* to think I was too eager either. Instead of saying anything else, I looked her in the eye and drew my hand up her leg another inch or two.

She pointedly glanced at my hand. When her eyes met mine again, they flashed, daring me to do something else.

I took her dare and tugged the hem of her skirt upward. It slid over her thigh, revealing more of her stocking-clad legs, as well as the dark valley between her thighs. Our eyes met again and she lifted an eyebrow. I purposefully moistened my lips and then cocked my head to the side.

She took a sip of wine, her eyes never leaving mine. Then she took a deep breath, her breasts rising as she inhaled. Her nipples were hard, and threatened to poke through her bra and sweater dress.

I inclined my head, as if to ask, "What's next?"

"Well," she said at last, "if we're going to party, I'm gonna get out the party favors."

"Of course," I agreed, although I really didn't have a clue what she was talking about.

When she stood, however, she gave me a seductive look.

I watched her as she walked away, bound for the back of the apartment.

"Are you sure we should do this, Paul?" Kendall whispered when Felicia was out of earshot.

"Aren't you having fun?" I asked.

Her blush and stiff nipples were all the answer I needed.

"Do you want to watch me fuck her?" I asked, my voice pitched low.

Kendall nodded.

"Do you want to go down on her?"

"If you want me to," she answered tentatively.

"I do," I said. Then I kissed her. When I pulled back, her lips were shiny from the kiss, and her eyes were still closed. "You look incredibly fucking sexy," I whispered.

Her eyes fluttered open and she gazed at me. "Oh, Paul," she breathed, "I love you."

"I love you too."

"Do you really want t—"

"My boyfriend brings this stuff from Colombia," Felicia said, interrupting us as she entered the room. "It's really good snow."

Kendall squirmed and looked at me, her eyes wide.

"Snow"? I wondered. *What's she talking about? "Snow," as in cocai—*

In shock, I watched Felicia hold a mirror-like plate to her face. She put a small glass tube to her nostril, pressed the other closed, and inhaled. When she finished, she pinched both nostrils shut, closed her eyes, and shuddered.

"It's *really* good snow," she repeated euphorically. Then she opened her eyes and looked at us.

I was speechless. I knew what cocaine was, but aside from the movies, I'd never actually *seen* it. Pot and acid were all around my high school, but I always avoided them. I'd heard about kids using coke or speed, but I never actually *knew* anyone who had.

"Here," Felicia said, extending the plate to Kendall. "Ladies first." Then, to me, "I cut you a fat line, though, since you started late."

Started late? What the f— "Thanks," I said, too shocked to say anything else.

To my utter disbelief, Kendall took the proffered plate. She glanced at me nervously, but then seemed to steel her nerve. Time slowed to a crawl. I watched as she picked up the glass tube and put it to her nose. She didn't do it as confidently as Felicia had, but she wasn't awkward either. When she inhaled, I could actually see the white powder flying upward. With her eyes still closed, she set down the tube and then quivered.

When she opened her eyes, she gazed at me a little vacantly for a moment. Then she moistened her lips and flashed me a wild, hungry look.

"Your turn," Felicia said to me.

On autopilot, I took the plate from Kendall. Shock-numbed, I simply stared at the small pile of white powder, about the size of half a golf ball. The powdery traces of two lines flanked a longer, thicker one in the center.

In the blink of an eye, my whole world shrank to that solitary line of coke.

CHAPTER TWENTY

When Kendall extended the mirror-like plate of cocaine, my first thought was to hand it to Felicia, untouched. But then I had second thoughts. If I didn't snort the line, would she kick us out of her apartment? Would she still have sex with me—with *us*—if I didn't do it? I desperately didn't want to seem uncool, but I *really* didn't want to have anything to do with cocaine.

"Go on," Felicia urged, "it's good stuff."

I swallowed hard and tried not to look as anxious as I felt. "I'm cool for now," I said at last. "Thanks, though."

"Have you ever fucked on coke?" she asked.

"Sure," I lied, hoping I appeared a lot more confident than I was. Inside, however, I cursed myself. Drugs were bad enough, but cocaine wasn't like pot or acid—it was a serious drug. Peer pressure can make people say *any*thing, though, and I certainly wasn't an exception.

"It's totally amazing, isn't it?" Felicia asked, breaking my train of thought.

"I guess," I said with a shrug, trying to appear nonchalant. "But I kinda like to do it the old-fashioned way."

"Yeah, fucking while you're straight is cool and all," Felicia said, "but it's *so* much better on coke. You sure you don't wanna do a line?"

When Kendall looked at me, she seemed to be urging me to do it, as if my complicity would absolve her of whatever guilt she felt.

"Nah," I said. "I'm cool… for now." What was I supposed to say? I *wasn't* going to do any coke, but I didn't want to seem like a narc.

"That's cool," Felicia said. "More for us." Then she took the plate, used a razor blade to divide "my" line into two smaller ones, and finally snorted one.

Kendall didn't even glance at me before she snorted the other half of the line. When she looked up, however, she had a wild gleam in her eye.

I desperately wanted to know when she'd gotten so familiar with cocaine, but I couldn't exactly come right out and ask. Besides, Felicia put her foot on the couch—between my legs—and got my attention by tickling my balls with her toes.

"Kendall told me that you're good in bed," the blonde said.

I glanced at Kendall, whose eyes merely flashed in response. Then I looked back at Felicia. "It sounds like you two talked about a lot while you were in the bathroom," I said.

"Uh-huh," she replied, unabashed. "She said you're the best she's ever had."

In spite of my shock, I felt my face heating.

"She also said you've got a big cock. Eight inches, huh?" She punctuated her question with a glance at my crotch.

At that, I momentarily forgot about the coke. Like virtually every guy on the planet, I had measured my dick before. I knew that I was bigger than most guys, though, so I didn't worry about exact numbers. Even though Kendall's estimate had been generous—by almost an inch—I wasn't going to argue the point.

"So, big boy," Felicia taunted, "are you gonna show me?" Even trapped by my pants and underwear, my erection made an obvious bulge. Her eyes practically smoldered as she looked at it.

"I thought you were going to show me your lingerie collection," I said, avoiding the question. I didn't mind showing her my dick, but I wanted to get her naked first. Her breasts—high, firm, round, and nearly perfect—had my mouth watering.

"So you're going to play hard to get?" Felicia asked, with a theatrical pout.

"If you want to get me *hard*," I replied boldly.

In spite of herself, she laughed. "It looks like we won't have any trouble doing that," she said, her eyes returning to my crotch. "But if you want to see my underwear, then you're gonna have to make it worth my while."

"Oh?"

"Mmm hmm," she practically purred. "You're gonna have to kiss me." Without waiting for my answer, she straddled my hips.

Kendall gasped in anticipation, and I spared her a quick glance before Felicia settled onto my lap. The blonde's lips crushed against mine, her lip gloss making our kiss a little slippery. As she ground her hips against me, I put my right hand on her thigh and ran it under her dress. I felt the tops of her stockings and then the bare skin of her upper thigh. Finally, I slipped my fingers around her ass and then under the elastic of her panties.

When we broke the kiss, she pulled back, her eyes closed. A moment later, her eyelids fluttered open and she gazed at me, her nostrils flaring with arousal. I pulled her toward me and our lips met again. Her tongue sparred with mine as she cupped my face, her blonde hair shrouding us.

I ran my left hand under her dress and through the leg of her panties, heedless of stretching the elastic. Her ass was smooth and firm, and I used it to pull her against me. She mewled softly and ground her pussy against the bulge of my erection. When we broke the kiss, her eyes were wild and slightly unfocused.

"Kendall said you were a good kisser," Felicia said softly.

"Mmm hmm," I replied. "She's a pretty good kisser too."

Felicia seemed to sober. Then she looked at me with a wry expression.

"Why don't you see for yourself," I suggested, flicking my eyes toward Kendall.

Felicia grinned at me. "What *is* it with guys? You all seem to get off on the girl-girl scene."

"So sue me," I said, unrepentant. "I like watching two beautiful women kiss each other."

With an eye-roll, Felicia faced Kendall.

Kendall was hesitant at first, but when Felicia cupped her breast, their lips met. My erection throbbed as I watched them kiss. When they finally separated, both of them were breathing heavier, their cheeks flushed with arousal.

"Happy?" Felicia asked me, her hand still on Kendall's breast.

"So far, so good," I said. Then I pulled her hips toward me, grinding her pussy against my erection.

"So," Felicia said, her eyes a little unfocused, "about this fantasy of yours…"

"Mmm hmm?" I prompted.

"Does it involve the three of us fucking?" she asked. "Or is it just a girl-girl thing?"

"The three of us," I said.

"Good," she said quickly. "'Cause I like girls and all, but I *really* wanna get fucked. Before I do, though," she said, "I want a little bump." Then she glanced at Kendall. "Are you ready for

another?"

After a moment's hesitation, Kendall nodded. She didn't look at me, because she knew me well enough to know my answer when Felicia asked if I wanted one.

"Not yet," I said. "Maybe later."

Instead of standing up to retrieve the plate of cocaine from the coffee table, Felicia simply leaned back, her breasts flattening as she arched her back. When she sat forward, she flashed me a wild, excited look.

"I just *love* fucking on coke," she said. "A little snow and I can fuck all night. Is that how it is with you?" she asked Kendall.

"I've only done it once," Kendall said, avoiding my gaze.

With me? I wondered.

"But I didn't really enjoy it," she continued.

Not with me.

"I was incredibly horny, but I was"—now she *did* meet my eyes—"with some people I didn't really like."

A-ha! I mentally shouted. *Big Mistake Guy! And Hayley, who seems like just the type to be a cocaine slut,* I thought acidly. *Strike five? Strike six? Strike one million and one.*

"That's why I wanna do it with someone I love," Kendall added, her eyes pleading with me for acceptance.

Felicia finished cutting the short lines and immediately snorted one of them. She shuddered as it took effect. Then she passed the plate to Kendall.

Kendall's eyes grew round as she silently begged me to understand.

I *didn't* understand. I wanted to shout at her not to do it. We didn't need *cocaine* to have good—no, great—sex. She didn't need to prove anything, especially since she *wasn't* a slut like Hayley.

But Kendall needed me to accept her, to forgive her for what she wanted to do. Maybe she was trying to erase the memory of Big Mistake Guy. Maybe she was trying to heighten our experience together. Maybe it was both, or something else entirely, something I didn't understand at all.

I didn't know what she was thinking, but I knew that I loved her. And I knew that Felicia's apartment wasn't the place to have a serious discussion about drugs and sex and love. Nor was it the time. That would come later. I had a million questions to ask, and I wouldn't let Kendall dodge them. But for the moment, she desperately wanted my understanding.

I loved her. I didn't like what she was doing, but I did love her.

After an angst-ridden moment, I nodded.

Kendall thanked me with her eyes and then swallowed hard. Finally, she picked up the glass tube and put it to her nose. Once again, I watched the white line disappear.

"Oh, fuck," she whispered, almost reverently. "That makes me feel so… *alive*." When her eyes snapped open, she looked at me and moistened her lips. "I can't *wait* to suck your dick," she said.

She seemed like a different person. She *was* a different person, I realized. I could still detect traces of the old Kendall—the shy, demure, horny-yet-reserved Kendall—but all of her inhibitions seemed to disappear as the drug tightened its grip upon her.

"So you like having your cock sucked, huh?" Felicia asked me.

I tore my eyes away from Kendall and gazed at the blonde.

"I've been told I give good head," she continued. "So, do you want us to suck you off?"

I didn't know *what* I wanted—my thoughts were chaotic. I didn't want Kendall using coke, but I couldn't stop her without making a scene. Worse, I was horny, and the little head kept urging me to just shut up and start fucking. After all, I had two beautiful, *horny* girls in front of me, and my willpower was taking a severe beating.

I wanted to fuck them, no matter what they put up their noses. I knew I'd pay the price later, in self-recrimination, but at the moment, all I wanted to do was to lose myself in mindless sex. *I* wasn't going to touch the cocaine, but for better or for worse, I couldn't undo what Kendall had already done.

Instead of answering Felicia, I pulled her toward me and kissed her. When she ran her hands over my chest and leaned into the kiss, I stopped thinking about anything but her body.

The little head had won.

Kendall and I would have a long talk, later. But for the moment, I decided to go with the flow. So I lifted Felicia's pink sweater dress and bunched it around her waist. She moaned softly when my fingers darted toward her panty-covered crotch. She moaned again as my hands roamed upward, cupping her breasts. I squeezed them gently, testing their firmness.

Finally, we broke the kiss so I could tug the fuzzy dress over her head and off her arms. Her white bra was so sheer that I could see the outlines of her erect nipples. Her panties were sheer as well, giving me a tantalizing glimpse of her pubic hair. Like Kendall, she was wearing a garter belt. Her stockings were plain white, but they made her legs look even better (if that were possible).

She let me look for a moment, but then leaned forward to kiss me again. I caressed her warm skin as she writhed against me. We kissed for several long moments, our tongues thrusting and feinting in rhythm. My fingers found the catch of her bra and I smoothly popped it. She shrugged out of the flimsy garment without breaking the kiss.

Her nipples pressed against me through my shirt as she planted kisses along my jawline. Then she moved down, her lips tasting my neck. As she reached my chest, she began unbuttoning my shirt. I spared a quick glance at Kendall, who was rapt.

While the blonde was busy with my shirt, I drew Kendall close and kissed her. Her tongue darted into my mouth as the kiss heated up. The cocaine seemed to have made her horny *and* assertive, and she rubbed my chest as Felicia pulled my shirt open.

All of a sudden, I felt something warm and wet surround my nipple. I started to sit up, but then relaxed—*slightly*—when I realized that it was Felicia's tongue. A moment later, I gasped when she gently bit my nipple. Much to my surprise, the sensation was actually pleasurable.

Kendall didn't seem to notice my anxious lurch, and kept right on kissing me, her body holding mine against the couch. I put my arm around her and cupped her ass. Then Felicia pulled the tail of my shirt out of my pants. I momentarily worried that the blonde might think my stomach wasn't flat enough, but my anxiety turned to pleasure as she kissed her way up my chest and then nipped at my crinkled nipple.

I put my right hand on the back of Felicia's head and tried to enjoy myself as she switched from nipple to nipple. I was a little self-conscious about having them sucked, but since it felt

good—*very* good—I didn't want her to stop.

With my free hand, I pulled Kendall's dress up. She rose onto her knees and the fuzzy garment slid over her ass. I cupped one satin-clad cheek and squeezed. She moaned into my mouth and then pulled back.

"I want to watch you fuck her," she whispered, her voice husky with desire.

"Okay," I said, "but take off your dress first."

She immediately crossed her arms and grasped the hem of the dress. She pulled it off and tossed it to the floor. A moment later, her heavy breasts swung free as she released the catch on her bra.

Felicia's eyes were drawn by the movement and she looked up.

"God, you've got fantastic tits," the blonde said.

Since Felicia was sitting up, I took a moment to admire *her* breasts. They were magnificent. Even without the bra, they stood up firm and proud, topped with pinkish areolas.

She saw me looking and cupped them, her fingers working her nipples. Then she squeezed her breasts together, the soft flesh bulging until the two mounds met in the middle. With a wry grin, she jiggled them and then let go; they were so firm that they barely swayed. Before I could touch them, however, she leaned forward and her lips crushed into mine. Her warm breasts pressed against my bare chest, and she moaned at the contact.

When she broke the kiss, she turned to the side and drew Kendall in for a kiss as well. Finally, Felicia pulled back, her lips moist and shiny. Kendall, her eyes still closed, looked beside herself.

To my surprise, Felicia leaned back and grabbed her wineglass. For a moment, I was afraid that she was going to pour the wine down her chest (where it would run down her body and stain my pants). She was just teasing me, however, and drank deeply, draining half the glass. Then she held it out to Kendall, who finished the job.

"Do you want me to get you some more wine?" I asked facetiously.

"No," Felicia said. "I want you to sit still while I unbuckle your belt." She suited action to words, her hands fumbling until they found purchase on the leather at the buckle. "I want to see this big cock of yours."

A moment later, she attacked the button on my pants, nearly ripping it off in the process. My zipper hissed as she pulled my fly open. Then she tugged the elastic of my underwear, jerking it away from my body. Finally, my erection sprang into view.

"Mmmmm, nice," she purred. Then, "It *is* big."

Not eight inches, I mused smugly, *but it'll rock* your *world.*

Before I could say anything out loud, though, Felicia descended on my erection and engulfed it. Then she brushed her hair out of her face and began sucking me in earnest.

I didn't know what I expected, but I guess I was a little underwhelmed. I'd never gotten a *bad* blowjob in my life, but some were better than others. Felicia's qualified as "others." She wasn't Kendall, and she definitely wasn't Susan. It felt good, but I wasn't going to turn into a drooling idiot.

Kendall immediately picked up on my reaction. "Are you okay?" she whispered, leaning close.

"I just like how *you* give head," I whispered in her ear.

"Oh, Paul, I love you so much," she said.

Between my legs, Felicia wrapped her fingers around my shaft and started pumping as she sucked me.

"Thank you for doing this," Kendall continued, her voice pitched low.

I tried not to snort at being thanked for having sex with two beautiful women.

"And thank you for not saying anything about… you know," she finished. "I know you don't like it, but… you don't know what it feels like."

I shook my head.

"Try some."

I shook my head again, firmer this time.

"It… it's really good. It makes me feel alive, like I don't have to worry about *any*thing. And… and it makes me so… so *horny*. Oh, Paul, I want you to fuck me so bad."

"Mmmmm," I groaned in agreement.

Felicia took it as a groan of approval and went into overdrive.

Kendall simply grinned at me and then looked down at the blonde's bobbing head.

"Do you really want me to go down on her?" Kendall asked.

I nodded.

"Will you fuck me from behind when I do?"

Another nod.

At that point, she kissed me, her lips crushing mine with the force of her enthusiasm. I split my attention between kissing her and the feeling as her warm, pliant breasts pressed into my chest. When we broke the kiss, she slid my shirt off my shoulders and tossed it aside. Then she began planting kisses down my chest. Eventually, she moved to the floor and joined Felicia.

Felicia pulled off my dick, which was shiny with her saliva. Then she noticed Kendall. With her hand still around my shaft, Felicia leaned toward Kendall and the two girls kissed.

Seeing my dick silhouetted against their pale skin as they shared a passionate kiss was enough to kick *me* into sexual overdrive. My manhood throbbed hard enough that Felicia pulled back, startled. Then she grinned up at me and offered my length to Kendall, who immediately wrapped her lips around it. The difference between Kendall and Felicia was night and day. Felicia had been good; Kendall was *great*.

For several minutes, the girls took turns sucking me. Then they silently agreed to undress me completely. Giggling, they each grabbed a pant leg. A moment later, my socks and underwear followed.

As Kendall moved between my legs and resumed sucking, Felicia sat next to me and pressed her luscious breasts against me. We kissed, and when she pulled back, she grinned at me.

"You *do* have a nice cock," she said.

"Thank you."

"And you're a good kisser, too."

I pulled her close to prove the point. When we broke the kiss, I gently tugged the waistband of her panties. "Take these off," I requested, my voice thick with desire.

She did, and I got my first good look at her pussy. Her hair was dark, and trimmed into a neat triangle. I flicked my eyes to her dark eyebrows and realized that her platinum hair probably came from a bottle.

She noticed my glance and grinned sheepishly. "So I'm not a natural blonde," she said. Then,

"I should probably just shave it, like Kendall."

I waggled my eyebrows at her.

"You'd like that, wouldn't you?" she asked, grinning.

I shrugged unrepentantly.

"God, you're sexy," she said softly.

"You're pretty sexy your—" I started to say, but she silenced me with a kiss.

Who was I to complain? I simply settled back and enjoyed the feeling of her lips on mine, the pressure of her breasts against my side, and the silky texture of her skin as my fingers delved between her thighs.

She gasped when I parted her labia and ran my finger along her finely furred slit.

"Oh, God, I want you to fuck me," she gasped, panting. "Give me all eight inches and make me scream."

Kendall heard her and let my saliva-slick shaft slip from her lips. As she moved out of the way, Felicia swung her leg over mine and straddled my hips. Without ceremony, she set the tip of my dick at her opening and then impaled herself on my length. She groaned when her pelvis met my hips.

I paused for a moment to enjoy the hot, wet, smooth texture of her pussy as it surrounded my manhood. Then I felt something completely unexpected; her pussy *clenched* me.

At first, I was confused, since she wasn't having an orgasm. When I looked at her, she grinned. Then she closed her eyes and her pussy clenched me again. In wonder, I watched as her belly contracted and her pussy gripped me a third time.

"Oh my God," I groaned, "that feels fucking incredible."

"I thought you'd like it," Felicia said, her eyes still closed. When they opened, she smiled at me. Before I could say anything, she began rocking her hips, moving my cock within her. "God, you *are* big," she grunted.

Kendall smiled at me, and I gestured for her to sit next to me on the couch. When she did, I drew her close and our lips met. As Kendall and I kissed, Felicia began moving atop me. Still kissing Kendall, I cupped Felicia's breast. When I squeezed it gently, she moaned in appreciation.

While she'd been on the floor, Kendall had taken off her panties. She still wore her black garter belt and stockings, though, and I paused to admire her as she knelt next to me. On my lap, Felicia groaned in ecstasy as she rode my cock.

When I began playing with Kendall's slippery, smooth pussy, she leaned close and we kissed deeply. She groaned into my mouth as my fingers found her clit and teased it in small circles.

Felicia rode me for five or ten minutes, her groans rising in volume as she worked herself toward orgasm.

"Oh, God," she cried at last. "Fuck me. Hard!"

Kendall pulled back and grinned at me, her lips shiny.

I obliged Felicia by pulling her close and then rolling both of us over. She ended up on her back on the couch, her head pressed against the cushions, her ass at the edge of the seat. I ended up kneeling on the floor, between her legs. Then I resumed thrusting.

As I watched her firm breasts bounce with each stroke, I couldn't resist sucking them. She held my head and groaned as my tongue circled her nipple. I pursed my lips around the little pink

bud and nipped gently, eliciting a gasp. Then I switched to the other nipple and gave it the same treatment.

After sucking her nipples for several moments, I straightened and simply gazed down at her body. Then I put my hands at the backs of her knees and pushed them toward the couch, spreading her open.

Her legs formed an "M", with her pussy—and my pistoning dick—in the middle. Her pubic hair was curly and damp from her own juices, and each time my shaft emerged from her pussy, it glistened.

For a few moments, I simply stared at where our bodies joined. Then my eyes were drawn back to her bouncing breasts, so round and perfect. I cupped them and began fucking her with long, smooth strokes. She cried out with mounting delight each time my hips slammed into her.

Finally, I released her breasts and used my thumb on her clit. Then I looked up to make sure Kendall was watching. She was. Surprisingly, she was playing with herself at the same time. I couldn't remember a time when she had been so worked up that she played with her pussy. I was sure it had happened before, but it was rare enough that I did a double take.

She saw me look twice and smiled. When I grinned in reply, she resumed fingering herself. Then I turned my eyes back to Felicia. With my thumb on her clit and my dick pumping into her, she was getting close. Her chest heaved as she sucked in air, her breath coming in short, sharp gasps. Her pussy wasn't as tight as Kendall's, but it was tight enough that I could feel it clamp down with the first twinges of orgasm.

Her cries turned into a long, sustained moan that rose in volume as her pussy quivered around my cock. I gripped her hips, my hands pulling her garter belt taut. Then I began fucking her as hard and fast as I could. Slapping sounds filled the room as my hips slammed into her.

After barely a minute of high-speed thrusts, Felicia cried out and arched her back, her pale nipples and perfect breasts pointed skyward. Her pussy spasmed around my invading member, a flush mounting her chest and neck as she writhed in ecstasy.

Finally, I buried my dick as deep as I could and stopped moving. Her pussy clamped me and then released as her orgasm subsided.

"Oh… my… God," she gasped. Then she looked at me in surprise. "Did you come?"

I immediately grew anxious. I hadn't even asked if she were on the pill or not. I'd just stuck my dick into her and started pumping. Stupid!

"Don't worry," she said, reading my panic. "I'm on the pill." Then, "But you didn't come, did you?"

I shook my head.

"Why not? God, *how?*"

"I'm saving myself," I said. "And I've got good control, that's how."

"God," she said, slumping back to the couch.

Kendall, her fingers still idly teasing her pussy, merely smiled at me. She knew what kind of control I had. She benefited from it as often as possible.

"You know what's next," I said to her, more statement than question.

Her nostrils flared as she nodded.

"Hold on a second," Felicia said. "After a pounding like that, I gotta take a break. Did we finish the wine?"

I nodded.

"Would you mind opening another bottle?"

I grinned down at her and then eased my hips back.

She gasped as my erection slipped from her still-sensitive pussy. My shaft glistened and bobbed gently when I stood up. A moment later, I returned with the corkscrew and another bottle of red wine. I quickly opened it and refilled our glasses.

Felicia downed hers and then held it up for a refill. "God, I was thirsty," she said.

I obligingly poured her another half-glass.

"You're still hard," she observed, taking a gulp of wine.

"Uh-huh," I said smugly.

"No *wonder* Kendall says you're the best she's ever had."

I took a sip of wine to hide my grin.

"Before the next round," Felicia said, "I want another little bump. D'you want one?" she asked Kendall. When she nodded, the blonde turned to me.

I shook my head. "No thanks. Maybe later."

"More for us," Felicia said. Then she used the razor blade to draw out two thin half-lines of the white powder. A moment later, she and Kendall snorted them.

Kendall shuddered euphorically. When she opened her eyes, they dropped to my jutting erection.

Without a word, she knelt in front of me and practically inhaled my dick. It hit the back of her throat and she kept going. Then she moaned in frustration as her gag reflex kicked in and she had to settle for all but the last two inches.

Felicia's eyes glowed wildly as she watched Kendall fellate me. I let Kendall suck me for several minutes, but then pulled her off my dick.

"Kneel between her legs," I said to her, indicating the blonde with a nod.

Kendall's eyes flashed in anticipation and she immediately obeyed.

As I knelt behind her, she started kissing Felicia's inner thighs, just above the stockings.

The black straps from Kendall's garter belt felt smooth under my fingers as I gripped her ass. When I eased forward, my dick slid along her channel.

Without lifting her head from Felicia's pussy, Kendall put her hand on my cock and directed it to her opening. She was as tight as usual, but I slid home after two short thrusts. As I began pumping, she put her hands on Felicia's inner thighs to steady herself.

I fucked Kendall with long, measured strokes, my hands on her ass for balance. She groaned each time I buried my dick inside her. Felicia's eyes burned as she watched me. The cocaine seemed to drive both of them into a hyper-sexual state, and their enthusiasm fueled my own.

Soon enough, I began thrusting into Kendall with frantic, driving strokes. Each time I slammed home, her pussy gripped me like a vise. Felicia arched her back as she tweaked her own nipples.

I knew I was close to coming, but I wanted to make sure Kendall got off before I did, so I buried myself as deep as I could and stopped thrusting. Then I reached around and began playing with her clit. The engorged little bead slid under my fingers as I moved them in circles.

Kendall moaned once and then grew quiet. Her pussy quivered, and I could tell that she was getting close. I started thrusting again, trying to time our orgasms.

She came first, but I was close behind. As she went silent and held her breath, I battered through her clenching inner muscles. I thought my dick was going to bend in half, but I forced my way into her each time. Finally, I slammed into her and gripped her hips in an orgasmic haze.

My dick seemed to swell to twice its normal size, and Kendall shuddered as spurt after spurt bathed her inner walls. Her orgasm subsided moments after mine did, and I collapsed against her, both of us panting.

When I finally came to my senses, Felicia's eyes were closed and she was frantically rubbing her own pussy. Kendall's head rested on the blonde's thigh, but she was clearly out of it. A moment later, Felicia arched her back and her feet shot straight out, jostling Kendall.

I wrapped a protective arm around Kendall's chest and pulled her with me as I sat back on my haunches, my cock still buried in her pussy.

A moment later, Felicia relaxed her back, but her legs began to rise. I tried not to chuckle at the sight of her stocking-clad toes pointing at the ceiling. Still breathing heavily, Kendall and I had a front-row seat while the blonde masturbated herself.

Felicia's fingers were a blur on her pussy, vibrating from side to side as she worked herself into a frenzy. Finally, she cried out sharply and then collapsed against the couch, her legs slowly falling from vertical.

"Oh my God," she gasped over and over.

"Like a fantasy come true?" I asked Kendall, whispering in her ear.

Instead of answering, she turned her head and kissed me fiercely. After several long, delicious moments, she pulled back and looked at me, her eyes sparkling with carnal intensity. "I love you *so* much," she breathed.

"I love you too," I said, grinning a little whimsically.

She didn't even frown at my gentle teasing. She simply kissed me again, just as aggressively as before.

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The next several hours were a blur. We moved to Felicia's bedroom, where the girls kept right on drinking wine, and occasionally snorting a bump of coke. I had a couple of glasses of wine, but I never touched the coke. Instead, sex was my drug.

Since the cocaine made both girls horny, I actually had trouble keeping up with them. Fortunately, Felicia seemed to like girls as much as guys. Kendall, who was normally reserved, was as wild as the blonde. Whenever I was forced to take a break to recover, the two girls licked, sucked, and caressed each other with abandon.

About midnight, Felicia reached for the plate of cocaine. The pile had dwindled, but there was plenty left. My emotions under control, I watched as she cut two small lines (she had already figured out that asking me if I wanted some got the same answer every time). I tried not to let Kendall see how much it bothered me, but she was too perceptive. So when Felicia held out the plate, Kendall shook her head.

"No, thanks," she said. "I've probably had enough."

Felicia merely shrugged and set the plate aside, the second line untouched. Then she emptied the current bottle of wine, dividing the remainder between her glass and Kendall's. Another empty bottle already decorated the nightstand.

At that point, we decided to take a bathroom break. When we were done, we sat in the middle

of the rumpled bed. The girls sipped their wine and talked about clothes.

"Hey," the blonde said, all of a sudden. "I promised to model my lingerie for you, didn't I?"

I glanced at Kendall to gauge her reaction.

She gave me a "go ahead" nod.

"Yeah," I said to Felicia, "you said something about 'blowing my mind.'"

"Wait right here," she said, as if we might actually go anywhere. Then she scampered into her spacious walk-in closet.

She had a lot of regular lingerie—bras, panties, babydoll nighties, and more. The outfits were all sexy, but they were ordinary. When I teased her about her "mundane" lingerie, she took up the challenge and went back to her closet.

When she returned, she wore a pair of crotchless panties and a bra that left her areolas bare. She tweaked her nipples to erection as she did a couple of model turns. Then she grinned and returned to the closet.

The next outfit was basically a fishnet bodysuit, which was also crotchless. She bent over in front of us, gazing at us from between her legs as she slid a finger along her damp slit. Then she stood, her fingers still teasing her pussy, and used her free hand to tweak her nipples.

When she returned a third time, she was wearing a leather bustier that lifted her breasts, but didn't cover her nipples. The outfit had a matching pair of leather panties— crotchless, of course—and she completed the look with thigh-high leather boots (with four-inch heels!).

Her next outfit looked like red vinyl. It was skintight, and covered her from neck to toes, but it had several zippers. With a sexy pout, she unzipped the diagonal zippers on the chest, revealing her pink nipples. Then she took her sweet time unzipping the crotch, slowly revealing her pubic hair and swollen labia.

The final "outfit" was simply a pair of long white gloves, which made her look like Marilyn Monroe. I didn't even try to hide my burgeoning erection, which prompted Felicia to breathily sing "Happy Birthday, Mr. President."

Then, with her gloves still on, she started playing with my cock. The silky gloves sent shivers up my spine, which made her grin. While she worked my shaft, Kendall and I kissed, my passion rekindling in a hurry.

When Felicia began sucking me, Kendall joined in, and the two of them ended up giving me a double blowjob. I wanted to fuck them, so Kendall straddled my hips while Felicia did the same over my face. I nuzzled her pussy, licking and sucking her inner lips as her soft pubic hair tickled my cheeks. At the same time, Kendall began rocking her hips, my cock sliding in and out of her tight pussy.

Over the next hour, we changed positions several times, thrusting, sucking, groping, and fingering. I took a couple of short breaks and simply watched the girls tease each other as I stroked my erection idly. Felicia didn't come, but Kendall did, going silently rigid as her orgasm gripped her.

When I was finally ready to come, I nudged Kendall to her back and buried my cock in her depths. Then I lifted her legs over my shoulders and began fucking her hard and fast. After barely a minute, I plunged into her and held still, my muscles taut. With a groan, I erupted, my spurts filling her with hot semen.

Almost immediately, her eyelids drooped. I guess the cocaine was wearing off, and she was

finally succumbing to the effects of the wine (by my count, she'd had six glasses since dinner, and at least four at the restaurant). As I sat back on my haunches, she closed her eyes and relaxed. Fortunately, Felicia seemed to be slowing down as well.

When Kendall rolled to her side, I spooned beside her. Then Felicia curled up behind me, her hand on my hip. After several relaxing minutes, Kendall began snoring softly. I kissed her shoulder and then covered her with the sheet.

Felicia was still awake, so I carefully turned toward her.

"Do you have anything to drink?" I asked her softly. "That's not alcoholic, I mean."

"Sure," she said, rolling off the bed. "I've got Tab, juice, milk, and water, of course."

"Juice or milk is fine," I said. Then I followed her to the kitchen. In the light from the refrigerator, I admired her body. Even though I was close to exhausted, she was beautiful enough that I felt my loins stir. I suppressed the urge, but grinned to myself and admitted that it was there in the first place.

"All I've got is tomato juice," she said, returning my thoughts to my parched throat.

"Milk's fine."

She poured me a glass.

"Don't you want any?" I asked.

She shook her head. "I stick to wine when I'm riding the white pony," she said. "It keeps me from going totally wild," she added. Then she looked at me skeptically. "You've never really done coke before, have you?"

I thought about lying, but then decided not to, so I shook my head.

"I didn't think so. The look in your eyes when I offered you that first line…," she mused, chuckling softly.

"Um… yeah. You kinda took me by surprise."

"It really *does* make sex a lot better," she said. "But you're plenty good without it."

"Thanks," I said, blushing.

"So what's the deal with you and Kendall?" she asked, changing the subject. Then she poured herself a glass of wine from an open bottle and gestured toward the couch. With that, we walked into the living room and sat down.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"I mean… you really love her, don't you?"

I nodded.

"Yeah, I saw how you held her as she went to sleep. God, I wish I had a guy like you."

"What about your boyfriend?"

"Naldo?" she snorted. "I'm just his mistress. And I'm not the only one, either. I know it, but"—she shrugged—"what can I do about it?"

"Naldo?" I asked, a little confused.

"Reynaldo de San Martín," she elaborated, "my boyfriend. He owns a gazillion acres of cattle ranches in Argentina. But that's not all… he's a real bigwig down there. He's a General—in the Army, I think—although he runs a bunch of TV stations. I don't know why they need a General to run a TV station, but that's what he says he does. He's also some kind of government minister or something. He's got diplomatic immunity and everything."

My jaw dropped.

"The police stopped his limo once. I was with him," she added, nodding at my incredulous look. "But they backed off real quick when he showed 'em his passport. He's an important man. He spends a lot of time in Washington, although he doesn't tell me much about that. I'm just his mistress in *Atlanta*," she finished on a sour note. "God, sometimes I hate him."

"Why don't you break up with him?" I asked.

She used her half-empty wineglass to gesture at the apartment around us. "Do you think I could afford a place like this on what I get paid? Ha!"

"So that's why you're still with him?" I asked. "Money?"

"I guess," she said. "But you don't understand… *no one* leaves Naldo. He leaves *them*. Besides, I don't know what else to do. And… I guess I love him, even though I know he doesn't love me. Does that make me crazy?"

"That makes you like a lot of other people," I said gently.

She snorted contemptuously. "He was so smooth when I first met him, so… *big city*. I fell for him the first time I saw him."

"When was that?" I asked.

"A couple of years ago, in Oklahoma."

"Where in Oklahoma?"

"The middle of nowhere," she said. Then, "Perry."

"Is that where you're from?"

"Good God, no. I was living there with a ranch hand named Ronny," she said. "He had big plans," she added, her voice dripping scorn. "He was gonna be a rodeo star. But he turned out like every other cowboy I grew up with."

"What happened? He didn't beat you or anything, did he?"

"Nothing like that; Ronny wasn't such a bad guy," she said, her voice softening. "He just wasn't what I was looking for. But he *was* my ticket out of Nebraska. I thought he'd get me further, though," she added with a dark laugh. "I just can't believe I wasted three *years* with him, thinkin' he'd eventually make it big."

"So you're from Nebraska?" I asked, changing the subject to see if I could lift her spirits.

"Stapleton," she said, nodding. "It's *another* little town in the middle of nowhere."

"Ah."

"I left home when I was nineteen. I met Ronny at a rodeo in North Platte, and I was outta there. Ronny never was a great rodeo cowboy, though. He was better at seducing corn-fed virgins. So when he got a job offer at a big ranch in Perry, he snapped it up. Anyway, that's where I met Naldo."

"How in God's name did you meet Naldo"—who sounded like a fairly sophisticated guy—"in Perry, Oklahoma?" I asked.

"He was there buying a herd of Texas Longhorns. I met him at an auction. He bought a bull from the ranch where Ronny worked. Ronny and I were fighting at the time… again. Naldo was interested in more than the bull, and I was interested in gettin' the *hell* outta Perry. The rest," she finished with a shrug, "is history."

"Have you been back to Nebraska since?"

She shook her head. "I called my folks, about a year ago, to let 'em know I was okay and all."

"Do you miss them?"

"Not really. I miss my little brothers, but I sure as hell don't miss the ranch, or waking up before dawn, or all the sweat and *dirt*."

"Ranch?" I wondered aloud. "I thought they grow corn in Nebraska."

"Oh, there's lots of corn. *Lots*. But my family had a cattle ranch. Black Angus," she said.

I looked a question at her.

"Beef cattle," she explained. "Big, smelly, and dumb. But I was raised around 'em, so I can actually rope and ride and all. My pa didn't want me working the herd, though, so I got to do 'women's work.' I guess he figured I'd marry some dusty redneck rancher. Ha! Not hardly. So when I had my chance to get out, I *took* it."

"And ended up in Atlanta," I said, smiling.

She nodded and took another sip of wine.

"What kind of business does your boyfriend have here?" I asked.

"I told you that he runs a bunch of TV stations, right? Well, he does a lot of business with Ted Turner. You know who he is, right?"

I nodded. Not only did I know who Ted Turner was—who didn't?—Gina's father actually *worked* for him.

"Anyway, Naldo wanted me to move to Atlanta, so I did. I think he was tired of his last mistress here. That'll happen to me sooner or later," she said pessimistically.

"Is that why you…?" I asked, letting the question die on my lips. I had started to ask, "Is that why you invited us to your apartment?" but decided against it. She caught the gist anyway.

"I normally don't do anything like this," she said, gesturing with her wine glass. "I like to flirt, but most guys are too shy to actually *do* anything. And… I mean, I work in a *women's* clothing store. Besides, I know I'm just Naldo's mistress, but I still love him, so I'm faithful. Usually."

"Then why us?" I asked. "Why now?"

She snorted. "I wanted to see if you were as good as you thought you were," she said. "Besides, you're smooth, like Naldo. And, well… I didn't think you'd have the balls to actually go *through* with it. I mean, you're… what? Twenty-one? Twenty- two?"

"Actually, I'm eighteen," I said, proud that she'd thought I was older.

"You're *kidding* me."

I shook my head.

"God, you're such a kid. Leave it to me to pick up a *teenager*," she said. Then, "Hold on… if you're eighteen *now*, you must've been, what, seventeen when I modeled those stockings?!"

"Believe it or not, I was still sixteen."

"Jesus, you *are* smooth. I thought you were only a couple of years younger than me."

"Why?" I asked. "How old are you?"

"It's not polite to ask a lady her age," she chided with a feigned pout.

"Sorry."

"I'm twenty-six," she said after a moment. "But I still can't believe you're a *teenager*," she added. Then, "Wait a minute… how old is Kendall?"

"Nineteen," I said.

"Jesus. I though she was older too. That's… crazy."

"Why? I mean, it's not like we're kids or anything. And it didn't seem to bother you a little while ago," I said, nodding toward the bedroom.

"No," she admitted, her cheeks coloring. "I guess… I guess I just thought you were older."

"Does it make a difference?"

She shrugged. "Maybe I thought you could rescue me or something."

"Huh?"

"I guess I thought you might be boyfriend material. You know? I thought you could rescue me from being Naldo's mistress."

"I'm not a knight in shining armor," I said softly. For some reason, she had turned melancholy, and a little bitter. I didn't understand *why*, but I still felt sorry for her.

"I know. But I thought— Oh, fuck it, I dunno what I thought." With that, she drained her wine and cast about for another bottle. When she spotted one on the end table, she emptied it into her glass.

"What's the matter?" I asked.

"Nothing. Nothing *you* can fix, at least. Nothing anybody can fix, evidently," she said, taking another drink.

"Whoa there," I said, prying the wineglass from her fingers. "Slow down. Maybe if you tell me what's the matter, I can help."

"I doubt it," she said. Then she wiped away a tear and crossed her arms. After a long, awkward moment, she looked at me, her eyes glistening with moisture. "You never came inside me," she said.

I blinked at the non sequitur.

"The first time, you came inside Kendall, when we were still out here. Then, later, you pulled out of *me* and came on her face. Remember?"

I nodded.

"And just little while ago, you came inside her again."

"So?" I asked, temporizing.

"I told you I was on the pill. So how come you didn't come inside me?"

"I dunno… um… I mean… um…," I stammered lamely. In reality, I'd been a little worried that she might *not* be on the pill, but I didn't want to tell her that. Consequently, I'd come inside Kendall whenever I reached the point of no return. I tried not to appear deliberate about it, but all of a sudden, I felt like a cad.

Before I could say anything in my own defense, Felicia got up and stalked toward the back of the apartment. I stood and started after her, but she stopped me with an impatient gesture. A moment later, she returned with a flat blue disk, which she tossed at me.

It hit my chest, and I caught it before it fell to the floor.

"See?" she said defiantly.

I looked at the plastic disk and immediately recognized birth control pills. Irrationally, my eyes slid over the series of differently colored pills and I quickly counted the remaining white pills; her period started in eleven days.

"I wasn't lying to you, so why didn't you come inside me?" she asked plaintively.

"I guess I didn't think about it," I said, as earnestly as I could. That wasn't true, of course, but the truth would only hurt her worse.

"Then what?" she asked, a tear rolling down her cheek. "Don't you trust me?"

"I trust you," I said, I hoped convincingly.

"Then… what?"

When I reached out to her, she let me pull her close. Then she buried her face in my chest. I knew why she was so upset, of course, and I wasn't heartless; I couldn't let her cry without at least trying to comfort her. I held her for several minutes as she quietly wept. Finally, she looked up at me. Then she wiped her cheeks and sniffled.

"Make love to me," she asked softly. "Make love to me and come inside me. I wanna feel loved."

I was speechless.

"Please," she begged.

After a long moment, I nodded.

She tilted her head back for a kiss and I lowered my lips to hers. She tasted of wine, and cocaine, and the faint tang of tears, but I didn't care. I didn't feel any love for her, but I *did* feel sorry for her, and she was obviously distraught. If making love to her would make her feel better, then I'd do it. At that point, I almost laughed at my own martyred attitude. Fortunately, I suppressed the reaction before I hurt her feelings.

When we broke the kiss, she sank to the floor and pulled me with her. Once on her back, she spread her legs to accommodate my hips. We kissed for several long minutes, my body pressed against hers. Her hands roamed over my back and shoulders, her erect nipples pressing against my chest.

Finally, she reached between us. I was still soft, but she began massaging my dick with an almost urgent intensity. Soon enough, my erection filled her hands, and she set the tip at her opening. Her pussy was a little dry, but my cock was already leaking pre-come. She rubbed my glans over her folds and managed to work up enough lubrication so I could enter her.

"Make love to me," she said again, her voice a hoarse whisper. Then she gripped my ass and pulled me into her. When my hips met her pelvis, she closed her eyes and sighed. Then she hooked her arms under mine, her fingers splayed over my shoulders. "Oh, God, yesssssss," she groaned.

She sniffled as I pumped into her, but then her sad look faded, replaced by an expression of bliss as the sensations from her pussy overcame her other emotions.

I wasn't all that concerned about whether or not I'd climax, since I knew I'd enjoy myself just watching her reactions. And while I may not have felt any genuine love for her, I did *like* her. Besides, my body knew a good thing when I saw it (or slid into it).

As I thrust into her, Felicia merely gazed into my eyes, as if trying to hold on to some ideal that I was suddenly part of. When I tried to vary my pace and angle, she shook her head.

"Don't you want to get off?" I finally asked, panting softly.

"I don't care," she said. "I just like watching you fuck me. You're so… intense."

I nodded.

"And… you actually *care* if I get off or not."

"Of course," I said between thrusts.

"That's so sweet," she said, her face softening. Then she smiled, albeit a little longingly. Finally, she began tweaking my nipples.

My sense of dignity rebelled against the pleasure shooting outward from her fingertips. *Girls* were supposed to have sensitive nipples, not guys, I thought. Regardless, I suppressed my

embarrassment and tried to enjoy the sensations.

Felicia also clenched her pussy as I thrust into her. At first, I thought she was having an orgasm, but when I looked at her, she simply smiled and did it again. I wasn't about to complain, though, so I kept right on pumping into her.

After about ten minutes, I felt my orgasm approaching. I could prolong things, if I wanted to, but it had already been a long night, and I was a little worn out. A beautiful girl beneath me was one thing, but four or five hours of non-stop sex were almost more than I could handle. Besides, not only did the cocaine make Felicia horny, it seemed to keep her from getting tired (a "benefit" I was happy to do without).

"Come inside me," she begged, sensing my impending orgasm.

I thrust into her a dozen more times, my balls tight and ready to burst. Finally, I lunged into her, my dick sliding home. Then I closed my eyes as pleasure blossomed within my loins, spreading outward like a warm, wonderful supernova. With my back still arched, I clenched my teeth and rode the wave of ecstasy.

When I finally came to my senses, Felicia was gazing at me.

"God," she said softly, "you *are* a good lover. Are you sure you're only eighteen?"

Impudently, I nodded.

"And you're proud of it," she accused.

"Uh-huh."

"Um… will you do something for me?" she asked after a moment, her voice small.

"Sure," I said without thinking.

"Will you hold me, like you held Kendall?"

I ruthlessly quelled my automatic panic and looked a question at her.

"I know I'm not your girlfriend, but I just want *some*body to hold me."

"I guess I can do that," I said at last. Her request worried me a little, but I couldn't really say no. She seemed to need something that I couldn't give her, but if I could make her feel better—even for a little while—I was willing to try. "Just a sec," I said. Then, still joined, I rolled us over. Felicia came to rest on top of me, her legs alongside mine. When she laid her head on my chest, she kissed my nipple and then took a deep, jagged breath.

"Thank you," she breathed, her voice thick with emotion. Then she squeezed me and her tears started in earnest.

I held her for a long time as sobs wracked her body.

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Sometime later, I looked at my watch. It took me a moment to focus on the Breitling's luminous dial. Finally, I did; it was after three in the morning.

"Do you want to spend the night?" Felicia asked from beside me.

After she had cried herself out, I must've dozed off. I had my arm around her, and we were still on the living room floor.

"Kendall's still asleep," she added. Then she propped herself on one elbow so she could meet my eyes. She seemed unnaturally chipper for three o'clock in the morning. "You two are more than welcome to stay," she added.

I wanted to wake up in my own bed in the morning, but I wasn't sure if I should drive home or not. I'd had a lot of wine, and I was dead tired.

"I can sleep on the couch," she said, nervous at my hesitation.

"No, you sleep in your bed," I said.

"But I thought you and Kendall…," she said, her voice trailing off in uncertainty. "I mean, she's still asleep, and…"

"Your bed's big enough for all three of us," I said. "If you don't mind sharing."

"Mind? Ha! No, I don't mind. I hate sleeping alone. Although…"

"Although?"

"I'm probably not gonna be able to go to sleep for a while. I'm still full of energy," she said. Then she looked away. "I was getting tired, so I bumped up."

"Bumped up?" I asked, my thoughts a little sleep-muddled.

"You know, another bump," she said, pantomiming a snort of cocaine.

"Oh, yeah. Sorry."

"It's okay," she said. Then, "How can you know so much about sex, but so little about drugs?" she asked.

"I guess I spent all my time fucking instead of doing drugs," I said dryly.

She laughed.

"I dunno, really," I elaborated with a shrug. "I stayed away from the druggies when I was in high school. And, I mean, I've never even *known* anyone who did cocaine."

"Never?"

"Never," I said. "Well, never that *I've* known about, at least."

"Coke's easy to hide," Felicia said. "That's one of the reasons I like it. I mean, it's not like pot, where you reek and it's obvious that you're stoned. No one can tell when I'm doing coke. Besides, it gives me more energy. And it makes me horny," she added. Then she trailed the backs of her fingers down my abdomen, toward my flaccid manhood. "*Really* horny."

"No kidding," I said.

"So… do you wanna fuck again?"

"I'm kinda tired," I said, hoping to head her off without actually saying no.

"Then I'll do all the work," she suggested, far too reasonably. "All you have to do is get it up," she added. With that, she grasped my shaft and started stroking me gently. "*Please*."

Her hand felt really good, and her body was a wet dream come true, so… "Lemme go check on Kendall first," I said after a moment.

"Ok. And I'd better get some lube."

I looked a question at her.

"Coke gets me worked up, but for some reason, it also makes me dry. I'm horny as hell, and I wanna jump your bones, but I'm dry as a desert. So, you go check on Kendall, and I'll get some lube."

I nodded, and we both stood. She headed for the bathroom, while I slid into bed behind Kendall, who was still snoring softly. She hadn't even sprawled out, and seemed dead to the world. I made sure she was comfortable and then kissed her shoulder. A moment later, I rejoined Felicia, who was waiting in the hallway.

Back in the living room, I sat on the couch. Felicia knelt between my legs gazed at my semi-hard cock. Then she began sucking it, her lips forming an "O" as she slowly bobbed up and down.

When I got hard enough, she squirted something into her hand from a small bottle. Then she rubbed her hands together to warm the gel. Finally, she began stroking me, spreading the slippery substance over my dick. Her breasts jiggled slightly as she pumped my hard-on, and I simply enjoyed the view.

After a minute or two, she squirted more lube in her hand and then rubbed her pussy. As she did, she gave me a smoldering look.

"God, you've got a great body," she said. "And a nice, big dick."

I felt my cheeks heating.

"Now," she said, straddling my hips, "you just sit there and relax."

After she sank onto my erection, she put her hands on my shoulders to steady herself. I used the opportunity to capture one of her flawless nipples and bite it gently. She gasped and then squeezed my cock in reward.

"Okay," I said, relinquishing the nipple, "I gotta know how you do that."

"What, this?" she asked, feigning innocence as she squeezed me again.

"*That*," I groaned, my head growing light as her pussy gripped me again.

She began rhythmically massaging my cock with her inner muscles.

"Seriously," I said, gasping in ecstasy, "I… gotta… know… how…"

Finally, she stopped.

When I opened my eyes, she was breathing a little harder than before. "Okay," I asked again, "how do you do that?"

"It just takes practice," she said.

"Can you teach Kendall?" I asked. Kendall's pussy was *already* tight, and if she learned to do what Felicia did…

"Probably," the blonde said, intruding upon my fantasy. "But it'll help if she has some Ben Wa balls."

I'd heard of Ben Wa balls, of course, but I didn't really know much about them. Some sort of balls, I figured, but other than "weird sex toy," I had no idea what they were for.

"One of my girlfriends told me about them," she continued.

"What do you do with them?"

"Well, most people think they make you get off or something, but that's bullshit."

"Then what *are* they for?" I asked. Even though she was still impaled on my erection, I was intensely interested in the balls and how to use them.

"I do pussy exercises with them."

I felt my eyebrows lift, almost involuntarily.

She nodded. "You know what they are, right? Little gold balls, about the size of a marble?" When I nodded, she continued. "You shove them in your pussy, and they're supposed to roll around and get you off. But I've never *once* gotten off with them. Instead, I do these exercises. I don't remember what they're called—K something… Kay… Keg… I dunno—but they're these exercises that make your pussy tighter."

I looked at her, a little skeptical.

To prove her point, she squeezed my dick.

Pleasure shot through my loins. "Okay," I gasped, by way of surrender.

"Anyway," she continued, grinning, "I do these exercises with 'em. They're kinda heavy, so I

have to squeeze to keep 'em inside."

"What're the exercises like?" I asked.

"You know how when you go to the bathroom…?" she began.

I frowned at the apparent non sequitur.

"Well, it's like if you have to stop peeing."

Suddenly, I Got It. I did the same thing when I clenched my buttocks and made my dick jump. I could also stop the flow of urine, although I'd never thought about what would happen if a *woman* did the same thing.

"The exercises are like that," she said at my look of recognition. "I squeeze and hold for ten seconds. I just pretend that the balls are starting to slip out, and I need to hold them inside. I do that about ten times in a row, a couple of times a day."

"Even at work?" I asked.

"Yeah, sometimes I use the balls at work, but usually not. I can do the exercises without them, though. But it's just easier to do 'em *with* the balls."

"That's it?" I asked. "You just squeeze your muscles like you're going to stop peeing?"

"That's it," she said, smiling.

"That's *all* you have to do?"

"Well, you've gotta do it over and over, for *months*. I mean, look at your muscles," she said, caressing my chest. "Did you get these overnight?"

I shook my head.

"It's the same with these muscles," she added, squeezing my dick for effect. "It's pretty cool, isn't it?" she asked. When I nodded, she grinned. "You'll have to get a set of Ben Wa balls for Kendall."

"No kidding."

"They'll help keep her pussy tight. God knows they worked wonders with mine."

I nodded.

"And *anything* that keeps me from getting older is a good thing."

"Why?" I asked without thinking.

"Unlike you, I'm *not* still a teenager."

"So? You've got a body like one," I replied.

Her eyes softened.

"Seriously," I said, sensing her desire to hear more, "you've got a great body."

"You really think so?"

I bit back the obvious comment about my body's reaction to hers—after all, she *was* impaled upon my erection. Instead, I got the impression that she wanted her ego stroked, so I obliged her. "You've got a fan-fucking-*tastic* body," I said. "I mean, you've got a trim stomach, great legs, and an awesome ass. But your tits…," I said, lingering as she hung on every word. "Your tits are…"

"Are…?"

I grinned. "They're…"

"They're *what?!*"

"They're perfect," I said at last.

"Now you're lying to me," she said, affecting disbelief.

"No, I'm serious," I said, the voice of sincerity. "Trust me, I've seen a *lot* of breasts in my life, and yours are just about perfect." The truth was that I'd never seen a breast that I *didn't* like, but some were prettier than others. Felicia's certainly qualified as some of the best. "Really," I added for emphasis, "a sixteen-year-old would be happy to have breasts like yours. Like I said, they're just about perfect."

Instead of saying anything, she kissed me, hard. As our lips crushed together, her tongue invaded my mouth. Then she whimpered in arousal and ground her hips against me, forcing the base of my cock against her clit.

I ran my hands up her flanks and then cupped the breasts in question, testing their heft as I tweaked her nipples with my thumbs.

For the next ten minutes, she fucked me with abandon. I'm sure my comments about her body must've driven her to a new level of excitement (as intended, thank you very much). When she came, she arched her back and her pussy clamped around my cock, threatening to squeeze it in half.

I held on for dear life as she bucked in the throes of her orgasm. When it subsided, she collapsed against me, panting. I simply held her, a sheen of sweat covering both of us.

"Oh, God," she gasped. "That was… that was… that was unbelievable. Fucking unbelievable."

I nodded smugly.

For several minutes, we both panted, enjoying the aftershocks from her orgasm. Then she pulled back and brushed her hair from her face, her eyes soft and pleading. "I want to feel you come inside me again," she said. "Fill me with come."

Without answering, I lowered us to the floor and hooked my arms behind her knees. Her perfect breasts, flattened against her chest, bounced hypnotically as I pounded into her. After only a few minutes, I was ready to explode. When the pressure built to the bursting point, I buried myself as deep as I could. A moment later, I erupted. I only managed a couple of good spurts, but the sensations lasted for a long, long time.

"God, yes," Felicia hissed. "I love that feeling."

When my orgasm subsided, I released her legs and then collapsed against her, my nostrils flaring as I sucked in oxygen.

"Will you hold me again," she asked, "like I was your girlfriend?"

I hesitated.

"Just one more time. *Please*."

"Okay," I said at last, softly.

✧ ✧ ✧

I woke up and it took me a moment to figure out where I was. I began to panic when I didn't recognize my surroundings. Kendall was with me, although I felt someone behind me as well. I started to move, but then felt a hand on my shoulder.

"Are you awake?"

What? Who? Where am I? Oh, yeah, I recalled, *Felicia's apartment, in her bed.*

"Paul?" she asked softly.

"Mmm hmm?"

When Kendall rolled away from me—her heel narrowly missing my shin in the process—I

turned to face Felicia. Even in the dim light from the window, I could tell that she looked like hell. “What time izzit?” I asked.

“A little after five,” she said, her nose obviously stopped up

I nodded and let my eyes droop shut. Then I felt her fingers on my face, caressing me. I smiled.

“Thanks for… you know… earlier,” she whispered.

“You’re welcome.”

“I know you were just doing it because I asked you, but still… I guess it feels good to know that someone cares whether I’m alive or not.”

“I care,” I said, stroking her bare hip.

“I know, but you’ve already got a girlfriend. Besides, you don’t want *me*. I’m too messed up.”

“You’re not any more messed up than I am,” I said earnestly, coming more alert as I realized how miserable she sounded. “Trust me, my life isn’t a bed of roses either.”

She shrugged silently.

“We’ve all got problems,” I said.

“I know. It’s just that mine seem bigger’n most sometimes.”

“Hey,” I said, “if I told you about my life, you’d be happy to have your problems.”

She caressed my face again. Then she sniffled—or *tried* to, since her nose was too stuffed up. “Coke nose,” she said ruefully. Then she smiled, but her eyes were melancholy. “Thanks for trying to cheer me up, though.”

I shrugged. I was dead tired, but I grinned as affably as I could.

“You’d better get back to sleep,” she said. When I nodded, she stroked my cheek again, her touch surprisingly gentle. Then I felt her face close to mine, and she kissed me softly.

Since my back was to Kendall, who was snoring softly again, I turned Felicia to face away from me. Then I pulled her close and wrapped my arms around her.

“Thank you,” she whispered, her voice full of emotion.

Instead of answering, I simply squeezed her gently and nestled my dick against the warmth of her ass. Then my eyes drooped shut, and in a moment, I went back to sleep.

✧ ✧ ✧

Sometime after dawn, I awoke again. All the wine from the night before must have woken me. I climbed from between Kendall and Felicia and stumbled toward the bathroom. I had my usual morning hard-on, but it subsided enough to let me urinate. When I returned from the bathroom, Felicia was sitting up, her platinum blonde hair disheveled.

“Why aren’t you asleep?” I mumbled.

“I usually can’t sleep after a night of partying,” she said. Then she snuffled. “And I *definitely* can’t breathe after a night like last night.”

I nodded. Then I looked at my watch: it was almost seven thirty.

“Do you need to leave?” she asked softly.

After a moment, I nodded. I didn’t want to wake Kendall, but I wanted to get some sleep—in my *own* bed.

“Do you want me to fix you breakfast before you go?” she asked.

I shook my head. I wasn’t really hungry, but I *was* thirsty. “Maybe I’ll just get a glass of milk or something,” I said.

She nodded and then slid out of bed, careful not to disturb Kendall. She didn't bother to put on her robe, so I admired her body as I followed her to the kitchen. Once there, she fixed me a glass of milk. In the morning light filtering through the living room curtains, she looked exhausted. She couldn't have slept much—every time I woke up, she was awake as well—and the night of cocaine and wine was finally catching up to her.

I wondered why she was still awake at all. Then I spotted the plate of cocaine on the kitchen counter; the pile was smaller than when I'd seen it last.

"You never did tell me exactly what your fantasy was," she said softly, diverting my attention from the cocaine.

"It was actually kind of simple," I said. Then I explained about Kendall's stranger fantasy, although I remembered to make it sound as if it were *my* fantasy.

"That sounds pretty kinky," Felicia said.

I shrugged. "Kendall's— I mean, I'm full of fantasies like that."

"And Kendall lets you do them?"

I nodded, since it seemed like the simplest answer.

"Wow," Felicia said, "she seems really cool."

"She is."

"You're pretty cool too."

"Thanks," I said, a little embarrassed. "You're not so bad yourself."

She shrugged. Then she looked at me, her expression pensive. "Tell me something," she finally asked. "Was this a… a one-time thing? Or…"

"Or…?"

"Or… well… I mean, I don't even know your last name."

"Hughes," I said without hesitation.

"Felicia Kirby," she said.

I held out my hand. "Nice to meet you, Felicia Kirby," I said.

"Nice to meet you, Paul Hughes," she replied, her hand in mine. Then, after a tentative moment, she lowered her eyes. "So, will I ever see you again?"

The $64,000 question, I thought. Then I dithered over how to answer.

"It's okay," she said, reading my hesitation for what it was. "I understand."

"Of course you'll see me again," I said, suddenly guilt-stricken.

She looked up, hopeful.

"Here," I said, "lemme give you my phone number." *At school*, I silently added.

"Area code 615?" she asked, looking at the number I'd written.

"I go to school at the University of Tennessee," I said. "In Knoxville."

Her face fell.

"Here's the number at my parents' house in Atlanta, too," I added impulsively. Then I silently cursed myself. Unless I wanted to hurt her feelings, though, I needed to follow through. So I wrote my parents' phone number below my number at school.

"I guess I forgot," she said.

"Forgot what?"

"You're only eighteen."

I nodded.

"And… of *course* you're in college. But why couldn't you go to someplace like Georgia Tech?" she asked, her tone peevish and facetious at the same time.

I laughed nervously.

"That's okay," she said. "I understand. I mean, I guess I expected… oh, fuck it, I dunno *what* I expected. It was fun while it lasted, though," she finished halfheartedly. Then she snuffled. "Damned coke nose," she complained with a wan smile.

Instead of answering, I pulled her close. Since she hadn't donned a robe, her breasts flattened against my chest. My morning erection had never fully subsided, and the feeling of her body against mine stirred something within me.

She felt my burgeoning erection press against her abdomen and looked up, her red-rimmed eyes wide with desire. In answer to her unspoken question, I kissed her. Since she couldn't breathe through her nose, the kiss was short, but passionate.

"Where's the lube?" I asked her, remembering that she was probably dry.

The little bottle was in the living room, where we'd left it. She went to fetch it, but I followed her. When she bent down to retrieve it, I gently pushed her to her knees and then knelt behind her.

With my erection bumping her ass, I reached around her body and cupped her breasts. She arched her back and I kissed her shoulder, working my way toward her alabaster neck as I kneaded her perfect breasts. She moaned and cupped her hands over mine, the bottle of lube falling back to the carpet.

Our lips met a moment later, but she still couldn't breathe, so our kisses were quick. After several hungry, frantic minutes, she reached down and picked up the little bottle of lube. I tugged it from her fingers and opened it by feel.

I squirted a dollop of the gel into my palm. Then I simply dropped the bottle and cupped her sex. She gasped when the cool gel contacted her labia, but quickly moaned as I rubbed the slippery stuff over her slit. When she was lubricated enough, I plunged two fingers into her opening and she whimpered.

Then I used my free hand to tug her nipples, alternating between the two and making her squirm. At the same time, I planted kisses along her neck, driving her higher still.

With that, I pushed her onto her hands and knees. Then I gripped my manhood with my gel-coated palm and rested my other hand on the half-moon of her upturned ass. I stroked myself once, then twice, using the remainder of the lube to coat my cock. At last, I set it at her opening and put both hands on her hips.

With one steady thrust, I buried myself in her steamy pussy. She groaned as my girth spread her open, her head hanging as she trembled in ecstasy. Then I began thrusting, and she cried out each time my hips slammed into her ass.

The lube and my own pre-come made her slippery, and I easily plowed into her. Then I reached around and felt for her clit; the hardened little bead slid underneath my fingers, causing her to gasp. I continued moving my hips as I played with her clit, sliding it between my lubricated fingers.

Her cries grew frantic as her orgasm approached, and I could feel the first flutters as her internal muscles contracted around my battering cock.

"Oh, God," she grunted. "Fuck me hard. Give me all eight inches. Fuck me, fuck me hard!"

Eight inches or not, I gave her all she was going to get, my manhood sliding deep inside her with each thrust.

She didn't complain. Instead, she kept urging me on, urging me to fuck her harder.

"Play with your clit," I said. When she dutifully obliged, I put both hands on her hips and began slamming into her full force.

She lunged forward, driven by the power of my thrusts. When she fell forward, her chest and face pressing against the carpeted floor, I didn't even slow down. I simply adjusted my angle and continued fucking her. Her ass was raised enough that I had an easy time, although my knees were beginning to heat from carpet-burn.

At that point, I supported myself with hands to either side of her shoulders and then looked down at my pistoning shaft. Her ass rippled each time my hips slammed into her, and I knew I was close. I didn't know if she was still playing with her clit or not, but I had reached the point where I didn't care. I'd take care of her *after* I came, if I needed to.

With a final grunt, I slammed into her, burying my cock as deep as I could. Then I arched my back, trying to shove myself deeper still. White light blossomed in my brain as the first surge of come filled her pussy. She groaned, her inner walls fluttering around my pulsing shaft. The second spurt overloaded my senses, and I barely remember anything other than the rumbling ecstasy of emptying my balls into her.

When I came to my senses, I was panting from the exertion. I swallowed hard, trying to restore some moisture to my parched mouth. Then I looked down. Felicia was rigid as she sprawled beneath me, her arms out to brace herself. Her legs were spread as well, driven apart by my hips and my thrusting. Her pussy quivered around my erection, but I couldn't tell if she'd come or not.

"Do you want me to—" I started to ask.

"Don't… move," she said firmly, still panting. Then she slowly went limp.

"Did you come?"

"God, *yes*."

"I was just making sure," I gasped. "I was… a little distracted."

"Oh, God, don't move," she said again. "I love this feeling."

✧ ✧ ✧

"I don't know if you want someone on the side or not," Felicia said, "but call me if you do… no strings attached. Just fun, okay?"

She was sitting up, one knee propped under her chin. Her lightly furred pussy gaped open, and I could see a hint of her inflamed inner tissues. For that matter, my red and shiny cock rested on the carpeting between my own legs as I sat cross-legged.

Both of us had caught our breath, but I think we were still a little light-headed from the force of our orgasms. By then, it was well after eight thirty, and I wondered when Kendall would be stirring.

"I'm serious," Felicia said, drawing my attention back to her comment. "I love Naldo and all, but *God*, I could use a fuck like that more often."

I grinned and nodded. I didn't really want anyone on the side, of course, but I wasn't about to decline the offer, especially to her face.

"My pussy is still tingling," she said, half lost in her own little world.

"What can I say?" I said semi-facetiously. "I'm a morning person."

"*I'll* say." Then, "I can't breathe, my head is starting to hurt from all the wine, and I feel like I've been trampled by a bull, but *God*…"

I merely grinned, albeit smugly.

"I know you've got to go," she said, "but do you mind sticking around for a little while?"

"No problem."

"Thanks," she said, genuinely grateful. Then she crawled toward me. "Kendall is very, *very* lucky," she said, kissing me. "But Kendall is also asleep," she added with a grin.

I rocked backward as she continued crawling forward.

I felt a little guilty for not waking Kendall, but I guess I was piqued at her for doing cocaine and drinking so much wine in the first place.

As Felicia planted kisses on my chest, I wrapped my arms around her and consciously decided not to dwell on Kendall and her wild night.

"This is *exactly* what I needed," Felicia said softly.

✧ ✧ ✧

I heard Kendall use the bathroom about twenty minutes later. Felicia looked at me and smiled, her eyes full of emotion.

"Oh well," she said, "I guess it had to end sooner or later."

I nodded.

Then we got to our feet and headed for the bedroom.

"What time is it?" Kendall asked, emerging from the bathroom. Her nose was still stuffed up, and she was holding her head. Her hair was a snarled mess.

"It's almost nine," I said, glancing at my watch.

Kendall flinched from the muted morning light streaming through the blinds. "Do you have any aspirin?" she asked Felicia.

"Sure," the blonde said, heading for the bathroom.

I fought the urge to step away from Kendall. I hoped I didn't smell *too* much like sex, but then I realized that she probably couldn't smell anyway. Not with her nose as stuffed up as it was.

"Here you go," Felicia said, returning with a cup of water and two tablets.

Kendall swallowed the tablets and gulped down the water. Then she smiled gratefully, wincing in the process.

"My head is *pounding*," she said. "How much did I drink last night?" she asked. Then she winced again.

"A lot," I said.

"I'd offer you breakfast…," Felicia started.

Kendall cringed and immediately shook her head.

"…but I don't think you really want to eat anything," she finished. Then she turned to me. "Do you want me to fix you something?" she asked.

"No thanks. I'm fine."

With a nod, she reached for a bathrobe.

"Unh," Kendall complained. Then she sat on the edge of the bed, her head in her hands.

"Are you ready to head home?" I asked her.

Felicia glanced at me nervously, clearly concerned for Kendall.

"I'm ready to die," Kendall said. "Quietly," she added. "Someplace dark, with no wine." Then, "Unh."

"You poor dear," Felicia said. "Do you want some coffee?"

Kendall shook her head.

"C'mon," I said gently, "let's get you dressed and head home. You can sleep it off there."

Felicia nodded.

Kendall merely groaned in agreement.

✧ ✧ ✧

After I loaded Kendall into the Jeep, I returned to Felicia's apartment for the rest of our things (Kendall's underwear, shoes, purse, coat, etc.)

"Here," Felicia said, handing me a folded piece of paper. She had written her name and phone number on it. "I had fun last night."

"Me too," I said, pocketing the paper. I didn't want to throw it away, but I also didn't want to upset Kendall, so I'd have to make sure she didn't see it.

"I was serious," Felicia added.

"About what?"

"About calling me if you ever want to get together."

"I dunno," I hedged. I didn't want to give her any false hopes. "I mean, I love Kendall and all…"

"I know. I can tell. That's what makes you a nice guy. But I figured you'd say that, so I guess the invitation is open to both of you. I like women too, obviously," she finished with a diffident smile.

I nodded.

"But if you'd ever like to get together, just to hang out, that'd be cool too. Like I said, no strings attached. Okay?"

"Yeah," I said, "I'd like that."

"Thanks," she said, stepping close and tilting her head up for a kiss. Then she put her hand on my chest, running her fingers over my shirt. Finally, she looked up at me, her eyes wistful. "Thanks," she said again, softly.

I nodded.

"I'd better let you go. Call me, okay?"

"I will," I said.

"And maybe I'll come up to Knoxville to see you sometime," she added.

"That'd be cool," I said, although I had to suppress my initial panic. I had *more* than enough women in my life, and even as pretty as Felicia was, I didn't need the added complications.

She tilted her face up for a final kiss, and I obliged her. Then I pulled back. Her fingers lingered on my chest and then she dropped them to her side.

"I'll call you," I said, although I wasn't sure I meant it.

She nodded, taking my words at face value.

What *else* was I supposed to say after a night of cocaine- and wine-fueled sex?

The last glimpse I had of her, she looked small, pale, and sad.

On the drive home, Kendall slept, so I was alone with my thoughts. As usual, I ran through a

million questions, none of them with easy answers.

I didn't like Kendall's cocaine use, that was for sure. And we'd definitely have a talk about it—a *serious* talk. As far as I was concerned, letting her snort cocaine fell squarely under her father's "don't do anything stupid" admonition.

I couldn't stop her if she wanted to sneak around behind my back, but I didn't think she would. Fortunately, Kendall had too much self-discipline to get addicted to something like cocaine.

With that, I shook my head and turned my attention back to the holiday traffic on the Perimeter. My relationship with Kendall had just taken a complex turn, and I didn't know if I liked the direction or not.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Kendall slept most of Saturday. The few times she got up, I forced water on her. Her nose eventually cleared up, but her headache and upset stomach lasted most of the day. Her stuffed-up nose was probably from the cocaine ("coke nose," Felicia had called it), but also I recognized the classic signs of a hangover when I saw them.

While Kendall slept, I puttered around the house. My parents called, concerned that they hadn't been able to reach me the night before. They had even called Elizabeth Coulter, who had driven to our house, only to find it dark and empty.

I told Mom that Kendall and I had gone out to dinner and a late movie. I didn't broach the subject of my "emergency" spending, though. I wanted to save that for when I could talk to her face to face.

I assured her that everything was fine, and promised to call Elizabeth to set her mind at ease as well. Mom said that they were having fun in New York City and then asked if I wanted her to bring anything back. After my spending spree from the previous night, though, I decided to forego anything from New York.

Finally, we said goodbye and hung up.

Since Kendall was still sleeping off her hangover, I decided to work out. I had a lot on my mind, and I was going crazy without anything to do.

My initial anger and frustration over Kendall's cocaine use had cooled, but I was still disturbed by it. As I did crunches, I thought about what I wanted to say to her. I went over imaginary conversations in my head, but all of them ended badly.

Then I began thinking about why cocaine was "wrong." It was illegal, but why? Who said it was wrong? Society?

A lot of people would say that nudism was wrong. But that didn't make it true.

An even larger number of people would say that swinging was wrong as well. But Susan and my parents had always taught me that love and communication were the keys to a good relationship, rather than sexual fidelity.

Trust was definitely important, but it was possible to have sex with another person without breaking the bond of trust in a relationship. My parents were living proof of that. They were an exception to the rule, but they were the "norm" I was familiar with.

So if society said that nudism and swinging were wrong—but I was raised to know better—what was different about cocaine? What was different about *any* drug, for that matter? Who made the rules about what was right and what was wrong?

As I launched into another round of exercises, I chuckled darkly at my philosophical turn. I still wasn't *happy* about Kendall's cocaine use, but the line between "right" and "wrong" had blurred a little.

Still, I felt that cocaine was "wrong." I saw what it did to Felicia. She wasn't a junkie on the street, but she was definitely under the spell of the drug. For that matter, *Kendall* had been as well, if only for a little while. She had turned into a different person when she snorted the white powder.

In the end, I decided that cocaine seemed like nothing but trouble. I could rationalize that society had arbitrarily decided that it was "wrong," but I still couldn't avoid the conclusion that *I*

thought it was wrong.

I had been raised to avoid drugs, and for most of my life, I had. I couldn't shake the feeling that I was making the same subjective decision that society had, but I couldn't deny my values. My parents had spent more than eighteen years instilling them, and I wasn't going to revolutionize my attitude in an afternoon.

Finally, I resolved to talk to Kendall. I wouldn't take a hard line, and I'd try to be understanding, but I wasn't going to let her off the hook.

I *couldn't* know how cocaine made her feel, but I could try to understand why she'd felt the need to use it. I knew her well enough to know—to *hope*—that she'd want to avoid drugs in the future.

As I mechanically did push-ups, I began my imaginary conversation with Kendall. I hoped the real conversation would go as smoothly as it did in my head.

Unfortunately, things *rarely* go as well as we hope.

✧ ✧ ✧

"I know it was wrong," Kendall said, "but I just couldn't stop myself."

We were in the Jeep, driving to Chattanooga. It was Sunday evening. I had avoided the Cocaine Talk (as I'd come to think of it in my head) until then. Kendall and I had watched TV on Saturday evening, and then spent a quiet Sunday together, but the events from Friday night hung over us.

"When we were in the bathroom at the restaurant and Felicia offered me a bump," Kendall explained, "I started to say no. But then I thought, 'what the heck! I'm good all the time.' I wanted to have fun. I wanted to get wild."

"You can get wild *without* cocaine," I said as evenly as I could.

"Sure, but Felicia was so cool, and I didn't want to seem like a square."

"So you snorted *coke* instead? I mean, *I* managed to say no."

"Then I guess you're a better person than me," she snapped.

"I didn't mean it like that," I soothed. "I'm sorry."

"Paul, you don't know what it's like," she said. "It made me feel so *alive*. I could do anything. I could ask you to do what I wanted, instead of being embarrassed. You don't know what it's like to be me sometimes. Everybody expects me to be the good girl, to get good grades, to speak properly, to look nice, to go to church. *Aaaah!* I'm going crazy inside!"

I looked at her, a little shocked.

"'Oh, Kendall's such a good girl. Kendall's going to be a doctor. Kendall gets straight As,'" she mocked. "'Kendall would never have sex. She'd never do drugs. She's so pure and good.' I hate it, I tell you. I'm not *like* that. I'm not some straight-laced prude."

"No, you're not, but cocaine isn't the way to prove that."

"I know," she said softly, reserved once again, "but… I guess you just don't understand what my life is like. Everyone has all these expectations for me, but what about *me?* What about *my* expectations? Can't I go out and have fun every once in a while without someone thinking I'm a slut, or a drug addict, or… or worse?!"

"Sure you can, but—"

"Then why don't you understand about the cocaine? It's not like I'm on the corner buying the stuff. I've used it twice, Paul. *Twice*."

"That's another thing," I said when she paused to take a breath. "The other time was with Big Mistake Guy, wasn't it?"

"Yes," she said, her mood changing drastically. "But that was a big, *big* mistake. That's why I wanted to try… it—the cocaine, I mean—with *you*. I knew you wouldn't…"

"Wouldn't what?" I asked, dangerously quiet.

"I knew you wouldn't take advantage of… the situation."

"The situation?"

"You know…"

I shook my head.

"Did you realize how horny it made me?" she asked by way of answer.

I nodded.

"I knew I was safe with you. Besides, I *wanted* to go wild with you. I wasn't worried about…"

When the silence drew out, I asked, "What *happened* with you and Big Mistake Guy?"

"I don't want to talk about it," she half-whispered.

"Why not?"

"I just don't. I'm not proud of what happened, and… and I don't really want to relive it."

I nodded silently. Inside, however, I was burning with curiosity. I wanted to know what had happened, but I didn't want to force her to tell me. In any event, my silence convinced her to explain.

"His name was Wes," she said softly, so softly that I almost missed it. "I met him last year, and I guess I thought he was a nice guy. But that girl I told you about…," she continued, "Hayley?"

"I know who she is," I said.

"Oh, that's right, Gina hangs out with her now, doesn't she."

"She doesn't really 'hang out' with Hayley," I said, trying not to sound defensive. "But she knows who she is. Anyway, what happened with Hayley and Big Mistake Guy?"

"They were both in my Western Civ. class, and I *thought* Hayley was my friend. But she's just *evil*, Paul," Kendall said, with more venom in her voice than I'd ever heard. Then she sniffed and wiped her cheek.

I had a similar opinion of Hayley, but I was curious about how she had managed to earn Kendall's enmity.

"She invited me to a Carnicus party at one of the Pike guys' houses, because she knew I kinda liked Wes. I swear, though, I wasn't going to do anything with him," she said, imploring me. "You know how you can be attracted to someone without doing anything, right?"

I nodded; I knew *exactly* how she felt.

"By then," she continued, "I knew Gina was coming to UT, and I was angry. *You* were supposed to come to UT by yourself, and we could be boyfriend-girlfriend… just the two of us. But Gina was going to spoil everything," she added bitterly. "She's so *selfish*. She always has been, and I'm the only one who's seen it."

I clenched my jaw, but didn't speak.

Kendall caught my reaction and hastily returned to her story. "I swear," she continued, wiping her cheeks, "I didn't mean to do anything with Wes. Hayley could tell that I was angry, though.

She said I should have fun and maybe even get drunk. I thought she was being my friend. Now I know different—I don't think she was *ever* my friend. Anyway, I guess I was a lot angrier than I realized. I decided to go to the party because… well… I don't know why. I was just angry and frustrated and… and… I wanted to *scream*."

I kept my eyes on the road, but my thoughts were awhirl. So many things from the past couple of months were starting to make sense. I'd known that Kendall wasn't happy that Gina had come to Knoxville, but I hadn't realized that the events surrounding Big Mistake Guy *also* had to do with Gina's decision to attend UT.

"I guess I had too much to drink," Kendall said, her voice heavy with self-recrimination. Then, "I *know* I had too much to drink. So when Hayley offered me some cocaine, I said yes. And it made me feel so *good*, as if this golden glow surrounded me, and I didn't care that Gina was coming with you. 'I'll show *her*,' I remember thinking. 'If she wants to fuck everything that moves to get Paul's attention, then I can too.'"

Gina hasn't fucked everything that moved, I thought crossly. But I held my tongue.

"I don't really remember exactly how it happened," Kendall said, drawing my attention back to her story, "but the next thing I knew, Wes was taking my clothes off. Then he was on top of me… *inside* me. I'll spare you the gory details," she whispered hoarsely, "but I'd done some more coke, so I was… well… I guess I wasn't myself."

"Did you tell him to stop?" I asked, my emotions under rigid control.

"At first, I… I didn't *want* him to stop. It… it felt good. Besides, I wanted to prove to you that I could be just like Gina. I know that's silly," she said, wiping her eyes, "but that's what I remember thinking. *Then* I started to feel guilty, so I told him to stop. He didn't, of course," she said, full of bitterness. "It's my own fault, though, for being there in the first place.

"But it got worse," she said, sniffing miserably. "As soon as he… finished… I heard applause. Oh, Paul, it was horrible. I looked up and a bunch of people were on the balcony above us. They were *cheering!* I was humiliated, and they were laughing. What kind of people do that?" she asked plaintively. "Hayley was there, that evil *bitch*. She probably set the whole thing up. 'Let's take Kendall out and get her drunk,'" she mocked, suddenly vicious. "'Let's get her high. Let's watch some Greek *ass*hole have sex with her.' I *trusted* her, Paul," she raged.

"She told all the other people at the party, too," Kendall continued. "Everyone who hadn't seen, at least. They all thought it was *so* funny. And by Monday, a bunch of other people had heard about it. Even Bridget Jameson said she heard 'some dreadful rumors.' Bridget! She's the sweetest, nicest person in the world, and even *she* heard about what happened. The Chi Os and Pikes must've told *everyone*," she said.

Then she looked at me, defiant and angry. "*Now* do you understand why I hate Greeks?! I *hate* them, Paul. They use people. That's all they do," she railed. "Bridget and Toni are okay, but they're the only ones who had anything *nice* to say to me. They felt sorry for me. But all the others…," she added with quiet ferocity, "all the others can… can… can *go to hell!*"

For several minutes, we drove in silence. I didn't know what to say, and Kendall was consumed by her bitterness and anger.

"The worst part was," she said, turning despondent, "I remember how good the coke made me feel. I was still humiliated, and I felt guilty because it was my own fault, but I couldn't stop thinking about the cocaine. So that's why I wanted to… you know… to try it with you," she said.

"I couldn't stop thinking about it. And, Paul, it felt *good*. I wanted that feeling again, but with the right person, instead of some lowlife Greek," she said, trying to convince me. "I know it was wrong… but I just couldn't help myself." Then she looked at me, tears streaking her face, her mascara a black mess. "Do you hate me?"

"I don't hate you," I said.

"You probably think I'm a slut. I *knew* I shouldn't've told you," she said. "I knew you wouldn't understand—"

At that point, I pulled to the side of the interstate and came to a stop.

Kendall looked at me, her eyes wide with anxiety.

"No, I don't think you're a slut," I said, meeting her gaze and holding it. "And I *definitely* understand." My anger had cooled, but I wouldn't soon forget what Hayley and the Greeks had done.

"When I did the coke with Felicia, I just wanted to have fun," Kendall said, her voice thick with emotion. "I just wanted to have fun with *you*. And… I wanted to erase that awful memory of Hayley's face as she laughed and cheered."

When I pictured Hayley in my mind, I practically snarled. *I want her* dead, I thought viciously.

"What's the matter?" Kendall asked suddenly.

I shook off my violent thoughts and returned to reality, to the girl next to me.

"You *do* think I'm a slut, don't you," Kendall accused half-heartedly.

"No," I said firmly. "*Hayley's* the slut. You just trusted the wrong person," I added. Then I pulled her into my arms.

"I'm so sorry," she whispered.

While traffic whizzed past us, I held her as she wept.

✧ ✧ ✧

When we reached her house, Kendall was composed. She was still upset—about the past, as well as the pain of revealing it—but her tears had dried and she'd fixed her makeup. Fortunately, her father was working late on a case, so we didn't have to explain to him why she was so distraught.

In her room, we talked some more, but for the most part, I simply held her. She promised not to do cocaine again, and even apologized for trying it in the first place. With all that she'd told me in the past couple of hours, though, cocaine was the *least* of my worries.

By the time I left, she felt better, and even gifted me with a wan smile after I kissed her goodbye. I, on the other hand, felt like murdering Hayley Devlin. And if I ever got my hands on Wes—whatever his last name was, Kendall wouldn't tell me—I'd kill him too. He deserved worse: something involving hot pokers, dull knives, or both.

The problem wasn't that Kendall had sex with another guy; I'd seen that often enough myself. But sex wasn't supposed to be about humiliation. Nor was it something you did *to* someone, especially when they were high on drugs.

Kendall had been guilty of bad judgment, of getting drunk and trying drugs. Wes had been guilty of rape, as far as I was concerned. Hayley was guilty of using oxygen that a human being could've used instead.

When I got home, my parents had returned from New York City. I wasn't in the mood to hear

about their trip, though, so I welcomed them home and went to my room. Mom knocked on my door about an hour later.

"Is everything okay, honey?" she asked.

"Yeah."

She could hear the lie in my voice.

"Okay, no," I said at last, "everything's *not* okay."

She came in and shut the door. "Is Kendall all right? Did something happen while we were gone? Was it Friday night?"

"It's not Kendall," I explained. "And nothing happened Friday night," I fibbed. "It's something that happened to her a while ago. She… she just told me about it."

Mom nodded for me to continue.

"I don't really wanna go into details," I said at last. "I'm angry enough as is. If I have to think about it any more, I'll wanna *kill* someone."

"Is it something her father should know about?"

"God, no," I said hastily. "He's got a gun; he *would* kill someone."

Mom was silent for a long moment, letting me think.

"I'm sorry, Mom," I said at last. "I really don't wanna talk about it."

She nodded and then quietly left me to my dark thoughts.

✧ ✧ ✧

Over the course of the following day, I went from hot fury to cold anger. First, I was angry with Gina, simply because she was *associated* with the Chi Os. I had to laugh at myself for that, though. I had fallen into the same trap as Kendall: blaming Gina for something she didn't have anything to do with.

Of course I was angry with Hayley, Wes, and anyone else who'd been at that party (Rod?), but I couldn't really do anything about the past. I guess I also blamed myself, for failing to protect Kendall. I know it's stupid, since I wasn't even *in* Knoxville when Big Mistake Night happened, but that's how I felt.

When I talked to Kendall on Monday night, our conversation was strained at first. I got the impression she was worried that I was angry with her for what happened with Big Mistake Guy (I refused to call him Wes, even in my head).

Even though she blamed herself, it *wasn't* her fault. I made that point a little more vehemently than I intended, but she knew me well enough to understand that I was upset about the situation, not her self-ascribed guilt.

✧ ✧ ✧

Tuesday afternoon, I went out by myself to finish some Christmas shopping. I needed to buy a couple of small presents for my family, especially my grandparents. In addition, I still had to buy private gifts for Kendall and Gina. Even though they probably wouldn't get together and compare, I didn't want to get them the same thing. Unfortunately, I had no idea what to buy either of them.

On the other hand, I had finally settled on what to get Susan, who was extremely hard to buy for. Fortunately, I could *make* her present, although it would take several hours (if not more). As I drove toward Perimeter Mall, I mentally scheduled the time to do the work.

When I got to the mall, it took me fifteen minutes just to find a parking place. Once inside, what should have taken an hour took almost four. By the time I left, I was sick and tired of crowds. I had managed to get my grandparents' gifts, as well as a few for my family, but I still needed to buy a private present for the girls.

Since I'd already spent so much on Kendall, I wasn't going to spend *much* more on her, but I needed to buy her something special to open when we were alone. I already had two things, but they were small; I needed something a bit more impressive.

I also had to buy a private gift for Gina, and lingerie seemed like a good idea. I hadn't bought her any in a while, so I thought she'd enjoy something new. Besides, she'd have the opportunity to model it for me, which we'd both enjoy.

As I passed the shopping center with Felicia's store, I decided to pull in. It wasn't as crowded as the mall, but there were still a lot of cars in the parking lot. Eventually, I found a parking place and headed inside.

"I'll be with you in a minute," a harried salesgirl said as I entered.

"I'll help him," another voice said.

I turned.

Felicia smiled at me. Then she said goodbye to her current customer, who was headed for the door, laden with shopping bags full of recent purchases. "Howdy, stranger," Felicia said brightly.

"Howdy, yourself," I said.

"You look *great!*"

"Thanks," I said. "You look pretty good yourself."

After an awkward moment, she turned demure. Then, softly, she said, "I didn't know if I'd ever see you again."

"Here I am," I said, laughing nervously. *Why had I come to* this *store to buy lingerie,* I wondered. I knew why, but I guess I didn't want to admit it.

"We close in half an hour," Felicia said. "Do you wanna get a drink someplace?"

"I *can't* get a drink," I hedged. "At least not until I'm nineteen. Remember?"

"Oh yeah, right! Well then, d'you wanna get dinner someplace. *Or,*" she said, suddenly enthusiastic, "I could fix you dinner. I grill a mean T-bone."

Part of me wanted to politely decline. But a growing part of me—below the belt, of course—wanted to accept.

"Please," she said. "No strings attached. Okay?"

"I'd love to, but…"

"C'mon, let's do something. Please? We can do anything you want."

I got the clear impression that "anything" meant *anything*. In retrospect, I was breaking "bachelor lesson number one"; I was shopping for groceries when I was hungry (metaphorically speaking, of course). In other words, it had been a couple of days since I last had sex, and with Felicia practically begging me to fuck her, my judgment was a little suspect.

Okay, maybe it was a *lot* suspect.

"*Any*thing," she repeated, stepping close and looking up with wide, dark eyes.

"I've got to finish my Christmas shopping," I said evasively.

"I can help you. I don't mind. I need to do some last minute shopping myself."

Against my better judgment, I caved.

With that, she practically beamed at me. Then she stretched upward for a kiss. I wondered what I was getting myself into as she gave me a peck on the cheek. I *knew* what I was getting myself into, of course, but I couldn't decide if I wanted to fight it or not.

For the next thirty minutes, I browsed the shop while Felicia helped last-minute customers. I spent the time usefully, though, and found a sheer white chemise and a matching pair of panties for Gina. Felicia arched an eyebrow when I paid for them, since they weren't Kendall's size.

"They're for a friend," I said, hoping I didn't sound as lame as I thought I did.

Felicia's eyes momentarily sparkled, until she realized that they weren't *her* size either. She bounced back quickly, though, and said, "Whatever, sure. Just let me clock out and get my coat, and then I'll be ready to go. Okay?"

"No problem," I said, taking the bag with my purchase as she headed toward the back of the store. I milled around for a few minutes, simply watching the remaining customers leave the store.

"Ready, willing, and able," Felicia said when she returned.

It took me a moment to realize it, but she had changed clothes. The differences were subtle, but important: her black skirt was shorter than before, and she had traded her businesslike sweater for a tighter one with a deep V-neck. And I couldn't help but notice that her breasts swayed freely, the bumps of her braless nipples casting shadows in the light from above.

"Do you mind if I ride with you?" she asked as I helped her don her coat. "I'll leave my car here and you can drop me off later. Or, if you want, you can ju—"

"That sounds fine," I said, heading off the invitation I knew was coming.

Her face fell, but then she forced a smile.

Once in the Jeep, she asked what I wanted to shop for. After a moment's reluctance, I explained that I needed to find a couple of private gifts for Kendall. (I lumped Gina's gifts in with Kendall's, since I didn't want Felicia asking questions about my complex relationship. If she knew I already had two girlfriends, she might not understand my reluctance for a *third*.)

"I know just the place," she said enthusiastically. "Head for the airport."

"Why? What's there?"

"This sex shop I know about. It's also a head shop, but they've got the kinds of things you're looking for."

With only a few misgivings, I followed her directions. *What* is *it about sex shops?* I wondered when we arrived. It was dingy and dreary looking, and I felt like I needed a bath just looking at it.

"C'mon," Felicia said excitedly, "let's go."

Inside, it was much like the shop in Knoxville: racks full of magazines, video tapes, and sex toys. Unlike the shop in Knoxville, though, half the store was devoted to bongs, pot pipes, psychedelic statues, black-light posters, scales, and a myriad of things whose use I couldn't even begin to fathom.

"Do you know what you want?" Felicia asked. Then she grabbed my hand and led me toward the sex toys.

We browsed for a few minutes and then she grew excited.

"Remember I told you about these?" she asked, holding up a small box with a drawing of two spheres. "Ben Wa balls?"

I nodded. As I recalled the vivid memory of her internal muscles, my dick began to swell.

"You could get these for Kendall," she suggested.

It wasn't a bad idea, but I didn't want to appear too eager, because I didn't want her to offer to show me—again—what kind of muscles she'd developed using the balls. Well, I *wanted* her to offer, but I didn't want to disappoint her by turning her down. So I smiled noncommittally and gave the box a faux-casual examination.

"They'll really spice up your love life," Felicia urged. "Trust me."

"Sure," I said at last. "Good idea."

We browsed some more, and Felicia made sure to stick close. She held my arm, and pressed her breasts against me as often as she could. I knew what she was doing, of course, but I couldn't really tell her to stop. Worse, I didn't *want* to tell her to stop. My dick, of course, was as hard as steel and seemed to be cheering her on.

Treacherous organ.

"Hey," Felicia said, "how about one of these?" With that, she held up a box containing an extremely realistic dildo. "It's not as big as the real thing," she said, gesturing toward my crotch, "but I think Kendall would like it."

In reality, I didn't think Kendall would like it one bit; I thought it would intimidate her. After all, she didn't even have a *vibrator*, so she probably wasn't ready for a veined and lifelike rubber cock. On the other hand, Gina would love it. "Yeah, that's a great idea," I said at last. Then I reached for the box.

"I'll hold your cock for you," Felicia said playfully, pulling the box from my grasp. "Do you want me to take it out for you?" she asked, her eyes round and innocent-seeming.

"That's okay," I said quickly. "Just leave it in the box."

"You want to leave your cock in my box?" she asked. Then she batted her eyes.

I'm sure I turned six shades of purple.

"You're cute when you blush," she said.

"Um… thanks." My dick was throbbing and my willpower was crumbling at the same rate. If I didn't get away from Felicia, I knew what was going to happen. So I wanted to pay for everything and then take her back to her car. Unfortunately, she had other ideas.

"How about these?" she asked, holding up a gold chain with clamps on each end.

"What *are* they?"

"Nipple clamps," she said. "You put 'em on like this," she explained, demonstrating on her own sweater-clad nipple. Her eyes flashed in challenge as she fastened the second clamp over her other nipple.

"I don't think Kendall would like anything like that," I said.

"But she said her nipples are really sensitive."

"Still," I equivocated, "I think they're probably too far out for her."

For the next several minutes, Felicia seemed bent on fondling everything on the shelves. I knew that she was stalling for time, of course, but it was *working*. Once, she even lifted her skirt to demonstrate how a strap-on butterfly vibrator worked. She wasn't wearing panties, of course.

"How do you know so much about this stuff?" I finally asked, hoping to get her talking, so she'd stop teasing me with sex toys. It was probably the wrong question, but it was the only one my sex-fogged brain could come up with.

"I've used most of this stuff before," she said, her finger tracing the valley between her breasts.

"You said you were a virgin when what's-his-name… Ronny… seduced you," I said. I tried to keep from glancing at her stiff nipples, but it didn't work. "So where'd you learn about all this stuff?" I continued, my eyes once again locked on hers. "From Naldo?"

"God, no. Naldo's good in bed, but he's *real* traditional."

"Then where?" I asked.

She turned sheepish. "I had this boyfriend on the side, about a year ago," she explained after a moment. "A lawyer. He was a super-freak. I mean, he was into everything: nipple clamps, anal beads, cock rings, hot wax, feathers, you name it."

I tried not to blanch.

"Unfortunately, his wife found out."

"Whoa," I said.

"Yeah, it got really weird after that."

I looked a question at her and gently guided her toward the cash register.

"His wife kept calling me and stuff. But she was even weirder'n him."

My eyebrows shot up.

"Seriously," Felicia said. "She wanted me to join 'em for a threesome, so we could tie him up and 'discipline' him."

"Did you do it?"

"Actually, yeah," she said, blushing. "A couple of times."

"What happened?" I asked, my dick throbbing sadistically.

"She was even freakier than he was, so I stopped returning their calls. God, those people were totally demented. Fun, in a freaky way, but totally demented."

"I'll bet," I said.

"Anyway," Felicia said, "that's how I know about most of this stuff. I've tried to get Naldo to try some of it—the tamer stuff—but he's too traditional. Straight fucking and the occasional blowjob, that's all he likes. He won't even go down on me. I guess that's why I like it when he brings another girl. He's like every guy on the planet, it seems, so he likes watching girl-girl action."

I nodded in agreement.

"Anyway, do we need to buy anything else?" Felicia asked. "I wanna get out of here and… go somewhere private."

"Um…," I said, panic suddenly blossoming in the pit of my stomach. I wanted to fuck Felicia. I *really* wanted to fuck her, but that was the *last* thing I needed to do. Finally, I got my emotions under control and glanced toward the cash register. Before I could say anything, however, I spotted a rack of small vibrators. I thought I could use them to avoid disappointing her (when I inevitably told her that I was going to take her back to her car, of course). "I also wanted to buy one of those for Kendall," I said.

"A dildo *and* a vibrator? Sounds like fun."

I took my time choosing. In reality, I was stalling. I was pretty sure I knew what would happen once Felicia and I were alone together. So I dithered over the vibrators, hoping my erection (and libido) would take a breather. Unfortunately, I was disappointed, on both counts.

Finally, I selected a smaller vibrator, which took AA-cell batteries instead of C-cells. It was plain white, and looked like the perfect beginner's vibrator. With that, I used most of the cash in my pocket to pay for everything.

When we got in the Jeep, Felicia pressed herself against my right side, the feeling of her luscious breasts completely distracting me. I normally had a lot of self-control, but there's only so much flirting a guy can take.

"Do you want to go to my place?" she asked, rubbing her hand over my thigh. "We can have a drink and relax."

"I dunno…"

"I can fix you dinner," she said, her hand inching toward my crotch. "And then I can model some lingerie for you."

"I should probably get you back to your car," I said, my voice tight. Then I put my hand on hers, to stop its progress toward my erection.

"We can do anything you want," she whispered, her voice husky.

"It's getting late."

"*Anything*."

Deliberately, I started the Jeep. Then I moved her hand from my knee, ostensibly so I could shift.

I felt bad for disappointing her, but I knew that I shouldn't have sex with her. My deal with Kendall and Gina was simple: as long as they were with me, sex with another girl was okay. I hadn't strictly followed the rules, but *one* of the girls had always been present when I'd had sex with someone else. Having sex with Felicia—by myself—wouldn't simply bend the rules, it would break them.

So I pulled onto the street and hoped I wouldn't explode in my pants before I had a chance to get home and jerk off. As I drove, I kept my attention on traffic. Felicia did everything in her power to distract me: flipping her hair; idly chewing on a nail; moistening her lips; and drawing her skirt up to flash me her long, long legs. I watched it all in my peripheral vision, my erection throbbing hopefully.

When we finally reached the shopping center with Felicia's store, she directed me around back, to the employee's parking lot. My stomach lurched when I realized that it was deserted *and* secluded.

I parked next to her car, but left the Jeep's engine running. I was trying to hint to her that nothing was going to happen between us, but she was determined. When she leaned toward me for what I hoped would be a chaste goodnight kiss, I began to lose hope.

Instead of kissing my cheek, she shifted at the last moment and her lips met mine. Our kiss rapidly heated up. I didn't want to hurt her feelings by pushing her away, but our friendly goodnight kiss had rapidly turned into something from a movie. The next thing I knew, she pressed her body against mine as she spanned the gap between our seats. Then she caressed the bulge of my hard-on, her fingers insistent.

"Oh, God," she gasped when she finally pulled back, "you make me so wet. I've been thinking about you since Saturday, thinking about your big cock."

I tried to muster my willpower and resist her. My hands were poised, ready to push her away.

"And I never got to taste you," she said breathlessly. She kissed my jawline and then down

my neck. “You said you liked blowjobs, but I never sucked you off. God, I want to feel you in my mouth,” she said, her breathing heavy. Then she kissed my shirt-covered nipple, sending shivers up and down my spine.

At that point, I still could’ve pushed her away.

She descended to my crotch, her fingers worrying my zipper open.

I knew I should tell her no, but—

She extracted my rock-hard erection.

My protests died unspoken as she wrapped her lips around my cock. She swallowed half of my shaft and then sucked gently. Her technique wasn’t as good as Kendall’s, but I was too worked up to care. With a guilty sigh, I silently admitted that I never wanted to say no in the first place.

I put my hand on the back of her head and guided her pace as she bobbed up and down. Within a few minutes, I was ready to explode. Felicia sensed my impending climax and let my erection slip from her lips.

“Come in my mouth,” she said. “I swallow.”

Who was I to refuse?

A half second later, she descended on my shaft, and I closed my eyes as the pressure built in my balls.

With a groan, I held her head down and closed my eyes as the first rush of orgasm broke over me. My cock swelled in her mouth and she cried out in surprise when the first spurt hit the back of her throat. She was ready for the second spurt, but she still moaned softly.

I launched two more streams into her mouth before I felt her swallow, but she didn’t stop sucking. After nearly a minute, she raised her head and smiled at me. Her lips were shiny with saliva and semen.

“I’ve got keys to the store,” she said, her voice full of desire. “C’mon.”

I hesitated.

“Please? I need you to fuck me. No strings attached, okay?”

Without waiting for me to answer, she hopped out and headed for the employee entrance. I didn’t want to seem like a cad—to take my blowjob and then just leave—so I killed the idling engine, tucked my semi-hard dick in my pants, and then followed her.

Once inside, I intended to let her down easily, but she had other plans. She kissed me, and I tasted myself on her lips.

“God, Naldo won’t even kiss me after I go down on him,” she said when she pulled back. Before I had a chance to answer, she kissed me again. When our kiss heated up, my dick quickly expanded to its full length.

As Felicia pressed her body against me, I had a silent argument with my conscience. I’d already broken the rules. At that point, it was simply a matter of degrees: a blowjob versus a blowjob and more. How *much* more was largely irrelevant.

I tried to resist Felicia’s advances, but I was still horny. When she fumbled for my renewed erection, I silently admitted what I’d known (feared?) all along: I was going to fuck her.

Note to self: Never shop for groceries when you’re hungry. Never. N-E-V-E-R. You’ll come home with a bunch of junk food and a horny blonde (with fantastic tits).

At the moment, the horny blonde was rubbing those very same fantastic tits over my chest.

When she finally freed my hard-on, she stroked it for a moment.

"God, you make me so *wet*," she whispered, her voice silky with desire. Then, "I love your big cock." After a minute or two, she released my shaft and ran her fingers up my chest. Then she flipped my coat over my shoulders in one smooth motion.

I could take a hint. While I finished removing my coat, she unbuttoned my shirt. She practically tore my shirttails out of my pants in her haste to undress me. At that point, I took over and slid the shirt the rest of the way off.

While she sucked my nipples—which still made me self-conscious, no matter how good it felt—I tugged at her coat. Distracted, she pulled it off and then tossed it aside.

At that point, I lifted her sweater, her firm breasts tumbling free. She growled impatiently and pulled the sweater over her head. Topless, she tilted her face up for a kiss and pressed herself against me, her breasts warming the bare skin of my chest.

Without breaking the kiss, she fumbled at my belt until she had it undone. In a frenzy of kissing and lust-hurried moans, we finished undressing each other. Then she pulled me toward her and took a step back.

When she bumped into the manager's desk, she started to scoot onto the desktop. Then she groaned in exasperation, reached back blindly, and cleared the desk with a sweep of her arm. The phone landed on the floor with a ringing crash.

With that, Felicia scooted onto the desk and spread her legs. "Fuck me," she begged. "God, please fuck me. I wanna feel your cock inside me."

I set the tip of my dick against the damp, soft hair of her pussy. Without looking down, I found her opening by touch and eased forward. My glans spread her inner labia and when I was sure I had the angle right, I slammed my length into her. She gasped from the force of my thrust, but clutched me tight, her breathing ragged and quick.

As I began thrusting, she locked her legs around me. Then she wrapped her arms around my neck and held on. Eventually, though, she lay back on the desk.

Flat on her back, her breasts bounced with each thrust, and my eyes were inexorably drawn to them. They were so full, so perfect, her pink nipples describing circles in the air as I pounded away.

She cried out each time my hips slammed into her, gasping "Oh God" over and over again. After several minutes of furious thrusting, I slowed my pace and bent over her, bracing myself with knuckles on the desktop. She dragged her fingernails down my back and then gripped my ass, as if trying to pull me deeper.

My pace still measured, I captured one of her nipples, biting it gently. When I switched nipples, she urged me on with sighs and moans.

Finally, I stood up straight and grabbed her hips for leverage. I took a couple of long strokes, my dick almost slipping free each time. Her supple belly heaved as she groaned in ecstasy, my thrusts sinking deep. Then, all of a sudden, I went into overdrive, my hips slamming into her pelvis as slapping noises filled the office.

After several minutes of rapid-fire pounding, I pulled out, my cock slick with her juices. She moaned, but then quickly hopped off the desk when I motioned for her to bend over it. Her round ass greeted me as I stepped forward.

As soon as my dick touched her opening, she hung her head and braced for my onslaught.

Once I eased the crown of my cock into her pussy, I gripped her hips. Then I held still, letting the anticipation build. The moment she lifted her head to see why I was waiting, I rammed forward so hard that the desk lurched beneath us.

She cried out in pleasure, her arms spread to brace herself. I began pounding into her, my hips slapping her round ass with each thrust. Her hot, slick pussy caressed my shaft, and I closed my eyes to simply enjoy the sensations. After several minutes, I buried myself as deep as I could and then stopped thrusting.

"I want to watch you while you fuck me," Felicia said, breathless.

With a wordless nod, I pulled out, my dick bobbing gently as I backed away from her.

Instead of rolling over on the desk, she simply spread her coat on the floor and lay on it. Then she beckoned to me. As I knelt between her thighs, I simply admired her body. She grew nervous at my hesitation, so I smiled to reassure her. Then I lowered my hips and eased forward, my dick seeking the warmth of her pussy.

Once I slid into her, I started rocking my hips, driving her wild with short thrusts. She returned the favor by clenching her internal muscles. When I started fucking her in earnest, she ran her hands up and down my triceps, her eyes holding my own.

As her pleasure mounted, she closed her eyes, her face contorting in ecstasy. I wasn't ready to come yet, so I steadied my pace. Besides, I was enjoying her reactions as I fucked her: she bit her lip, her nostrils flared, she mewled with pleasure.

Finally, though, I was ready to come. So I held myself above her, push-up style. My body bowed toward her as I buried my shaft in her pussy. My balls felt tight, and I knew they were ready to unleash a torrent of semen deep inside her.

With a final lunge, I slammed into her and stopped moving. Pleasure lashed my senses as I shut my eyes and emptied my balls. She cried out, her fingernails digging into my ass, trying to pull me deeper.

When I finally came to my senses and opened my eyes, I gazed down at her.

She was panting and grinning. "Are you sure you're only eighteen?" she asked.

I swallowed hard and then nodded. "Why?"

"'Cause you fuck like a god."

✧ ✧ ✧

A little while later, Felicia got up to use the bathroom. She took her purse with her and blew me a Marilyn Monroe-style kiss as she shut the door.

I took the opportunity to retrieve the phone and call home. When I'd left the house, I said I'd be gone for a couple of hours.

That was eight hours earlier.

I fibbed and told my mom that I'd met a friend from high school and gone to dinner with "him." Then I told her that I'd be home in a couple of hours, around midnight.

"That's fine, honey," she said. "Wake me up when you get home, though. You know I can't sleep till I know you're home safe."

"Okay, Mom. Thanks," I said, chuckling at our long-standing joke. "Bye."

When Felicia emerged from the bathroom, she looked excited. I didn't need Kendall's insight—or experience—to realize that she'd probably snorted some coke. When she sniffed a couple of times and pinched her nostrils, I was sure.

I suppressed my natural reaction and forced a smile.

"Who were you on the phone with?" she asked.

"I called my folks," I explained, "to let 'em know when I'd be home."

"Oh. Do you need to go?" she asked, her face falling.

"Not yet," I said. "But I need to be home by midnight."

"Curfew?" she asked, half sarcastic, half serious.

"No," I said flatly. "I'm just being responsible." *Or at least I'm* trying *to,* I reflected, thinking about the past several hours of *ir*responsible behavior. Irresponsible, true, but sinfully enjoyable, although I sincerely hoped Felicia meant the "no strings attached" part.

"Sorry," she said. "I didn't mean to—"

"It's okay," I said quickly.

She smiled gratefully. Then she waggled her eyebrows and let her eyes roam over my body. "So," she asked, her voice sultry, "what time is it? How long before you have to leave?"

"Long enough."

"*I'll* say," she said, her eyes on my dick. Her breasts swayed as she walked toward me and then knelt at my feet. With a smile, she began kissing my expanding cock.

We spent the next hour in a frenzy of sex. We fucked on the floor. We fucked on the desk. We fucked against the wall. We fucked out in the store itself. We even fucked against the cold glass of the front window, cars whizzing past on the street. If anyone had looked, they would've seen Felicia's perfect breasts pressed against the plate glass as I fucked her from behind, the heat of her body forming a halo of condensation on the window.

She came twice: once while I bent her over the sales counter and fucked her from behind, my fingers busy on her clit; the second time while she rode me in the center of the store, her clit grinding against the base of my shaft.

Finally, I rolled her to her back and began pounding into her, intent upon my own orgasm.

"Come inside me," she urged, lifting her hips and thrusting against me.

After less than a minute, I buried my length in her molten pussy and then held still. Her pussy clamped around my cock, her trained muscles rhythmically gripping me. I came with a rush of sound and sensation, groaning as I blasted her inner walls.

"Oh, God," she gasped. "I can feel it."

Panting, I collapsed against her when my orgasm subsided.

"Oh, God," she whispered over and over, her arms and legs wrapped around me. Then, "I love the feeling of come inside me. It feels like... love." With that, she began planting tender kisses on my shoulder, her breath soft upon my skin.

✧ ✧ ✧

A little before midnight, we gathered our discarded clothes and got dressed. Then we put the manager's desk in a semblance of order and rearranged the racks of clothes that we'd knocked out of place in the heat of passion.

After we straightened up, I went to the bathroom. I also checked myself in the mirror. Unfortunately, I was a rumpled mess. I tucked in my shirt, dragged my fingers through my hair, and hoped the smell of sex wasn't *too* obvious.

When I emerged, Felicia looked at me, more awake than ever. I might be a little slow on the uptake sometimes, but I knew what she'd been up to. I didn't say anything, but my look of

disapproval spoke volumes. She saw my expression and self-consciously wiped her nose.

"So," she asked, changing the subject, "do you wanna get together sometime? Maybe tomorrow night? I could cook you that T-bone I promised."

"I can't," I said, a little harsher than I meant to. I smiled to soften the blow. "I've got to meet… a friend… at the airport."

"Oh… okay."

"Maybe some other time," I suggested.

"Maybe some other time."

I felt guilty. And I felt even more like a cad.

"I knew it wouldn't work anyway," she said.

"You can call me sometime," I suggested. Then I mentally kicked myself. "When I get back to school, I mean."

She looked up, her dark eyes full of questions.

"I'm pretty busy from now until the end of the year. I mean, I'm going to Chattanooga for Christmas Eve," I explained, "and then my family's going on vacation the day after Christmas. As soon as we get back, I head off to school," I finished.

"That's cool," she said, trying to sound detached.

"Well," I said, after a moment's awkward silence, "I guess we'd better get going."

"Paul?" she asked suddenly.

I turned.

She looked at me with yearning eyes. Then her face fell. "Never mind," she said softly. Then, "We'd better lock up, I guess."

As we stood outside the store, I gave her a kiss. I could tell that she wanted more, especially since she was probably horny from the coke, but I stuck to a chaste kiss on the cheek. *No strings attached,* I tried to silently remind her. *Remember?*

I held her door while she got into her car. Then I got into the Jeep and started the engine. I waited a moment until she started her car before I backed out. When I waved goodbye, she waved in return. Her expression was hard to read, but she didn't look happy.

She wanted more than I could give, and I shouldn't have let things go as far as they had. But I couldn't *un*-cross that bridge. As I drove home, my thoughts were chaotic, and I had the sinking feeling that "no strings attached" didn't mean the same thing for both of us.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

When I woke up the next morning, I started thinking about Felicia. The more I thought about it, the more I convinced myself that having sex with her had been a Bad Idea. She was incredibly sexy, but I didn't need Kendall's insight to realize how vulnerable she was, not to mention how starved for love and affection.

Unfortunately, I genuinely liked her. I guess she appealed to my protective nature. Worse, I was definitely attracted to her. Just *thinking* about her made my morning hard-on demand some attention.

I knew the difference between love and lust, of course, and I didn't *love* Felicia. Besides, I had more than my fair share of beautiful women in my life, so I spent a moment or two wondering why I *lusted* after her. She was beautiful, but her beauty came with a number of problems that *I* wasn't the answer to. But her *body*…

At the very thought of her body—her breasts, her ass, her lips—I wanted to see her again. I silently admitted that I wanted to fuck her again, too. As I began stroking my erection, however, I forced myself to think of someone else.

At first, I pictured Kendall, on her back, her smooth pussy spread before me. Then I imagined Gina sucking me, making love to my cock. I went through several scenes in my head, both remembered and imagined, but I kept returning to Felicia.

In my fantasy, the sexy blonde was begging me to fuck her, to come inside her. I pictured the way her perfect breasts flattened against her chest when she lay back. I imagined how they bounced when I fucked her. I imagined her nipples, pink and hard, yearning to be sucked. While scenes of Felicia romped through my overactive imagination, I stroked myself, my hand a blur.

When I came, I spurted so hard that my semen overshot the wad of Kleenex and splattered on my chest. I quickly adjusted and managed to capture the remaining spurts, but as I lay there panting from the force of my ejaculation, I felt more guilty than ever.

I had to do *something* to get Felicia out of my head!

✧ ✧ ✧

I spent most of the morning working on Susan's Christmas present. Fortunately, my project involved more than enough concentration to ward off daydreams of Felicia and her luscious body.

Before lunch, Dad asked if I wanted to fly to South Carolina to pick up Susan (she was spending the night with us and then flying to Texas the next day).

I showed Dad what I was doing, so he understood why I declined the flight time. Then he looked at my work and gave a whistle of approval.

"I didn't realize you were so good, son," he said.

I felt my face heating.

"I'm serious. That's really good. Is that from a picture?"

"Not a real one," I said.

He furrowed his brow.

"I've got pictures in here," I said, tapping my temple. "If I've seen it, I remember it."

To my surprise, he laughed. "I'd love to see a slideshow of those memory pictures sometime,"

he said, still chuckling. “But I don’t think I could handle that much excitement!” Laughing at his own humor, he grabbed his sunglasses and ball cap.

When I finished the drawing, I held it at arm’s length and studied it. I’ve always been surprised by how much detail I can recall, and Susan’s drawing was no different. In my head, I simply saw the overall image. When I had time to study the drawing itself, hundreds of little things combined to make it seem “right.”

As I looked at my work with a critical eye, I fixed several things, and added a detail or two. Finally, I signed my name in the corner and added the date.

Mom helped me hunt down a cardboard tube and pointed me at the wrapping paper. I still had about a dozen other presents to wrap, so I spent two hours hunched over the coffee table in the living room.

Wrapping presents is an acquired skill—and I hadn’t acquired it—but I did a decent job, so I didn’t think anyone would complain.

Later, Elizabeth called to tell me that she and Leah were coming by to pick me up; we were going to meet Gina’s plane.

At the airport, we hung around the gate until the plane taxied in. Gina and her sorority sisters emerged somewhere in the middle of the stream of passengers. They were laughing and happy, but Gina’s face still lit up when she saw me waiting for her.

She said goodbye to her friends—most of whom had a layover before taking a flight to Knoxville—and we headed down to baggage claim. Leah and Elizabeth went to fetch the station wagon, while Gina and I waited for her bags.

“Did you have fun?” I asked her.

“God, yes,” she said. “I’m sore, I don’t want to *see* any booze for the next month, and I need a good night’s sleep, but yeah, we had a great time.”

“Good,” I said, putting my arm around her.

She practically sagged against me, exhausted. We stood in companionable silence until the baggage carousel clattered to life. Then I hefted her bags off the conveyor and carried them outside to the waiting station wagon.

On the drive back to the Coulters’ house, Gina leaned against me and dozed. I was more than happy to let her, too. I felt guilty about having sex with Felicia, and I guess I didn’t want to have a conversation where I had to worry about revealing too much.

I didn’t think Gina would be upset about the blonde salesgirl, but she *had* been more possessive lately. That was probably a reaction to Kendall, but I didn’t want to test that theory, especially if being wrong meant an argument (or worse).

So I simply held Gina close, enjoying the quiet companionship of the ride to her house.

✧ ✧ ✧

After dumping her clothes in the hamper, Gina took a shower. She emerged refreshed, and smiled as she joined me on her bed.

“God,” she said, straddling my hips, “I missed you.”

“I missed you too.”

As we kissed, she unwrapped the towel from her body, her nipples hardening. Then she broke the kiss and simply gazed at me. With a playful waggle of her eyebrows, she tugged the towel from around her head and ran her fingers through her damp black tresses.

"Do you want me to comb out your hair?" I asked.

"I want you to screw me silly," she said. "You can't *imagine* how horny I am."

I grinned at her.

"But I guess we'll have to wait. Susan and your family are coming over for dinner, right?"

I nodded.

"When are they supposed to be here?"

"About twenty minutes," I said, looking at my watch. "But we've got time for a quick blowjob."

"Mmmmm," she purred. "Hot, fresh come," she continued. "Going a week without isn't easy, you know," she added. She tried to look serious, but she just couldn't pull it off. Then she wrapped her arms around my neck and hugged me tight. "I've missed you *so* much," she whispered in my ear. Then, "I love you."

"I love you too," I said, hugging her in reply.

"Now," she said, pulling back with a grin, "I believe you mentioned a blowjob."

"I believe I did," I said as she slid to the floor between my legs. Then I began unbuttoning my pants. "Do you still want me to comb out your hair?"

"Later," she play-snapped. "Right now, I want dick. Long, hard dick," she said, eyeing my manhood as I fished it out of my pants, "full of hot, white, creamy goodness."

"And it's all yours," I groaned as she swallowed half my length.

"Mmm hmm," she agreed, her mouth too full to speak.

✧ ✧ ✧

Normally, we waited until Christmas morning to open presents ("No exceptions, kids!"), but since Susan was leaving for Texas the next day, we exchanged gifts with her after dinner.

Her present from the Coulters was too big to wrap, so they wrapped a box containing the product brochure instead. (The present itself was teak patio furniture: a table and four chairs.)

"I know the brochure doesn't do it justice," Chris said, "but the display in the store looked fantastic. We thought you'd like it for the patio outside your bedroom."

"We got it in Carmel, California," Elizabeth added.

"The boxes are out in the garage," Chris said, picking up the narrative, "and we thought we'd have them shipped to South Carolina."

"It's beautiful," Susan said graciously. "Thank you very much." After a bit more oohing and aahing, she set aside the brochure.

"We're going to save our gift for last," Mom said to Susan, who nodded.

With that, I presented my gift with a flourish

After rewarding me with a smile, Susan unwrapped the tube and extracted my drawing. It was of her house, from three-quarter perspective. Her eyes flicked over the details, taking it all in: the jasmine growing up the courtyard wall, the wrought iron patio furniture visible within the courtyard itself, the pergola over her private patio, all of it. "Oh, my," she said quietly. Finally, she glanced at my stylized "P.D. Hughes '81" signature in the lower right corner. "Did you draw this?" she asked, only half rhetorically.

I nodded, my face warming.

"Oh, Paul, it's wonderful," she said, almost reverently.

"I hope you like it," I said.

"Like it? I *love* it. Thank you very much."

Then she set the drawing aside and gave me a big hug.

"It's perfect," she whispered. "Thank you."

Gina's present to Susan was a silk scarf and matching blouse. Gina always had good taste in clothes, and Susan was very appreciative. Erin and Leah had pooled their money to buy Susan a set of leather-bound photo albums, along with the promise to help her organize her family photos.

With that, Susan brought out her own wrapped presents, which she distributed to all of us (Kara wouldn't arrive until the next day, so we put her present under the Christmas tree).

Her gifts to our families were the same, and Chris almost choked when he unwrapped the largish box.

"A *VHS?!*" he said, his expression pained.

"What's the matter?" Susan asked.

"Who recommended this? Don't they know that the Betamax is *much* better technology? I mean, the Beta's based on the three-quarter-inch U-matic, and it produces a much sharper image than—"

"He means 'thank you very much,'" Elizabeth interrupted.

Susan smiled in amused tolerance.

Elizabeth elbowed her husband in the ribs.

"Um… I mean, thank you very much," Chris wryly parroted. Then he turned serious. "I mean it, though. We can put this in the guesthouse, so Leah and her friends can watch videotapes. We really do appreciate it."

"Doug recommended the VHS," Susan said, referring to her youngest son. "He told me you'd probably say that Beta was better, though," she added, laughing. "He mentioned something about 'proprietary technology being a death knell,' but I think you two will have a lively discussion about it."

"I'll have to explain to him the benefits of Beta the next time I see him," Chris said. "Anyway," he continued, "we really do appreciate it."

"So do we," Mom said, indicating our own VHS box. "Thank you very much."

With that, Susan gestured for Erin and Leah to open their gifts. Erin gasped and held up a pair of sapphire earrings. Leah was suitably impressed by her ivory cameo and black ribbon choker.

Next, Gina opened her first gift: a stethoscope. She thanked Susan and then opened the second box, which contained a stainless steel ladies Rolex watch.

"Thank you *very* much," Gina said. "For everything," she added.

"You're very welcome," Susan said. Then she turned to me. "Open the smallest present first," she suggested.

When I opened the box, it took me a moment to figure out what I was looking at. Finally, I realized that it was a bronze disk keychain. For a moment, I studied the bas-relief picture carved on one side.

"Is that…?" I muttered, scrutinizing the disk. "Is that… a *tree branch?!*"

Susan smiled mischievously and then nodded. "I thought you'd like to have it immortalized," she said, referring to the branch that led to our first sexual encounter (after she accidentally clobbered my testicles with it, that is).

Mom and Elizabeth couldn't stop laughing. Even Dad and Chris were smiling, although I think they understood my pain at the memory of having my balls unceremoniously assaulted.

Still chuckling, Susan smiled fondly. "I had my jeweler make it for you," she said. "It's one of a kind… like you."

I blushed.

Gina leaned over to kiss my cheek. "I think it's cute," she said.

My face felt like it was ready to catch fire, but at my mom's insistence, I passed around the keychain so the others could see it. Everyone teased me good-naturedly, but I was still embarrassed. Finally, I moved on to my next gift, a large envelope. When I opened it and read the card inside, I gazed at it for a moment, stunned.

"What is it?" my sister asked.

"It's flight time and lessons," Susan said when I didn't speak up.

"It's *fifty hours* of flight time," I said, still a little shocked.

"Your dad said you were thinking about getting your instrument rating," she said. "Besides, this way, you don't have to worry about being able to afford it if you want to fly somewhere."

"Say, like South Carolina," Chris quipped.

"Like South Carolina," my dad agreed. "Just for example, of course."

As my parents and Susan smiled among themselves, I shook my head in wonder. I should've known they were in cahoots. When I glanced at Gina, however, she *also* smiled knowingly.

"Did you know about this?" I asked her softly.

"Mmm hmm."

I rolled my eyes at her.

"I thought we might like to fly to Susan's once in a while," she said. "You know, just to get away from it all."

And to get away from Kendall, I mentally supplied. Aloud, I thanked Susan.

She explained that my parents had told her about the Flying Club at school, so she'd made arrangements with the local airport to bill her for my flight time and instructor expenses.

I nodded absently as I listened to her explanation. Still staring at the card, I felt everyone's eyes on me. When I looked up, they were grinning.

"I think he likes it," Chris teased.

"Be nice," Elizabeth chided him.

"Thank you *very* much," I said to Susan.

"I've got one more present for you," she said, "but I'll save it for later."

Still in shock, I nodded.

"Now," Mom said to Susan, jerking me out of my daze, "before you open your gift from us, I need to give you this."

"A box of Kleenex?"

Mom suppressed a glimmer of a smile as she nodded. Then she glanced at me, my signal to fetch Susan's gift. I hastily dropped my flight time card and headed for the Christmas tree. From behind it, I withdrew Susan's present. It was a framed picture, sheathed in gift wrap; that much was obvious. Susan recognized it for what it was, but she still looked curious.

When she tore away the wrapping paper, however, she gasped and tears welled up. Then she smiled and covered her mouth. "Where did you find them all?" she asked my mom. The large

frame was filled with pictures, almost twenty of them, arranged around a central picture.

"David took the big one," Mom explained, indicating the blown-up photo in the center.

The picture was of Jack, standing next to his A-4 Skyhawk on the deck of an aircraft carrier. He was smiling and flashing a thumbs-up. He looked cheerful, cocky, and full of life.

"On their first cruise together," Mom added.

"That was what," Susan asked, "1966?"

Mom and Dad nodded together.

"Some of the pictures are from our photo albums, with a few that I filched from yours," Mom said, "but most of them are from our trip down to Los Cabos."

(I knew the story, but only vaguely. When my father and Jack had returned from cruise, Jack borrowed a friend's sailboat. He and Susan had invited my parents to join them as they sailed down the Baja California coast to Cabo San Lucas, Mexico.)

Still smiling, Susan wiped her eyes with a tissue. "That was such a fun trip," she said.

Mom smiled in agreement, laying her hand on Dad's knee. He covered it with his own.

"When I found the picture of Jack," he added, "I thought about having it blown up for you. Beth suggested adding the rest of the pictures."

Many of the other pictures were of Jack and Susan alone—tan, smiling, and happy—although there were some with my parents as well. A few showed them with their sons, Kirk and Doug.

"They're wonderful," Susan said, blinking back more tears. Then she smiled in feigned irritation and snatched two more tissues. "You know me so well," she said to Mom as she dabbed her eyes. "Thank you. Thank you so much." For a few moments, she gazed at the pictures of her late husband and their family in happy times. Damp tissues clutched in her hand, she ran her fingertips over the picture of Jack and his airplane, smiling at some unvoiced memory.

Even though Susan had been a widow for more than a decade, I could see the love in her eyes. She sometimes had the same expression when she looked at me, but I'd never seen the raw, untamed emotion she displayed when she gazed at the picture of Jack. Then suddenly, she took a deep breath and it was gone, locked away for her own private remembrance.

My parents silently smiled at each other and then Dad put his arm around Mom.

"We're glad you like it," Dad said.

"It's… *wonderful*," Susan said at last, her voice full of emotion.

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Later, Elizabeth served hot mulled cider and we all headed out to the hot tub. The weather wasn't too cold, but the water felt nice by comparison. Everyone teased me about looking too thin—I *was* down to 171 pounds, but I still wanted to lose a bit more weight. I shrugged it off, but Mom was clearly concerned.

"Don't worry about it, dear," my dad told her. "I lost nearly fifteen pounds my freshman year in college."

"And I thought *you* were too thin," Mom countered. Then she turned to me. "I'm just worried about you, dear. That's all."

"Thanks, Mom," I said, "but I'm fine. I eat three meals a day." *Usually*, I added mentally. "I've just got a busy schedule and all."

She was clearly unconvinced, but she let the subject drop. Fortunately, the conversation

turned to other things. After about fifteen minutes, however, Gina and Susan shared a look. Then Gina squeezed my hand and tilted her head up to whisper in my ear.

"Do you want to spend some time with Susan?" she suggested. "She said she's got another present for you. Remember?"

I nodded.

"And then," Gina continued, "I think they're planning a little party."

"I figured," I said.

"Afterward, would you like to spend the night?" she asked, squeezing my hand again.

"Yeah, that sounds nice."

"Good. Now go, pitter-pat man."

I met Susan's eyes and nodded.

She thanked Gina with a glance and then semi-ostentatiously drained her cider mug. "I think I'm going to head inside and get some more cider," she said.

"That sounds like a good idea," I said. "I'll go with you."

"I'll go too," Leah piped up.

In a flash, Elizabeth took in the situation and reacted. "No, you stay here," she told her daughter.

"But, Mom…"

Elizabeth's expression turned hard.

At that point, Gina got her sister's attention and started telling Leah about the sorority ski trip.

Once inside, Susan stepped close and put her hand on my chest. "Thank you for my drawing," she said. "I'll always treasure it."

I felt my cheeks heating. As a distraction, I thanked her again for my flight time and lessons.

"You're welcome," she said, ever gracious. Then, "The last gift I have for you is kind of simple. It might not seem like much, but it's very special to me."

I nodded and followed her to the Christmas tree. She picked up a small present. When I tore off the wrapping paper and opened the nondescript box, I felt my brow crease in uncertainty. The box was "new," but clearly old at the same time.

"It's an antique ship's compass," Susan said softly. "I bought it for Jack, before… before he was killed. He always loved naval hardware," she added, smiling fondly. "I was going to give it to him for Christmas that year, but…"

I nodded in understanding.

She took a deep, shaky breath. "I've kept it all these years, because it's been a piece of him."

"Thank you," I said. "But this is too personal…"

"I want you to have it," she said, cutting off my objections. "I don't know what brought you into my life, but I'd like to think that Jack had something to do with it. When he first met your dad, he told me that it was like meeting his brother. They were that close."

I nodded.

"And when your family started coming to camp, I watched you grow up. I didn't know Jack when he was your age, but I imagine you're a lot like he was," she said. For a long moment, she was silent. Then she wiped her eyes and looked up at me. "Now, *you're* a part of Jack, at least in my mind. You're a separate person, but I see the best of him in you. Do you understand?"

I swallowed hard and nodded.

"So now, in a strange way, I'm giving the compass to its rightful owner."

Suddenly, I had to blink back tears of my own.

Instead of saying anything else, Susan simply stepped close and hugged me.

Over her shoulder, I gazed at the brass compass, the lights of the Christmas tree reflecting from its glass. Then my eyesight blurred and I held Susan as she squeezed me tighter still.

Once we composed ourselves, we filled our mugs with cider and then took the insulated carafe out to the hot tub. I noticed that someone—Chris, probably—had turned on the guesthouse lights. He'd probably turned up the heat as well, since the Coulters lowered the thermostat when the guesthouse was unoccupied.

Susan followed my eyes and linked her arm through mine, smiling happily. Then we picked up our pace. In the short walk from the main house, our skin had turned to gooseflesh, so we quickly plunged into the bubbling water of the hot tub. As Susan poured hot cider into mugs, I settled between Elizabeth and Gina.

"What did you think?" Gina asked quietly.

"About what?"

"About the compass, silly," she said.

"How'd you know about that?" I asked.

She rolled her eyes. "Do you think you're the *only* one who talks to Susan? She asked me about it… about a month ago, before Thanksgiving."

"Why'd she ask you?" I asked, a little suspicious.

"Because she wanted my opinion, I guess. And…"

"And…?"

Gina actually blushed, her café au lait complexion darkening. "I think she's trying to get us to talk to each other more. I mean, she knows that things haven't been good between us for a while, and I guess she's trying to fix things from afar."

I nodded.

"But she also knows that *she* can't make decisions for us. We've got to talk to each other," Gina said earnestly. "I mean, I'm even willing to try to work things out with Kendall… again."

"Do you want to drive up to Chattanooga with me tomorrow?" I asked immediately.

"That's a dumb idea," she said without heat. "I mean, think about it for a moment. Kendall thinks she's got you for the night, by yourself. How will she feel if *I* show up uninvited?"

"I see what you mean."

"Mmm hmm. But maybe when we get back to school, we can all sit down and talk about things. Okay?"

"It's a date," I said. Then I kissed her.

"I love you *so* much," she said with quiet intensity, her breasts crushing against me as she hugged me tight.

"Hey, the kids are starting early," Chris said.

Elizabeth made a reproachful moue at his antics.

"I thought we were gonna— Hey! That hurt."

"And I'll do it again if you don't behave," Elizabeth threatened.

Chris rubbed his side and grimaced.

Elizabeth smiled sweetly. "Do you want me to kiss it and make it better?"

"Now *that's* not a bad idea," Chris said.

"Mom?" Leah prompted from across the tub.

"Yes, dear?"

"Can Erin and I join you all tonight? We're not kids anymore, and—"

"You know the rules," Elizabeth interrupted. "Not until you're eighteen."

"But that's not *fair*. Gina and Paul didn't have to wait!"

"They most certainly *did* have to wait," Elizabeth said sternly, her British accent making her sound a little prim. Then her expression softened. "But we sometimes made exceptions…," she ventured, glancing at my mom.

The two women shared a silent conversation and then looked toward Susan, who said, "We *did* make an occasional exception."

"*Please*, Mom," Leah begged. "Please, please, please, please."

I glanced at Erin, who was grinning. Then Mom got her attention and wordlessly asked if she wanted to join us. Erin considered it for a moment and then nodded.

"I don't know…," Elizabeth was saying when I turned my attention back to her. I knew her well enough to realize that she'd already made up her mind, though. She was going to let her youngest daughter join the party, but she wanted to see how Leah would behave if she thought she wasn't going to get what she wanted.

"Please, Mom," Leah asked. "I promise, I won't ask again."

When Leah actually closed her mouth and stopped wheedling, my eyebrows rose in surprise.

"What do you think, dear?" Elizabeth asked her husband.

"I think I know when to keep my mouth shut," Chris answered immediately.

"For *once*," Elizabeth said. Then she smiled to take the sting out of her words. Finally, she turned and looked a question at my mom.

"It's all right with me," Mom said.

"This is an *exception*," Elizabeth stressed to her daughter. "A special occasion. Okay?"

"Thank you, Mom," Leah gushed. "Thank you, thank you, thank you." With that, she practically lunged at me.

"Hey there! Not so fast," Gina said, fending off her sister.

"But…"

"Leah…," her mother warned.

"Why don't we have a mother-daughter party?" Susan suggested, the voice of reason. "Beth and Erin can tag-team Chris—"

Mom and Erin grinned at each other, while Chris tried to look scared. They didn't buy it.

"—and you and your mom," Susan continued, to Leah, "can find out if David's man enough for two women at once."

"Oh, he is," Mom assured Susan.

"But what about Paul?" Leah asked. Then she glanced at Susan. "Oh."

"Mmm hmm," Susan said. "I thought Gina and I would see if Paul can handle both of us."

"D'you think you can, ahem, *do it*, big boy?" Gina asked, even white teeth flashing in challenge.

Leah started to protest, but at a sharp look from her mother, she fell silent. Then Elizabeth gestured for her daughter to come close. I was near enough to overhear.

"Don't you think David is sexy?" Elizabeth asked.

Leah nodded sullenly. "Yeah, but Paul—"

"No 'buts,'" Elizabeth cautioned.

Leah fell silent.

"You *know* how much David shoots when he comes. I know you like the taste," Elizabeth said. "After all, you're a Coulter woman." When Leah didn't react, Elizabeth continued, softly, but with steel in her voice. "Leah, if Susan and Gina want to have sex with Paul, then that's the way it's going to be. Paul is *Gina's* boyfriend. You know how we do things… the women make the rules."

Leah reluctantly nodded.

"Besides, it's Susan's only night here, and you're being childish."

Leah started to bristle, but her mother cut her off with a gesture.

"If you don't stop pouting," Elizabeth said, "I'm going to change my mind about letting you participate. Do you understand me, young lady?"

Around the hot tub, idle conversation continued, everyone pointedly ignoring the mother-daughter tête-à-tête. I was looking at anything *but* Leah and Elizabeth—and I'd even made a few inane contributions to the conversation around me—but I was riveted to the drama next to me, of course.

"But, Mom…" Leah half-whined.

"*Leah!* Stop and think about what you're doing. David knows you want to have sex with Paul. How do you think it makes him feel to know he's your second choice? How would it make *you* feel?"

"Not very good," Leah answered after a moment.

"Precisely. That's not very polite."

Leah silently agreed.

"And you know how I feel about rudeness," Elizabeth warned.

"Yes, Mom," Leah said in resignation.

"Then you have a choice. You can change your attitude and decide to enjoy yourself, or…"

"Or?" Leah asked, although she probably knew the answer.

"Or you can go up to the house and sit in your room. The choice is yours."

Leah sighed. Then, "But, Mom, I just wanna—"

"I know, dear," Elizabeth interrupted, her voice comforting. "But I have it on good authority"—she flicked her eyes to my mom, who briefly met them—"that David thinks you're very sexy."

"He *does?!*"

"Mmm hmm," Elizabeth answered. "He told me that you're tempting enough to break the rules for."

"He did?"

I didn't think Dad had said anything of the sort—it wasn't like him—but Leah didn't know that, and it was a harmless fiction, used to divert her attention.

"Mmm hmm," Elizabeth continued. "He's a very good lover, and he *does* shoot a lot when he comes."

Leah nodded with growing enthusiasm. "He does," she mused.

"Besides," Elizabeth added, the coup de grâce, "I think you're probably old enough to have sex with him."

"*Real* sex?" Leah asked, suddenly *very* excited. "Not just a blowjob?"

"Real sex," Elizabeth confirmed. "That is, if you can convince him you want to."

"'*Want* to'?!" Leah repeated. "Of *course* I want to. God, I'm so horny, I'm ready to explode."

With that, Leah and Elizabeth turned to look at my dad.

Around us, the conversation died, as if on cue. (We were all paying attention to the byplay, of course.)

"Uh-oh," Chris said comically, "you're a marked man, David."

My dad made a show of looking nervous. Then he grinned, as self-assured as I'd ever seen him.

Mother and daughter waded across the hot tub to him.

When I looked at Gina, she smiled.

"God," she said quietly, "that was brilliant."

I nodded.

"Maybe turning into my mother isn't such a bad thing after all."

"She *is* sexy," I said, grinning impishly.

"*You* are incorrigible," Gina shot back. Then she pinched my ribs.

"Hey! That hurt."

"And I'll do it again if you don't behave," Gina said, repeating her mother's words from earlier. Then she flashed me the same sweet Elizabeth-smile. "Do you want me to kiss it and make it better?"

"I want you to kiss lower," I said.

"I think that can be arranged," Susan said, sliding to my left. Then she and Gina shared a conspiratorial look. "I just love these little hot tub soirées, don't you?" she asked Gina.

"I do indeed," Gina replied. "You meet the most fascinating people."

"Like this young man, for instance," Susan said, as if I weren't there. "An excellent specimen of manhood: handsome, strong, virile."

Gina nodded at each word.

"But is he good in bed?" Susan asked rhetorically. "So many handsome young men don't know what to do with a woman."

"Or *two*," Gina added.

"My point exactly," Susan agreed. Then, completely straight-faced, "Do you think we should give him a try? It'd be an awfully big risk."

My eyes flew wide. "I'll show you a 'big risk,'" I said. Then I stood suddenly and scooped Susan into my arms, ignoring her yelp of feigned indignation. With that, I simply stepped onto the hot tub seat, and from there to the deck itself. My erection bobbed gently and water steamed from our bodies in the cold night air as I looked down at Gina. "If you want to take a big risk too, you'd better get your butt outta that hot tub."

"Yes, pitter-pat man," she replied, her eyes laughing.

At that point, I spared a glance at the people remaining in the hot tub; they were staring at me and grinning. I rolled my eyes for effect. "You see what I have to put up with?" I asked facetiously.

Everyone burst into laughter.

"You *are* incorrigible," Gina said, standing beside me. "But it's cold out here. Let's head inside." Then she scampered toward the guesthouse, not bothering with a towel.

"You heard her, pitter-pat man," Susan teased, trying to look innocent.

"'Big risk,' my ass," I jokingly muttered as I followed Gina. "I'll show you a 'big risk.'"

"I was hoping you would," Susan replied with a grin. "Several times."

Once inside the guesthouse, we found towels and dried off. Then I draped a dry towel over the loveseat and sat down. Gina and Susan nudged my legs apart and sat on the floor between them.

With that, Susan began kissing the tip of my dick while Gina tongued my balls. A few minutes later, I looked up as the outside door opened; Mom, Erin, and Chris entered.

"Where're the others?" I asked.

"Trying to freeze your father," Mom said.

"Did you see his teeth chattering?" Chris asked her, chuckling.

Mom nodded. "He won't say anything about it though."

Gina sat up and turned. "Has Leah got him trapped?" she asked.

Chris and Mom shared a grin.

"In a manner of speaking," Mom elaborated.

Susan stopped sucking me and looked up. (She kept her hand on my cock, though, stroking it gently.)

"A horny young woman can be… *persuasive*," Mom said.

"Especially a *Coulter* woman," Gina agreed. "I mean, I remember how I was at her age. If I hadn't had Paul, I think I would've gone nuts."

"She still doesn't have a steady boyfriend?" Susan asked.

Mom and Erin shook their heads at the same time.

"She just needs some self-confidence," Mom said as she directed Chris to sit on the couch.

"Is that what David calls it these days?" Chris teased. "So I guess he's"—dramatic pause—"*instilling confidence* in her?"

Susan smirked but then looked a question at my mom.

"Well," Mom said, "let's say that she's discovered his 'confidence' and she's busy instilling it for herself."

Erin giggled.

I could picture Leah frantically fucking my father. I silently chuckled at the thought.

At that point, Mom and Erin sat on either side of Chris, and Mom began playing with his dick, stroking him back to hardness.

"Elizabeth seems to have things well in hand," she said.

"So do you," Chris quipped.

Mom rolled her eyes. "I meant with *Leah*," she said.

"I was just making an observation," he said, trying to sound innocent.

"Take over for me," Mom said to Erin, indicating Chris's dick. When Erin started stroking Chris, Mom rose on the couch. "Here," she said to him, aiming her breast at his mouth, "this should keep you quiet."

With a roguish grin, Chris wrapped his lips around my mom's nipple.

"Now," Mom began, "as I was saying… Elizabeth seems to have things— Oh… ooh, keep

doing that." (Chris had begun playing with my mom's pussy, distracting her.) "What was I saying?" she asked, only half joking.

Erin grinned at me.

Chris used his thumb to tease my mom's clit, and she stopped talking altogether.

With that, Susan and Gina turned back to me. Smiling, they picked up where they'd left off.

I watched Chris, Mom, and Erin for a few minutes, but then suddenly returned my attention to Susan, who had taken my cock into the back of her throat. Her nostrils flared as she took a deep breath. Then she swallowed my remaining length in one slow lunge.

When I felt her lips close around the base of my shaft, I groaned. Then I closed my eyes in ecstasy and rested my head on the back of the loveseat. I felt Gina crawl onto the cushion beside me. She leaned close, her warm breasts pressing into my side.

"I love watching Susan suck you," she whispered in my ear. "I just wish I could take you that deep."

"I don't care how deep you can take me… ahh," I grunted as Susan worked her tongue over the base of my dick. "Oh, that *is* nice."

"I make up for it in enthusiasm," Gina said softly.

I nodded.

"Now, while she's sucking, I need to kiss you." Before I could answer, Gina crushed her lips into mine, whimpering with growing passion.

I cupped her ass and pulled her closer. After kissing for several minutes, I slouched down on the couch. Susan adjusted without missing a beat—a lick?—and I lifted Gina. It took her a moment to figure out what I wanted, but after a little direction, she stood on the cushions and straddled my face.

As Susan sucked my cock, I nuzzled Gina's shaved labia and began teasing her with my tongue. She braced herself on the wall behind the loveseat, but I still used my arms to support her.

I licked her for a few minutes, sucking her clit and buzzing it with my lips. Then I pulled back and gazed at her pussy, dark and puffy with arousal. I spared a glance at the couch, where Erin was on her knees, sucking Chris as he kissed my mom. I smiled to myself and then turned my attention back to Gina's pussy.

Over the next fifteen minutes, Susan worked me into a frenzy. She laved her tongue over my shaft, teasing me with gentle bites. She planted kisses along my length, rubbing the skin of my manhood over her face. She sucked me gently, her lips caressing my hard-on. She took me into the back of her throat and her breath tickled my pubic hair.

While she did that, I teased Gina with lips, tongue, and fingers. I sucked her inner labia into my mouth and flicked them with my tongue. I buzzed my lips against her hooded clit. I dragged the tip of my tongue between her inner and outer lips, driving her wild. I shoved first one, then two fingers into her pussy, feeling the inner ridges, making her squirm. I crooked my fingertips, pressing her G-spot. She tried to collapse when the pleasure grew too great, but I held her above me.

By the time I was ready to come, my face was covered in Gina's juices and she'd begun to quiver with the first twinges of her own orgasm. Susan's head bobbed up and down over my cock as she took long, luxurious strokes, taking me deep and then dragging her lips over my

turgid length.

I was going to climax before Gina did—I knew her body well enough to recognize the signs, and I knew that it would be impossible for me to delay my own release—so I went into a holding pattern with Gina. I kept her on the verge of orgasm, teasing her clit but never driving her over the edge.

Then I concentrated on what Susan was doing. She sensed my impending orgasm and began pumping my cock with her fist, her lips wrapped around the crown. I groaned softly as my erection swelled in her mouth, the long buildup to orgasm coming to fruition.

With an explosive grunt, my legs went stiff as the first spurt of semen coursed up my shaft. Susan cried out in a combination of surprise and joy when I blasted a stream of hot, white come down her throat. She kept pumping me, milking my cock for the next spurt, which she quickly swallowed. Two more spurts followed, and then the flow slowed to pulsing gushes.

A minute or two later, I had recovered to the point where I could refocus on Gina's pussy. In the meantime, Susan kept sucking me, nursing my slowly deflating cock. I shifted into high gear with my tongue, waggling it through Gina's slippery folds. She half-shrieked and clutched at my head with one hand, her fingers twined through my hair almost painfully.

I crooked my fingertips and pressed her G-spot again. She shrieked, and threatened to pull clumps of hair out by the roots. When I surrounded the hard pearl of her clit with my lips and began buzzing, she tried to suffocate me by shoving her pussy at my face. I angled my neck so I could breathe and kept going.

Her pussy contracted around my invading fingers, the contractions quickly growing into full-fledged spasms. Finally, she cried out and arched her back. Her weight shifted, but I quickly adjusted, holding her above me as I relentlessly tongued her clit. A flood of warmth and wetness gushed around my fingers, but I kept right on sucking the bead of her clit.

Her orgasm lasted for almost a minute, and she had several smaller aftershocks before she pushed my mouth away from her hyper-sensitive clit. When she finally collapsed and sagged against the wall, I withdrew my fingers from within her. Then I grinned; the skin on my fingertips was wrinkled from being inside her so long.

Since Susan was still sucking my half-hard cock, I gently lowered Gina. I held her high on my chest, though, her legs straddling my midsection, her breasts framing my face. She embraced my head and kissed the top of it, murmuring soft endearments.

I couldn't see Susan, but I could feel what she was doing: as she sucked me, she was playing with her clit. I'd seen her do it often enough that I could picture it in my mind. (She liked to have a dick in her mouth when she climaxed.)

My cock wasn't rock hard, but she didn't seem to mind. She wasn't really sucking me so much as *suckling* me, nursing my cock for the sensations it gave *her*. Nonetheless, I pictured her in my mind, her breasts brushing my legs as her head slowly bobbed up and down over my manhood.

As I listened to her breathing and soft moans, I could imagine her expression, her face beginning to turn red as she held her breath. Finally, she clamped her lips around my shaft and then stopped sucking. I could almost feel her orgasm building, the sensations transmitted through my dick.

A moment later, she let out an explosive breath, a sort of cough around my cock. Then she

groaned, deep in her chest. I clenched my buttocks and made my shaft swell in her mouth. Because I wasn't fully hard, it didn't work as well as I'd hoped, but she moaned in appreciation anyway.

Finally, she let my cock slip from her mouth and then sat back, panting. I couldn't see her at the moment, but I'd seen the same thing often enough to know her reaction.

"I love you, pitter-pat man," Gina said quietly from above. Then she kissed the top of my head again, her soft breasts caressing my cheeks.

I couldn't breathe, but I didn't really care.

When Gina released me, I let her slide to the loveseat next to me. Susan, looking logy and sated, joined us. With all three of us, the loveseat was full, but I certainly didn't mind having two nude women crowding me.

In front of the couch, Mom, Erin, and Chris were still going at it. Chris was on his back, while Mom straddled his hips, rocking up and down on his erection. Erin straddled his face. The dark blonde hair of her pussy was damp and matted from her arousal and his ministrations.

While we watched, Erin leaned forward and began playing with Mom's nipples. When Mom didn't object, Erin grew bolder. She captured a swaying nipple, her pink tongue swirling around it. Mom groaned softly and increased her rocking pace, tilting her hips to rub her clit against the base of Chris's cock. At the same time, Chris's tongue went into overdrive, licking and sucking the folds of Erin's pussy.

After several frantic minutes, Erin shuddered in release. She let Mom's nipple slip from her lips. Then she arched her back and cupped her own breasts, her blonde hair swinging behind her as she shuddered in ecstasy. Finally, her orgasm subsided and she sagged to the floor, panting.

Chris, his face covered in pussy juice, grinned at Mom and immediately rolled her over. With her legs in the air, he began pounding into her. Mom played with her pussy as he did, her fingers moving in tight circles over her clit. She reached the point of no return before he did, crying out as waves of pleasure wracked her body.

When Chris was ready to come, he pulled out and began stroking his cock. Erin crawled forward as the first spurt arced from his shaft. It landed between Mom's heaving breasts. The next spurt was weaker, but still managed to spatter my mom's stomach with pearly droplets of semen.

Erin rubbed it into Mom's skin as Chris sat back on his haunches, his chest heaving from the exertion. Mom put her hand on Erin's leg and smiled up at her. Then she sagged back to the floor, exhausted.

I'd long ago gotten over the sheer weirdness at seeing my mother have sex, but it still gave me a secret thrill, especially since Erin had joined in. When Susan looked at me, she raised an eyebrow in question.

I don't know what she was asking, exactly, but I'm sure my blush was answer enough.

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Dad, Elizabeth, and Leah eventually came in from the cold. Leah had a silly grin on her face, but Elizabeth looked perturbed.

"…but if you freeze your partner to death," she was saying to her daughter, "it won't matter *how* much fun you were having at the time."

"Yes, Mom," Leah said, trying to look apologetic, although her goofy smile belied her

contrition. Then she turned serious. “I didn’t realize how cold he was,” she added.

Dad didn’t exactly have icicles hanging from him, but his lips *were* blue, and he was obviously suppressing shivers.

“I think I’m going to take a hot shower to wash off the chlorine, and to warm up,” Dad said. Then he turned to Leah. “You wanna join me?”

Her eyes immediately lit up.

“I don’t know if I’m ready for round two,” he said as they started toward the bathroom, “but that doesn’t mean we can’t fool around.”

“What happened?” Chris asked when we heard the bathroom door shut behind them.

Elizabeth explained that Leah had spent most of the time in the hot tub itself, while my dad had been perched on the edge. His feet and legs had been in the water, but his upper body hadn’t. Even when Leah wanted to fuck him, she had simply stood on the seat, turned around, and lowered herself onto his cock. When she got cold, of course, she slipped into the hot water and resumed sucking him. According to Elizabeth, Leah had done that several times.

Dad hadn’t uttered a word of complaint, but Elizabeth could tell that he was uncomfortable. And she knew well enough that uncomfortable men rarely reach orgasm (a fact her daughter didn’t seem to realize, since she was having so much fun switching between sucking and fucking).

Elizabeth had suggested that my dad sit in the water itself while Leah rode him. Dad didn’t get completely warm, but the bubbling water had done wonders for his libido. He had finally come inside Leah, at which point Elizabeth suggested a change in venue.

“I swear,” Elizabeth said at last, “that girl is going to be the death of me.”

“And my husband,” Mom joked.

“Your mother always said you’d have the daughters you deserved,” Chris teased his wife.

“You old terrier,” she said to him, “don’t blame me. She gets it from both of us; you’re just as horny as I am.”

“But I know when to come in out of the cold.”

“Then teach our daughter that,” she shot back. Then she took a deep, calming breath. After a moment, she smiled. “Oh, I suspect David will survive.”

Mom nodded.

“But Leah might’ve invented a new kind of blue balls,” Chris deadpanned.

“I don’t think *any* man is in danger of having blue balls around Leah,” Elizabeth said. “That is, if she can just overcome her shyness.” For a moment, she was silent. Then she stood up suddenly. “I’d better go rescue David,” she said. “Besides, Leah needs to learn to share.” With a feigned sigh of weary determination, she said, “My work is never done.”

We chuckled as she headed toward the bathroom, for her daughter’s education as well as her own enjoyment, of course.

✧ ✧ ✧

We spent the next hour enjoying ourselves. Susan and Gina got me hard again, and I took turns fucking them from behind as they bent over the loveseat. On the couch, Mom and Erin double-teamed Chris.

Erin didn’t have sex with Chris, which I thought was odd. During a break, she and I were in the kitchen together—alone—so I asked her about it.

"Oh, that," she said, almost offhand. "I'm saving myself for Sean."

"I thought you… I mean, he was here for your birthday, right?" I asked, a little confused.

"Yeah, but we didn't have time to do it. I mean, c'mon, his parents were here, and a bunch of my friends, and everybody. Besides, I don't want some wham, bam, thank you ma'am kinda thing. I want to take my time and enjoy myself. I mean, it *is* my first time, you know."

I gave her a bemused nod.

"Well, what did you expect?" she asked.

"I guess I thought you two would… you know… do it."

She shook her head. "I did find time to suck him off three or four times," she said. Then she started counting on her fingers. "Three," she announced. "Yeah, three. The fourth time doesn't count, 'cause he didn't come. I guess I wore him out," she added, beaming.

I laughed and then put my arm around her.

She hugged me tight. Then, "Mom's right, you *are* losing weight."

"It's just a couple of pounds," I said tightly. "I mean, I don't *ever* wanna be pudgy again."

"Whatever," Erin said. "Just take care of yourself, big brother."

"Yes, little sister."

With that, we rejoined the group in the living room.

"Leah and your dad are in the bedroom on the right," Gina said as I sat down. "Since I'm going to have you all next week," she added, referring to our families' ski trip, "I thought it might be a treat for Leah to have two guys at once. I haven't said anything to her, though, because I wanted to talk to you first. So, what do you think?"

I shrugged noncommittally.

"Well," she continued, "I'm kinda worn out from flying all day. I mean, I *did* wake up this morning in Vermont. And I think Susan is pretty tired too."

I nodded.

"You look like you're not all that worn out," she said, "so I thought…"

In reality, I *was* still horny. But I didn't want to desert Gina. When I started to speak, she silenced me with a look.

"Don't worry about me," she said. "I'm fine. You're still spending the night, right?"

I nodded.

"Then we'll have tomorrow morning, after I've had a good night's rest. I know it's been a week since we've slept together, but I haven't forgotten a certain morning hard-on that always wakes me up."

I felt my face heating.

"Go on, have fun with Leah. Besides," she added, shooting a sly glance at Elizabeth, "I think my mom'll join you."

I followed her eyes to where Elizabeth was sitting on the floor next to my mom, chatting.

"Leah's kinda monopolized your dad," Gina said, "so I think my mom'll want the attention. After all, she *is* a Coulter woman, you know."

"Oh, I know," I said with a grin.

"I'll be here when you get back," Gina said.

I gave her a kiss and then headed for the bedroom.

There, Leah was on her back, her legs in the air as my father pumped into her. He looked like

he was having a good time, but he also looked a little tired.

"Care for some company?" I asked.

Leah's eyes snapped open when my dad stopped thrusting. When she gave me a blank look, I repeated my question. Her eyes widened and she immediately nodded.

As my dad resumed thrusting, I knelt next to Leah's head and let her suck me. As soon as I reached full erection, Dad and I switched positions. Even though my dad's dick was longer than mine, I thought mine was thicker, if only by a little. Leah seemed to agree with my assessment; she put a restraining hand on my abdomen as I entered her.

For the next ten minutes, Leah sucked my dad while I fucked her. When Elizabeth joined us, my dad seemed grateful for the break. He lay on his back and fondled her breasts while she straddled him, gently rocking her hips. Leah tried to pull me deeper into her pussy, her hands on my ass as I pounded into her.

We switched positions several times before I was ready to come (Elizabeth had long since swallowed my dad's load, and they had returned to the living room). When I reached the point of no return, I pulled out and started stroking my cock.

Leah half sat up, her mouth seeking my swollen manhood. She wrapped her lips around the glans just as the first spurt arced out. Since it was my fourth orgasm of the night, I didn't shoot much, but she didn't complain.

My dick was too sensitive for her to keep sucking, though, so I pulled back. Then I reached between her legs and teased her slippery pussy, driving her toward an orgasm of her own. After less than a minute, she stiffened and cried out in pleasure, her climax overwhelming her. Finally, she sagged to the bed and glanced up at me, her eyelids heavy. Then she licked her lips, tasting an errant drop of semen.

"I still say it isn't as good as pussy," she said, "but Mom's right, it *does* taste good."

I merely laughed and flopped onto the bed beside her.

✧ ✧ ✧

Since Gina was so tired, we went to bed shortly before midnight. Leah and Erin spent the night in Leah's room, while my parents and Susan stayed in the guesthouse (*after* the women changed the bed linens, of course).

True to Gina's prediction, my morning hard-on woke her, and she reacted by crawling between my legs and sucking me awake. In languid silence, I lay there and simply enjoyed myself as she fellated me.

At breakfast, Leah started flirting with me, but Gina quietly reminded her that the previous night had been a special occasion. Earlier, Gina had told me that she and her mother had talked about it, and agreed that Leah shouldn't have an "easy" source for sex (*me*, in other words). Consequently, Elizabeth sat down at the breakfast table and reinforced the "special occasion" message.

"Fine," Leah said. "I'll just have to find my *own* boyfriend."

The other women at the table all shared a covert glance.

"And I *won't* share him with you," Leah finished, glaring at Gina.

For her part, Gina took her sister's petulance in stride, since she saw her mother's guiding hand at work. I merely chuckled to myself, a semi-clueless pawn in Leah's education.

After breakfast, we took Susan to the airport. She had shipped most of her sons' Christmas

presents before she left South Carolina, so she only had her regular luggage. After a round of hugs and kisses, she boarded the plane with a final wave.

Around two o'clock, Gina and I managed to find a quiet spot—in the guesthouse—where we could be alone.

"When do you have to go to Chattanooga?" she asked.

"I need to leave by four," I said, looking at my watch. "We're having dinner at six. Why?"

She shrugged. Then, "I meant what I said about trying to work things out with Kendall. I know how much you love her."

I nodded.

"I used to, too," she mused. Then she bit her lower lip. "I don't know if I still do, but you're important to me, and you *do* love her. So…," she said, trailing off meaningfully.

"Thanks."

"I miss the way things used to be," she said. "I guess I got spoiled, having you to myself all the time."

I didn't nod, but I didn't contradict her either.

"Anyway," she continued, "I guess I can be friends with Kendall." Then she turned introspective. "Although she's not really my type. I mean, I don't even really remember *why* I wanted her to join us. Sure, she's sexy, but…"

But what? I wondered.

"I dunno," Gina finished, as uncertain as I was. "I guess we've changed."

I nodded.

"Still, I hope you enjoy yourself tonight."

"Thanks."

"What time do you think you'll be home?"

"My parents laid down the law," I said. It was rare for them to make specific demands, but in this case, they had. "Since it's Christmas Eve, they want me home by midnight."

Gina nodded.

"So I'll probably leave there by ten o'clock, ten thirty at the latest."

"I was hoping I could spend the night with you, but there's no way my parents'll let me. Not on Christmas Eve."

I wordlessly agreed.

"But I'll see you tomorrow," she said. "And then we're off to Utah on Saturday," she continued, "so I've got you for a week. I guess I can spare you for one night, especially for your girlfriend. But Paul…"

I raised my eyebrows, inviting her to continue.

"Just remember that I'm your *first* girlfriend. Okay?"

"Okay," I said softly, hugging her tight.

"Thank you, pitter-pat man," she whispered.

✧ ✧ ✧

When four o'clock rolled around, I loaded Christmas presents in the Jeep and headed north. Since Gina seemed far more conciliatory about the situation with our three-way relationship, I felt good. Kendall still had a major hurdle to overcome—realizing that Gina wasn't like all Greeks—but I had faith in her. After all, she loved me, so I hoped she'd be willing to at least talk

to Gina.

As I drove, I thought about how things had been between us, before college. The three of us had been happy together. I desperately wanted us to be happy again, and Gina's new attitude gave me hope.

Maybe I wouldn't have to make a choice after all.

Maybe, just maybe.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

When I pulled into the Paytons' driveway, Kendall rushed out to greet me. She threw herself into my arms, almost knocking me over.

"Hi," I said.

"Hi yourself," she replied, beaming.

"What're you so happy about?"

"*You're* here," she said. "My life is complete." Then she did a pirouette and smiled, white teeth flashing.

"You're crazy."

"Crazy in love," she said. "C'mon inside, it's freezing out here."

"I can tell," I said, glancing at her cold-hardened nipples.

She rolled her eyes. "Is that all you men think about?"

"Yeah, pretty much."

Once inside, Melissa emerged from the kitchen and gave me a hug. Drew introduced me to his girlfriend, Sherrie, a big-breasted blonde who looked more attractive than intelligent. And finally, Adam looked over the top of his newspaper and greeted me with a nod.

"Merry Christmas, son," he said. "Have you thought about that winch for your Jeep?"

I guess that was his way of reminding me of my "responsibilities."

"After all," he continued, "you never know when a good winch will come in handy."

I looked at him for a moment, trying to gauge his mood. When he cracked a smile, I realized that he was merely giving me a hard time. I decided to return the favor, so I pantomimed breasts and asked, "Winch or wench?"

His brow momentarily creased, but when he got the joke, his booming laugh filled the room.

"*Paul!*" Kendall scolded.

"Aw, we're just havin' fun, baby doll," Adam said. "Whaddya call it? 'Male bonding'?"

"Yeah," I added, "it's just male bonding."

Kendall rolled her eyes, but then looked at me fondly.

✧ ✧ ✧

After dinner, Melissa and Kendall served eggnog and sugar cookies. My first sip of eggnog was a surprise, though; my throat burned when I swallowed.

"What's in this?" I rasped, trying not to cough. When I looked up, Adam and Drew were grinning at me.

"Tennessee Sippin' Whiskey," Adam said, "courtesy of Mr. George Dickel." Then he took a swig. "Ahhhh," he said at last, smacking his lips. "I *love* the holidays."

I didn't miraculously acquire a taste for the whiskey, but it did leave me with a happy, warm glow. Kendall offered me some plain eggnog for my second cup, and I noticed that everyone but Adam and Melissa switched to the non-alcoholic blend.

When we polished off the cookies, we gathered around the Christmas tree. Actually, we gathered around the Christmas tree with the presents, since the Paytons had two trees. The first was mostly for show. It stood in the formal family room on the house's main level where it could be seen through the bay windows.

The second tree was downstairs in the basement, which had higher ceilings and a cozy wood-burning stove, not to mention the TV, hi-fi console, and a wet bar. So we gathered around the downstairs Christmas tree, and Melissa brought down two pitchers of eggnog ("high-test" and "regular," she called them).

The Payton tradition was to open one present on Christmas Eve, and I was included. Since I wouldn't be spending Christmas itself with them, though, I'd open all of my gifts from them.

After everyone opened their traditional presents, Drew and Sherrie exchanged gifts. Then Kendall helped me distribute the gifts and cards I'd brought. Adam and Melissa opened the Christmas cards from my family, the Coulters, and Susan, and gave me cards to take back to Atlanta in return.

Finally, Kendall opened her presents from Susan. The first was a book: the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, which she later told me was simply called the DSM (*the* standard reference for psychiatrists and psychologists). As I watched her eagerly leaf through it, I marveled at Susan's breadth of experience, which made her the consummate gift-giver.

Once Kendall set aside the book, she opened her second present, a pearl necklace and matching set of earrings.

"Susan called to ask me if you had pearls," Melissa said to her daughter. "I told her you'd eventually inherit some from Grandma Frances, but you didn't have any at the moment."

"Oh, they're beautiful," Kendall said.

Melissa looked on fondly when she tried them on, while Adam nodded in approval.

Then I opened my gifts from the Paytons: a book on Roman architecture and an album, J. Geils Band, "Freeze Frame." With that, Kendall and I turned to our gifts from each other.

Her big gift from me had been the shopping spree at Felicia's shop, but we had decided to wrap the clothes—the dress and shoes, at least—and open them in front of her family.

Kendall oohed and aahed appreciatively when she opened the boxes and "discovered" what was inside, but I had managed to sneak an additional present into the mix (with Melissa's help, of course).

With an uncertain glance at me, Kendall tore at the wrapping paper. Then she opened the black velvet box.

"Oh, Paul," she whispered, "they're beautiful."

I had gotten her a pair of amethyst earrings (her birthstone). She immediately removed her pearl earrings and put in the amethyst ones.

"Thank you," she said, hugging me tight. Then she gave me a sound kiss and sat back, blushing.

After showing everyone the new earrings, she eagerly gestured for me to open my gifts.

The first was a Polo sweater—forest green with dark blue stripes. The second was a small silver medal.

"It's St. Joseph of Cupertino," Kendall explained.

I looked a question at her.

"He's the patron saint of aviators," she said. Then she smiled bashfully. "I guess I want *some*one watching over you."

"Thank you very much," I said. I still wanted to help her conquer her fear of flying, but at least the medal was tacit approval of my own flying.

With that, we cleaned up the discarded wrapping paper and poured more eggnog. We relaxed and talked for a few minutes, but then Adam and Melissa stood.

"I think we're going to go up and get settled," Adam said.

Melissa smiled at us, her eyes a little unfocused from the spiked eggnog.

After another round of thanks and happy holiday wishes, they headed upstairs.

Drew immediately turned out the overhead light. The Christmas tree lights filled the room with a festive glow.

While Drew and Sherrie quietly made out, Kendall and I did the same. After ten or fifteen minutes, though, Drew stood up.

"Come on, baby," he said to Sherrie. "Lemme drive you home."

"But, Drew, I don't have to be home till eleven o'clock."

I looked at my watch: it was 8:55.

"Then I guess we'll have to find something to do in the meantime," Drew said, his tone suggestive. "You know, in the Scout."

"But, Drew…"

Kendall and I looked at each other and rolled our eyes. Drew obviously wanted some privacy—his father's Scout was the perfect place—and he probably wanted to give Kendall and me some privacy as well. Sherrie, however, didn't Get It.

"Come on, baby," Drew insisted.

"But I don't wanna go home."

"Then we'll have to find something better to do," Drew emphasized.

After another exchange Sherrie finally got the idea. Once she did, she bounced up from the couch and practically plastered herself to Drew's side. (Did I mention that she was more attractive than intelligent?)

"I don't know where he finds those girls," Kendall said after they left. "Sometimes, I wonder why he was ever attracted to Erin. After all, she's got a brain."

"Aw, Drew likes to play the field," I said.

"No kidding. I just worry about him getting some girl pregnant or something."

"He's not going to do anything that stupid."

"I hope not. But let's not talk about Drew's girlfriends."

I raised my eyebrows, inviting her to continue.

"Let's talk about *your* girlfriend," she said. "Namely, *me*."

"What would you like to talk about?" I asked coyly.

"Private presents. Wait right here. I've got yours in the closet down here."

While she was gone I reached into my backpack and took out four small presents. When she returned she set down her gifts and then settled in my lap. Her lips met mine, and the kiss quickly heated up.

I slid my hands under her sweater to her bra-clad breasts. Her nipples hardened under my palms. We broke the kiss and I lifted her sweater. She resisted, but I was insistent. Finally, I tugged the sweater over her head and tossed it aside. Then, with a practiced flip, I unsnapped her bra. She tried to hold it against her chest, but I pulled it away, her heavy breasts swinging free.

Finally, I pulled her against me. As we resumed kissing I tweaked her nipples, driving her to distraction. I had just unzipped her skirt when we heard someone coming down the stairs.

"It's my mom," Kendall hissed. She covered her bare chest and began casting about for her discarded sweater.

I dutifully stood up to intercept Melissa, and met her as she reached the bottom stair. She stood on it without coming into the basement proper.

The step put her head a good eight inches higher than mine, and I found myself looking squarely at her impressive breasts. They were the prototypes for Kendall's, of course, but that wasn't what drew my eyes; her frilly pink robe was practically transparent. Not only could I see her nipples, but I could easily make out the dark triangle of her pubic hair.

"I probably should've put on something more appropriate," she said, following my glance without batting an eye, "but you've seen everything I have to offer. Besides, I like to show off a little too, so I thought 'what the heck!'"

She'd obviously had more spiked eggnog than I realized.

"Is everything okay, Mom?" Kendall asked. She hadn't found her sweater quick enough, so she'd simply draped herself with a blanket. It was a feeble disguise, but her mother didn't seem inclined to take notice.

Instead, Melissa smiled indulgently. "Everything's fine," she said. "I just came down to tell y'all that we're going to bed."

"Okay, Mom," Kendall said, a little perplexed. "Thanks."

Quieter, to me, Melissa said, "Eggnog always gets me in the mood, so Adam and I are going to… um… enjoy a bit of Christmas cheer, if you know what I mean. And since Drew won't be home till after eleven," she continued, "y'all more or less have the house to yourselves."

"Oh, okay," I said, "thanks for letting us know."

"I know this is a special night for Kendall," Melissa continued, "and I didn't want her to worry about us coming down and interrupting things, bless her heart. Besides, I think Adam has a… *special*… present for me," she added, her words a little slurred by the alcohol. "It's my favorite beauty treatment."

I did my best not to let my surprise show, but I don't think I succeeded.

"Oh, you know what I'm talking about," she added with a wink and a smile. "Like mother, like daughter." Then her eyes unconsciously flicked downward, toward my crotch. "And Kendall's a lucky girl; you've got quite a cannon on you. Just be sure to warn her before it goes off in her face. Or *on* her face!" She chuckled, low and suggestive.

I couldn't believe my ears, but I nodded, my face flushed.

"Now," she continued, "I'm going to go see about my own beauty treatment. You two have fun. I don't expect we'll see you until you head back to school… so, Merry Christmas and Happy New Year." Then she hugged me, her soft breasts cushioning my face.

When she headed upstairs, her short robe flared and I got a good view of her dark-fringed pussy. (I'm ashamed to admit it, but I actually lingered to watch!)

"What were you two talking about?" Kendall asked when I rejoined her on the couch.

"She said that she and your dad are going to bed for the night," I answered simply. "So we won't be interrupted."

"Was that all she said?"

"More or less."

"You talked for longer than that," she said skeptically.

"You wouldn't believe it if I told you."

Fortunately, she was horny enough that she didn't press the issue. Instead, she discarded her concealing blanket and pressed herself against me. "Okay, where were we?"

"I believe we were kissing," I said, suiting action to words.

As we kissed, we slowly took off each other's clothes. She had to stand up to remove my pants, and when she did, she paused to let me admire her. Her waist chain glinted in the light from the Christmas tree. And she was still wearing the odd combination of amethyst earrings and pearl necklace, but I wasn't about to complain. When she reached for my erection, however, I stopped her.

"Let's get our presents," I suggested.

"Don't you want to…?"

"Trust me," I said confidently. Once we gathered our presents, I beckoned to her. "Here," I said, "sit on my lap." By way of explanation, I gripped my erection and aimed it upward.

She quickly got the idea. A moment later, she rested on my hips, impaled upon my length. Her pussy was as hot and tight as ever. I stopped her before she could start moving atop me, though.

"What?" she asked, perplexed.

"I thought we could open our presents first."

"Like *this?*" she asked incredulously, gesturing to where our bodies were joined.

"Mmm hmm," I said. "It'll be fun."

"But I thought—"

I shushed her with a finger to her lips. "Trust me."

"Okay," she said at last. "Although I don't see how you can concentrate like this."

"I can concentrate just fine," I said.

"Well, I can't."

"Then you'll just have to practice," I said. Then I grinned wryly. "Add another class to your schedule next quarter: Doing Everyday Things While Sitting on Your Boyfriend's Dick."

"How many credit-hours?" she asked archly.

"Three," I said. "With a three-hour lab."

"Do you have a syllabus?"

"Uh-huh. Monday, sit on your boyfriend's dick. Wednesday, sit on your boyfriend's dick. Friday—"

"Lemme guess… sit on your boyfriend's dick?"

"Bingo! Miss Payton, I think you deserve some extra credit."

She moved her hips against me, my cock sliding within her slippery sheath.

"But let's hurry up and open these presents," I added.

She smiled smugly.

"Okay, smarty-pants. You first." With that, I handed her a present.

"Ooh, *The Autobiography of a Flea*," she said as she unwrapped the book. "I've heard of it, but… where did you find it?"

"Susan kinda helped me with that one," I admitted.

"Oh, Paul, I can't wait to read it. Although… I've got an even better idea—we can read it together!"

"Sounds good to me," I said. Then, "Open the next one."

"Uh-uh. Your turn."

I opened my first gift from her, a small bottle of "Love Lotion."

"It's supposed to heat up when you rub it," she explained.

"Like you," I said whimsically. She started to reply, but then I tweaked one of her nipples.

"No fair," she gasped.

"All's fair in love and war," I said, grinning. "Here, open your next present."

It was another book, *Fanny Hill*.

"Susan kinda helped me with that one too," I said.

"I can't wait to read it… together," Kendall said, her eyes aglow. Then she handed me a small odd-shaped present.

It was a fancy bottle of lightly scented oil. I looked at it, perplexed.

"I thought you might like a hot oil massage… *my lord*," she said, her eyes demurely lowered.

"I'd like that… Ariadne," I said, in my best Roman nobleman's voice.

Her eyes flashed, and the temperature in her pussy jumped a degree or five.

I set the oil aside and gripped her hips. For several minutes, we simply rocked against each other. But we both had more gifts to open, so I reluctantly held her in place.

She frowned, but her expression brightened when I handed her another gift. "What *are* they?" she asked when she unwrapped the box.

"Ben Wa balls."

"Oh, I've read about them! They're supposed to move around inside me, and when they rub together, they vibrate, right?"

"Well, yeah, but the… um… the clerk at the store… said they don't really vibrate all that much. But you can use 'em with special exercises. 'K' something or another, although I don't remember the exact name," I half-fibbed, since I didn't want to explain the source of my information. I guess I was also feeling a little guilty about Felicia. Unfortunately, at the thought of the blonde—her perfect breasts, her inner muscles—my cock jerked and grew harder still.

Treacherous imagination!

"Exercises for *what?*" Kendall asked, feeling my excitement and misinterpreting it.

"To make your inner muscles stronger," I said, doing my best to curtail thoughts of Felicia.

Kendall's eyes flashed and she moistened her lips.

"I wish I could remember the name of the exercises," I said, glad for the distraction of searching my memory. "'K' something. Kay… Keg… K—"

"*Kegel* exercises?!"

"Yeah!" I said, seizing upon her greater knowledge. "You've heard of 'em?"

"Yes," she said, "but they're for bladder control problems."

"Bladder control problems?"

She nodded.

Then I remembered something Felicia had said. "You know how when you're going to the bathroom," I explained, "and you have to stop the flow…"

Cautiously, "Mmm hmm."

"That's what these exercises are like. So yeah, I guess they *could* be used for bladder problems, but—"

Kendall suddenly covered her mouth with her hand, deep in thought. "You might be right,"

she said at last. “I’ll have to do some reading. I think I’ve still got the book where I read about them.”

I nodded enthusiastically, and tried—*tried*—not to think about Felicia and her gripping pussy. Fortunately, Kendall distracted me by thanking me for the Ben Wa balls. Then she handed me another gift. When I opened it, I stared at the box in shock. “Are these what I think they are?” I asked.

She nodded like the cat that ate the canary.

“Where did you *get* them?” I asked. I couldn’t imagine her going into a store where she could buy—

“Mail order,” she explained. “I… um… ‘borrowed’ one of Drew’s girly magazines and looked through the back. You know, where they have all those little ads for sex toys and stuff?”

I nodded absently, still staring at the pair of fur-lined leather handcuffs, complete with steel rings and long leather thongs, used to tie them to… *whatever*.

“I thought you could handcuff me and have your way with me,” she said, her voice sultry and very, *very* arousing. She felt my cock swell within her, and leaned close. “Would you like that?”

“*Oh, yeah*.”

“Me too,” she said softly.

I was tempted to forego the remaining presents, but my willpower held.

“Okay,” Kendall asked, her face a mixture of disappointment and eagerness, “next?”

I handed her the final box and smiled a secret, smug smile.

When she opened it, she gasped in surprise, the reaction I’d been hoping for. “Is this…?”

“You said you needed one,” I said. “After all, you’re a modern girl.”

“But I’ve got the real thing,” she said, wiggling her hips.

“But ‘every girl needs a vibrator,’” I quoted. “Besides, who says you can’t use both at once: the real thing *and* a vibrator.”

“I don’t know…”

“Trust me,” I said, interrupting her. “Now, lemme open my last present—I dunno how much more of this I can stand.”

“It was *your* idea,” she said pointedly, smiling to take the sting out of it. Finally, she pressed herself against me and gave me a kiss full of heat and promise. When she pulled back, she suddenly turned shy and uncertain. Then she handed me a thick envelope.

On closer examination, it wasn’t an envelope after all; it was folded parchment, complete with a red wax seal.

“Open it,” she said, her eyes dancing with anticipation.

I broke the seal and unfolded the parchment wrapper. It contained several folded sheets of thinner parchment, filled with flowing script in Kendall’s feminine handwriting. “What is it?” I asked at last.

“Read it.”

It was a love letter. When I finished reading I looked up, my chest tight with emotion. Then I set the parchment aside and drew Kendall close. Her breasts flattened against my chest, her nipples hard. We kissed passionately as we moved together, her hips rocking as I thrust upward.

After several minutes I wrapped my arms around her and sat forward. Her legs gripped my waist as I laid her on the floor and resumed thrusting.

Our bodies twined together as one, my cock sliding smoothly within her. I took my time, but when I felt my orgasm approaching, I gazed down at her, our eyes locked. She caressed my face and silently urged me on, until I buried myself as deep as I could and erupted within her.

When I opened my eyes, she was gazing up at me, her expression full of love and devotion.

We didn't speak.

We didn't *need* to.

✧ ✧ ✧

On Christmas morning, I woke up bright and early. The night before, I had left Kendall's house late, but I'd been thoroughly sated and very, *very* happy.

Even though I had less than four hours' sleep, I bounded out of bed. I was full of energy, so I did a set of push-ups. Then I did sit-ups. After a round of crunches, I repeated the cycle. The slight burn in my muscles gave me a heady, world-conquering feeling.

By the time the rest of my family awoke, I had taken a shower, gotten dressed, and eaten a hearty breakfast (damn the consequences!). I'd also made coffee for my dad, and toasted some English muffins for my mom and Erin.

"My goodness," Mom said when she entered the kitchen, "what's gotten into *you* this morning?"

"I'm happy to be alive," I said, spreading my hands expansively. "Merry Christmas!"

"Merry Christmas," my dad said as he entered the kitchen. He seemed to be following his nose. "Did you make coffee?"

"Hot and black, made fresh," I answered cheerfully. I sounded like a TV commercial, but I couldn't help myself. Kendall loved me, Gina loved me, and I saw a glimmer of hope for my three-way relationship. Why *wouldn't* I be happy?

"Ooooh, muffins," Erin said as she entered the kitchen.

"Butter?" I prompted. "Jelly? Jam? Preserves?"

Mom and Dad merely glanced at each other and grinned at my boisterous attitude.

"Why're *you* so cheerful this morning?" Erin asked.

"Don't ask," Dad said hastily. "He's made coffee, fixed breakfast, and made coffee. Let's not spoil it with whys and wherefores."

"You said 'made coffee' twice, Dad," Erin said.

"Did I? I hadn't noticed," Dad replied, grinning to show her that she'd been set up.

She rolled her eyes theatrically.

"So I take it things went well with Kendall last night?" Mom asked quietly as she and I headed into the living room.

I nodded. I'm sure my smile was goofy.

Mom evidently thought it was. She smiled, bemused, and put her arm around my waist. "Good," was all she said. Then she looked over her shoulder. "C'mon you two. *I'm* ready to open presents."

"Yes, dear," my dad called from the kitchen.

Then Erin squealed in surprise.

A moment later, they emerged; Dad had Erin over one shoulder. He had even managed to grab his steaming mug of coffee in one hand.

"Daddy!" Erin squealed.

"Where did we put that sack of coal, dear?" he asked Mom.

Mom and I merely shook our heads and grinned.

After a moment, Dad set Erin down and sat next to Mom on the couch. Erin and I plopped on the floor, near the Christmas tree.

My family didn't have many traditions regarding presents. When Erin and I were younger, we had to take turns opening gifts (to avoid fights), but since we'd matured, neither of us felt the urge to quarrel over whose turn it was. Consequently, our Christmas mornings had become a lot more enjoyable, not to mention more informal.

And despite our teasing, Mom doggedly held on to her belief in Santa Claus. Consequently, we always had a number of presents wrapped in red Santa paper, with cards that read "From S. Claus, North Pole." Even though we gave Mom a hard time about the Santa presents—Dad even called her "Mrs. Claus"—we still enjoyed them.

While Mom and Dad looked on, Erin and I sorted the presents and made piles for everyone. Then we started opening. We didn't really go in order, but we did take our time, and we tried to pay attention to what others were opening.

Erin and I got the usual assortment of clothes, music, and gadgets that every teenager simply *has* to have. My parents' big present to the family was a color television. Their big present to me was a pair of Rossignol skis, Lange ski boots, and a fancy Gore-Tex ski outfit.

Then Mom and Dad grinned at each other and brought out Erin's big present. It was a smallish box, so I figured it was jewelry. When Erin opened it, however, she gasped in surprise and then looked at our parents, mouth agape.

They merely grinned.

"Are these…?" Erin asked.

"I think she's finally speechless," Dad said to Mom.

"What *is* it, Er?" I finally had to ask.

She held up a pair of keys.

Car keys.

Then she looked at our parents again, her expression full of unasked questions. She smiled from ear to ear when Dad nodded. In a flash she flew outside, heedless of the cold weather, her blonde ponytail streaming behind her. The rest of us followed at a more sedate pace. In the driveway, Erin stood gazing at her new car, a blue 1979 Honda Accord.

Sometime during the night, Mom and Dad had fetched the car from wherever they'd hidden it, then parked it in the driveway with a big red bow on it. They done it *after* I'd come home and gone to bed, though, because the Honda sure wasn't there when I pulled in.

Once I thought about it, I recalled that Mom had been unusually quick to respond when I knocked on their bedroom door and quietly announced my return (at 1:20AM, *whoops!*). I guess they'd been waiting for me to get home before they ventured out to retrieve Erin's car.

Fortunately, they were enjoying Erin's reaction too much to be upset with me, but I did sidle close to Mom and apologize for getting home so late. She accepted my apology by putting an arm around my waist. I gratefully hugged her in reply.

We spent the rest of the morning enjoying ourselves and our new gifts. I tried on clothes—*most* of them fit, although some were too large, which I took to be a good sign. Erin, however, sat in her car with the engine and heater running.

She set all the radio buttons to the local stations. She learned how the windshield wipers worked. She played with the emergency blinkers. She… well, you get the picture.

When Mom finally told her to come back inside, she sported a permanent ear-to-ear smile.

✧ ✧ ✧

Later that day we headed over to the Coulters' house for Christmas dinner. Mom and Erin had spent the late morning and early afternoon cooking, and when we arrived, Gina greeted me with a mixing bowl in hand. She gave me a quick kiss and returned to the kitchen.

Dad and I brought in our presents for the Coulters and arranged them under the tree, alongside the presents from the Coulters to us.

After dinner, we relaxed in the living room. Erin and Leah (who was green with envy over Erin's car) were our official Elves, handing out presents to everyone.

Gina's first public present for me was an old-fashioned leather flying cap and goggles. I goofed around and put them on, but I was a little self-conscious, since I thought I looked like a bug. They were more decorative than functional anyway, but I still thought they were cool.

Her second present was Polo cologne, and she urged me to try it on. It was a little "greener" scent than I was used to, but when Gina inhaled and her eyes lit up, I quickly forgot any misgivings I might've had about the scent. The other women agreed with her, and I quickly decided that when it comes to cologne, a woman's opinion carries a *lot* of weight.

My presents to Gina were simple, but they had taken a big hunk of my savings to buy: emerald and gold earrings, along with an emerald, diamond, and gold pendant. Emerald was Gina's birthstone, and the green gems glowed against her dusky skin.

For a moment, she was speechless, and I tried not to squirm as I worried that she didn't like them. But when she looked up, her eyes welled with tears and I breathed a sigh of relief.

She thanked me with a wordless hug, but then pulled back to let me look at her. I smiled and told her she looked beautiful.

"I love them," she whispered in my ear, giving me another hug. "I love *you*."

"I love you too," I said, hugging her tight.

✧ ✧ ✧

Even though it was Christmas Day, my parents agreed to let me spend the night with Gina. Erin and Leah wanted to go drive Erin's new car, although they planned to spend the night at the Coulters' house as well. In reality, I think my parents had plans of their own, because they seemed to be looking forward to having the house to themselves.

Kara spent most of the evening in the guesthouse, talking to her boyfriend, Victor, who was in Virginia with his family. Chris and Elizabeth disappeared into their bedroom early, so Gina and I basically had the house to ourselves.

"Do you want to open private presents now?" she asked, her dark eyes sparkling.

When I nodded, we headed upstairs to her bedroom.

"Give me a few minutes," she said, closing the bathroom door behind her.

She took longer than a few minutes, and when I heard her drawing a bath, I decided to relax. As I lay on her bed and stared at the ceiling, I let my thoughts wander.

I still needed to tell my parents about my "emergency" spending on Mom's credit card, but I hadn't come up with a good way to begin the conversation. I'd *have* to tell them before the bill

came in, though. My parents were sometimes strict, but they were always fair. From years of experience, I knew that if I told them about something before they discovered it themselves, things always went better.

I had another problem about the credit card bill, however: I didn't want to tell my parents when the Coulters were around, since I didn't want Gina to find out about my night with Kendall and Felicia. I didn't *think* Gina would be upset, but I didn't want to risk it.

So I couldn't talk to my parents while we were on our ski trip, and I wouldn't have much time when we returned. I reluctantly decided to tell them the next morning, before we met the Coulters and headed to the airport.

Thinking about the *reason* I'd spent all that money, however, brought Felicia to mind.

At the very thought of the blonde, I felt my penis twitch. Before I could stop myself, I pictured her perfect breasts, pink nipples bouncing in circles as I pounded into her on the manager's desk. The twitching in my dick became full-on swelling, and I tried to think of something else.

That only made things worse.

I imagined the feeling as Felicia's pussy contracted around my dick, gripping me, milking me. Memories of her body flashed through my brain in an insidious montage, tormenting me with pure sex appeal.

Finally, the bathroom door opened and I snapped out of my Felicia-induced sexual trance. Fortunately, the sight of Gina, backlit by the light from the bathroom, was more than enough to distract me.

She was wearing a black teddy, and it was so sheer that I could see the curves of her body, although the details were hidden by shadow.

"Merry Christmas, pitter-pat man," she said, her voice sultry.

I sat up as she walked toward me, my erection bending uncomfortably in my pants. I stood to relieve the pressure and Gina glided into my arms.

She tilted her face up for a kiss, and I obliged her.

"Do you want to open presents first," I asked, "or… do something else?" I was silently hoping for the latter.

"I wanna make you wait," she said mischievously. "So let's do presents first."

Thwarted, I nodded in agreement.

"But first, I've got something for you to put on… your first present."

My first gift turned out to be black silk boxer shorts.

Gina sat on the edge of the bed and watched as I quickly stripped off my clothes. Her eyes followed my bobbing erection, but she didn't make a move for it (much to my consternation).

After I donned the boxers, she beckoned me close and looked up at me, her dark eyes full of desire. Then she reached out. "Oh," she cooed, rubbing the silk against my balls as she cupped them, "this feels nice."

I groaned softly in agreement

"Although your poor dick looks trapped," she added mischievously. "Let's see if we can give the little guy some relief."

"Little?" I half-squawked.

"Maybe not so little," she amended. "Certainly big enough for *me*." With that, she unbuttoned

the boxers' fly and delicately withdrew my swollen shaft. Instead of swallowing it—as I wanted—she simply kissed the tip. Then, obviously teasing me, her demeanor changed. She grinned sweetly and looked up at me, her face the mask of innocence. "Where's *my* first present?" she asked.

"Tie a bow around my dick," I said. I wasn't entirely kidding.

She made a moue. Then she gestured for me to sit down. As I did, she moved to the center of the bed, where she crossed her legs Indian-style and folded her hands in her lap. I knew she wasn't wearing panties, but it didn't make a difference; I could barely make out the shape of her body underneath the translucent black teddy. The outfit made her seem even sexier, since my imagination filled in the details of her figure.

I also sat cross-legged, my erection jutting up from the boxers' fly. When I realized that she wasn't going to reach for me, I retrieved a present and handed it to her. Inspired by Susan's suggestions of books for Kendall, I had bought Gina one of the few sex books I could think of (other than the *Joy of Sex*, that is). Even better, the book was perfect for her, especially with her Indian heritage.

"Oh, cool," she said. "The *Kama Sutra*."

I nodded, silently hoping that we'd try several of the positions before the night was over.

"My mom has one of these, and I used to sneak peaks at it all the time. We should try 'The Position of the Wife of Indra,'" she said. "I think you'll like that one. I know I will."

"We could try it now," I suggested, my erection throbbing in anticipation.

Instead of saying no, Gina simply blinked, as if she didn't understand. Then she glanced at the remaining presents.

I muttered about stubborn girlfriends and reached out to take the gift she offered. When I opened the small box, I sifted through the tissue paper and eventually discovered a plastic card, about the size of a credit card. The words "Ultimate Boyfriend" were hand-stenciled on one side, but it was otherwise plain. "What *is* it?" I asked, my brow furrowed.

"It's an Ultimate Boyfriend card," she said, as if that explained everything.

Still puzzled, I gestured for her to continue.

"It's the card you use when you want something," she added, obviously enjoying my reaction.

"Like what? Can I use it *now?*"

"Not yet, silly," she said. "I haven't even explained what it does."

"Okay, well, hurry up and explain so I can use it."

She smiled indulgently. "You use it when you want me to do something."

I shrugged, still clueless.

"We're both busy at school, but we need to spend more time together," she explained. "I've got my sorority and classes, and you've got classes, your workouts, your… well, you know."

I nodded.

"Sometimes," she admitted, "I realized that I put the sorority before you, and I'm sorry. I know I shouldn't, but I get so frus— anyway, I shouldn't do it. So I decided to make an Ultimate Boyfriend card for you. Whenever I've got something else to do, you need to remind me that *you* come first. That's what the card is for. All you have to do is mention it, and it trumps whatever else I had planned: sorority mixers, studying, *anything*."

"Wow," I said, comprehension dawning. And then I felt like a jerk. I realized that I routinely

put other priorities before Gina (Kendall, friends, or even classes). I felt bad for doing it, but I felt *worse* that Gina had realized it before I did. I should've known better. Gina had been the most important person in my life for years, and I'd begun to take her for granted. *Not* good.

"The Ultimate Boyfriend card is just a way to remind us what's really important between us. You shouldn't've needed it in the first place," she added softly, "but I haven't been a good girlfriend lately."

"You've been a *great* girlfriend," I said. "I… I need to pay more attention to you, too."

She smiled wistfully, but was gracious enough not to nod.

"Jeez," I said. "Now I feel like a total jerk."

"Why?"

"I don't have anything like this for you."

She put her hand on my knee, her touch soft and comforting. "You don't need to. I… I know you've got Kendall in your life, but…"

"*You're* my first girlfriend."

"Thank you," she whispered. After a moment of shared silence, she smiled in amused dejection.

I followed her glance to my wilted erection and shrugged apologetically.

"I don't think we'll have trouble coaxing him back to his former glory," she said. "You still haven't seen my last present."

I smiled.

"I want to save it for *last*, though," she added.

I nodded and reached for her two remaining gifts.

She opened the white chemise set and her eyes lit up. "Oh, Paul," she said, her voice hushed, "it's beautiful."

"I'd tell you to try it on, but…"

"Later," she said. "I'll take it with us to Utah."

I nodded in agreement.

She giggled when she unwrapped her remaining present, the dildo. "It's not as big as the real thing, though."

Felicia said the same thing, I mused. Then I ruthlessly quashed thoughts of the blonde. "Do you like it?" I asked aloud.

"Mmm hmm," Gina said. "No batteries required."

"So Faith won't hear it."

"*Exactly!* So now my fingers have backup. Thank you, Paul," she said. "It's my second favorite dick." With that, she glanced at her first favorite dick, *mine*. "My last present for you is kinda weird. It's like the Boyfriend card, though."

I arched my eyebrows.

"Here," she said, handing me the gift. "I think you'll figure it out."

I unwrapped the irregularly shaped present to find a five-pack of disposable razors. For a moment, I was confused. Was Gina saying I needed to shave? Then I realized that the pack was open, and it contained *four* razors. My confusion only deepened until Gina leaned back and uncrossed her legs.

"*Now* do you understand what they're for?" she asked, drawing the teddy over her hips.

I glimpsed the dark lips of her pussy, her *clean-shaven* pussy. My dick immediately sprang to attention.

"Whenever you want me to— Oh, you *do* understand," she said as I uncoiled and practically leapt between her legs.

She ran her fingers through my hair as I nuzzled her hairless mons. The aroma of her arousal surrounded me, and I tasted it a moment later when I licked her. She shuddered as I darted my tongue between the folds of her labia. Then I used two fingers to spread her open.

She was already excited, and her juices soon coated my face. I buzzed my lips around her clit, and her hips bucked, forcing my neck to absorb the shock. I grinned to myself and cupped her ass, holding her pussy to my face.

When I finally lifted my head and looked up at her, she was panting, her teddy-covered breasts rising and falling with each ragged breath. I quickly shed the silk boxers and moved between her legs.

The heat of her pussy assaulted my senses as I entered her. When my hips ground against hers, she moaned softly. Then her eyes snapped open and she gazed up at me.

"You *are* the ultimate boyfriend," she said.

Instead of answering, I began pumping into her.

"Ul… ti… mate… boy… friend," she gasped in between thrusts.

I pounded into her for barely a minute before I was ready to burst. I didn't want to come yet, so I buried myself as deep as I could and remained still, breathing heavily. She wrapped her legs around my thighs and reached up to caress my face.

"I love you," she whispered. "I always have. Even when I thought you were a goof."

I swallowed hard and nodded.

"Don't ask me to explain it, but I've always known that I was going to be with you for the rest of my life."

At that point, I kissed her, hard. Then I began moving my hips, my cock driving into her. Our lips remained locked until I rammed into her and emptied my balls. When we finally broke the kiss, she pulled my hand to her heaving chest.

"You make my heart go pitter-pat. Do you feel it?"

I nodded.

"Merry Christmas," she whispered.

"Merry Christmas to you too," I said. Then, with my cock still buried inside her, I began moving, slowly at first, but gaining speed. My erection hadn't really softened, but since I'd come barely a minute before, I knew it would take me a while to climax again.

Judging by Gina's whimpers of ecstasy, she didn't mind at all.

✧ ✧ ✧

The next morning, I got up early, walked through the bathroom to Leah's adjoining room, and quietly knocked on the door. Without waiting for an answer, I opened the door and poked my head into the room.

"We need to head out soon, Er," I said, my voice pitched low.

"Okay," she answered groggily.

Our parents had told us that we had to be home before breakfast, since we needed to pack for our ski trip.

Gina was awake when I returned to bed, and she gestured for me to join her.

"I had fun last night, pitter-pat man."

"Me too."

"Do you have time before you go?" she asked, caressing my chest.

I looked at the bedside clock and then shook my head. "Sorry."

"That's okay. We'll have lots of time in Utah."

I nodded.

"Besides, we can always slip away to the lavatory on the flight out," she added. "Is there such a thing as 'gold membership' in the Mile High Club?"

I shook my head, chuckling.

Surprisingly, Gina turned serious. "I know things haven't been good between us," she said softly, "but I wanna fix that next quarter. Okay?"

"Me too."

"Even if that means I've got to share you with Kendall."

I nodded.

"I love you, and that's all that matters."

"I love you too."

✧ ✧ ✧

"Why didn't you tell us sooner?" Mom asked.

Erin had gone to take a shower, so I was alone with my parents over the remains of breakfast. And I had finally worked up the nerve to tell them about my pre-Christmas spending spree.

"I guess I never could find the right time," I said lamely.

"What did you say you bought?" my dad asked. "A dress… shoes… dinner?"

I nodded.

"And you spent more than three hundred dollars?"

"Almost four hundred," I said. "I'll pay you back, though. Um… well… as soon as I can."

He merely arched an eyebrow, and I felt lower than dirt.

"I kinda spent all my savings on presents," I admitted. "So I'm broke… I mean, except for the money I got for Christmas. But I'll give you all of it. It's not enough, but—"

"You can keep your Christmas money," Dad said, cutting me off. "You'll need spending money in Utah."

Mom nodded.

"Thanks," I said, relieved.

"But you can pay us back this summer," he continued. "You're getting a job with your friend Trip, aren't you?"

Surprised, I nodded. In the past, my parents had refused to accept my money. When I broke something, they made me fix it—a window, a desk chair, the clothes dryer (it's a long story). Some things were un-fixable, and I was simply punished. But they never took my money when I offered it.

The spending spree wasn't the same as breaking something, but it was close enough. So I guess I expected to be let off the hook, since I was too old to be grounded.

"You're wondering why we accepted your offer to pay us back," Dad said.

I looked up, taken aback by his insight.

"Son," he said, his voice uninflected, "being an adult has consequences."

I nodded. And then I suppressed an inner cringe; my little confession was turning into a serious discussion.

"Now that you're an adult, we can't punish you, and you can't really 'fix' a four-hundred-dollar charge card bill… except by working it off."

"I know, Dad. I'm—"

"Let me finish," he said, holding up a hand. "I work hard for the money I earn. I pay for food, clothes, electricity, car insurance, college tuition, ski vacations, and countless other things."

I nodded solemnly.

"I have a job that I enjoy, and I earn a good living," he continued. "Your mom has a job too—taking care of us. She doesn't get a paycheck, but you'd better believe that I couldn't do *my* job without her, so she's my partner, 50/50. Now, we take care of you and Erin because you're our children, and we love you. We don't mind giving you spending money when you ask for it. This time, however, you spent money you didn't ask for, money you were supposed to use only in an *emergency*."

"I know, Dad. I—"

"The amount's not really important. A new dress, shoes, and dinner at a fancy restaurant are *not* emergencies, son," he said, as angry as I'd ever seen him. He wasn't loud when he got angry; he was quiet, which was far, far worse. "Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir."

With a quiet parade-ground inflection, he said, "Look at me when you answer, mister."

I snapped my head up and met his gaze. "Yes, sir," I repeated, without rancor. "I understand." I don't know if he paused because I didn't look sincere enough, or because he wanted to drive the point home. Whatever the reason, I tried not to shy from his glance.

"Okay, son," he said at last. "Your mother and I will look at the bill, and then we'll let you know the exact amount. When you get a job this summer—"

"I'll pay you back as soon as I get paid," I interrupted.

"You can pay for your living expenses first," he said. "If you're not living at home, that is. But I expect you to pay us back as soon as you can. Is that clear?"

I made sure to look him in the eye when I nodded.

"I hope you learn something from this, son," he said after a moment. "When you earn your own money, you'll be free to spend it however you want. But until then, you're spending our money, and you'll do it by our rules."

"Yes, sir," I said. "I understand. And… I'm sorry."

At that, he smiled in paternal disappointment. "I know you are, son. Just don't let it happen again."

"I won't, Dad. I swear."

"I'm going to take your word for it, son."

I felt my chest tighten; his phrasing was almost formal, and definitely serious. If he took a man at his word, he expected that word to be good, no matter what. And once lost, my father's trust was seldom earned again. I suddenly understood—with *absolute* clarity—that he was no longer treating me like a boy. "I won't let you down, Dad," I said solemnly.

"I know, Paul," he said at last. Then he dismissed me with his eyes. "We've got a flight to

catch, so you'd better finish packing."

Humbled and a little embarrassed by my own irresponsibility, I stood and headed for my room. I felt like I'd let my parents down, and I vowed never to do it again. In retrospect, I'm sure that's exactly what they intended.

✧ ✧ ✧

In Utah we stayed in Park City, at the same chalet as the year before. It was a short distance from the rest of the chalets on that side of the resort, so we had a modicum of privacy.

Kara's boyfriend, Victor, went with us (his last name was Adams, I learned). He turned out to be an excellent skier. I skied with him most of the time, since Gina and Kara didn't want to brave the more difficult trails.

When we finally headed to the airport for our flight home, the day after New Year's Day, we were exhausted, but happy. The flight wasn't that full, so we had room to spread out a little.

"Now, who's riding back to Knoxville with you?" Gina asked, shortly after we took off. "Aside from Kendall, I mean."

"Wren, the girl from my Art History class."

"I thought her name was Christy."

"Christy's the *other* girl from Art History, but she lives in California. Wren's the one who lives in Atlanta. I modeled with her, remember?"

"Oh, yeah, you told me about her."

"Uh-huh," I said, relieved that Gina seemed to be satisfied with my cursory answer. I knew myself well enough to realize that I was attracted to Wren. So I didn't want Gina asking too many questions about her.

I wanted to have a threesome with Wren (or maybe a foursome?), but that would simply complicate my already thorny three-way relationship. That wouldn't be a good idea—just like *Felicia* hadn't been a good idea. I tried to convince myself that the blonde had simply been part of a fantasy, but *whose* fantasy was another story altogether.

As I thought about the last time I'd seen Felicia, I fervently hoped that her idea of "no strings attached" matched my own. I didn't like her cocaine use, and I didn't want to have anything to do with it, no matter *how* sexy she was.

✧ ✧ ✧

A couple of hours after we got home from the airport, I called Wren. She answered on the second ring.

"Hi. It's Paul."

"Hi," she said cheerfully. "Happy New Year."

"Happy New Year to you too."

"So, how was your ski trip?"

"It was good, thanks," I said. Then I wracked my brain, trying to remember what her plans had been. "Um… how was your trip?" I asked. "You went to Florida, right?"

"Yeah, Destin," she said.

"Where's that?"

"It's on the panhandle, near Panama City Beach. It was kinda cold, but not bad."

We talked for a few minutes, simply exchanging pleasantries. Finally, I got around to the

reason for my call. “Hey,” I said, “I wanted to pick you up around three o’clock tomorrow, if that’s okay.”

“Sure,” she said. “I’ll be ready. You remember how to get to my house, right?”

“Yep.”

“Okay,” she said. “I’ll see you at three.”

“Seeya.”

✧ ✧ ✧

On Sunday, Gina stopped by around noon; since she didn’t have anyone riding with her, she was headed back early.

“Hi,” she said, leaning against my bedroom door jamb.

“Hi yourself. C’mon in.”

She looked at the disaster which was my room and smiled. “My room looked the same a little while ago,” she said, chuckling. Then she looked at my bed, loaded with things to take back to campus. “Are you taking your skis?” she asked, a little surprised.

“Yeah. There’s a ski resort about an hour from Knoxville.”

“Ober Gatlinburg? I’ve heard it’s not really that good.”

“Yeah, I heard the same thing,” I said. “Man-made snow, lousy trails, etc. But it’s better than nothing. Besides, I wanna use my skis more than once a year. And I can always drive up to Boone, North Carolina. I’ve heard the skiing up there is better.”

Unlike me, Gina was an indifferent skier. She enjoyed it, but as far as she was concerned, the ski *trip* was the enjoyment, rather than the skiing itself.

“Anyway,” I continued, “I can go skiing on the weekends, if I have time.”

She nodded. “Sounds like fun. Maybe I’ll go with you sometime.”

“Yeah. That’d be fun.”

“So, when’re you leaving?” she asked.

“I’ve gotta pick up Wren at three,” I said.

At the thought of Wren, my dick twitched. Part of me was looking forward to the back-and-forth teasing with her. Another part—the part in control, fortunately—did *not* want to get into a situation with Wren similar to the one I’d created with Felicia. Sure, I wanted to have sex with Wren, but at what price?

If my experience with Felicia taught me one thing, it was that sex *rarely* came without strings attached. And while I didn’t have to see Felicia on a daily basis, Wren was another story entirely. So I had to keep a tight reign on my desires, since I didn’t want to let the Wren-genie out of the bottle (and into my bed).

In other words, Wren would have to remain a fantasy. But that led me back to my original problem: how to survive a three-hour car ride with her, especially if she was in a teasing mood.

“What’re you thinking about?” Gina asked.

I shook my head to clear my thoughts.

“You had this funny look on your face,” she continued. “Like you were…”

“I was thinking of you,” I lied.

“I thought you were,” she said, sidling close. “You had that look in your eye like you were in the mood.”

“Maybe I am.”

"Do you want me to shut the door?"

I fixed her with a hungry look and nodded. In reality, I *was* horny. And while thoughts of Wren may have been the spark that started the fire, Gina was definitely the fuel to feed the flames.

"So… what exactly were you thinking?" she asked, looking up at me as she leaned against my chest.

"I was thinking I could give you a bon voyage gift, a tasty treat."

"What *kind* of tasty treat?"

"Something warm and creamy."

"Oh?" she asked, one eyebrow arched.

"Mmm hmm. I think you'll like it," I said. Then I kissed her, my lips crushing against hers with more force than I'd originally intended.

When we broke the kiss, she wordlessly sank to her knees. I unzipped my pants and freed my stiffening manhood. Then I ran my fingers through her silky black hair as she wrapped her lips around my glans. The heat and moisture of her mouth felt incredible, and I quickly reached full erection.

It didn't take her long to coax an orgasm from my balls. When she did, she pulled back, her lips surrounding the crown of my cock. Then she started stroking me, applying just the right amount of pressure as she did. I leaned back and closed my eyes as the first spurt coursed up my shaft. Gina cried out softly, surprised and excited. Three more shots filled her mouth before the spurts turned to gushes and then a trickle.

Instead of swallowing, she pursed her lips and pulled off my cock. When she looked up, she smiled a tight-lipped smile. After a moment to savor the taste, she swallowed once, then a second time. Finally, she opened her mouth and gazed up at me.

"All gone," she said, her eyes sparkling. Then she kissed the tip of my dick. "Thank you, Mr. Penis."

"He says, 'you're welcome.'"

Instead of answering, she wrapped her lips around my slowly shrinking manhood.

"Do you want to…?" I gestured vaguely toward the bed.

She shook her head. Then she let my dick slip from her lips. "I'm fine," she said. "Besides, I need to get going soon." I started to pull back, but she half-whined in protest. Then she gripped my hips and pulled me toward her, recapturing my dick. "I thaid *thoon*, thilly," she said around my shaft. With that, she sucked me for several more minutes. I didn't go soft, but I didn't get hard again either. Finally, she pulled back and wiped her lips.

"Did *you* want to…?" she ventured, tacitly asking if *I* wanted more.

I shook my head. "I'm okay if you're okay."

"I'm *better* than okay!" She bounced to her feet. "I'm filled with love for my pitter-pat man." With my dick still hanging limply from my fly, she hugged me tight. Then she pulled back and gazed up at me. "I love you."

"I love you too."

After hugging me again for several long moments, she held me at arm's length. Then she rolled her eyes and reached for my dick. "Men…," she teased as she tucked me back in my pants. "They never put away their toys."

I smiled in amused indulgence.

"Will you walk me out to my car?" she asked.

"Duh."

Arm-in-arm, we walked outside, where she turned to me. Then she bit her lower lip. "Paul?" she asked after a moment. "Um… say hi to Kendall for me, okay?"

"Sure! Do you want us to call you when we get back to Knoxville? Maybe we could have dinner together or something?"

To my disappointment, Gina shook her head. "Too much, too soon," she said. "Just tell her 'hi,' okay?"

I nodded.

"I wish…"

When she didn't continue, I asked, "Wish what?"

"Nothing," she said, shaking her head. "Drive safely, okay?"

"I will."

"I love you."

"I love you too."

"I'd better get going," she said after a quick kiss. "Call me tonight, okay?"

I nodded.

With that, she hopped into her Bumble Bug and started the engine. She waved as she pulled out of the driveway.

"Things seem to be going well with you two," Mom said as I closed the front door behind me.

I looked up in shock. Had she been—

"No, I wasn't spying on you," she said. "But Elizabeth said that Gina was in a much better mood, that she was actually looking forward to going back to Knoxville."

"Ah. Okay. Sorry."

"You told Susan that I was 'scheming and devious,' I believe," Mom continued.

I blinked as innocently as I could.

She saw through my ruse and smiled to show that she wasn't upset. "I've got a reputation to maintain," she added wryly.

I barked a laugh. "Is there *anything* you don't know about?"

"Lots of things," she admitted. "But I can fake it like a pro. You'll find out when you're a parent, though."

"I hope so."

"Trust me, you will," she said confidently. Then she stood on tiptoe to kiss my cheek. "Now, go finish packing, honey."

✧ ✧ ✧

Wren answered the door when I arrived at her house. She was wearing a plaid skirt with a matching vest over a white turtleneck. Her dark hair was held back with barrettes, and it looked like she'd curled it.

"Quick," she hissed, "before my mom gets here. Here's what you need to tell her: you've got a girlfriend and you're in love with her… you're serious… *no!* you're thinking about getting married. Got it?"

I tried not to grin as I nodded.

"Is that Paul?" Wren's mother called from deeper within the house. Then she emerged from the hallway. "Come in, come in, Paul. It's so good to see you."

"It's nice to see you too, Mrs. Hilliard," I said.

"Oh, posh. Call me Helen." Then she ushered Wren and me into the living room. "So, how were your holidays? You went skiing in Utah, right?"

I spared a glance at Wren as I nodded.

"Wren likes snow skiing, don't you dear?"

"Mom, we've gotta go," Wren said. "We need to pick up Paul's *girlfriend* in Chattanooga."

I don't know what possessed me next, but on a whim I told them that Kendall and I had broken up.

Wren flashed me a startled look.

I surreptitiously glanced at her and shook my head, to let her know that I was lying.

"Oh, I'm sorry to hear that," Helen said.

I shrugged as dejectedly as I could.

Wren's nostrils flared and she set her jaw.

I tried to hide a grin; then I turned to Helen, the picture of wounded sincerity. "Things just weren't working out."

"I'm so sorry," Helen repeated. "Is there anything we can do?"

"We'd better get on the road," Wren said, giving me a warning look.

"Nonsense," her mother said. "Can't you see that Paul's upset? Besides, he just got here. We should at least offer him something to drink."

"Thank you very much, that sounds nice," I said, earning another hard look from Wren.

"Don't get up, Wren, darling, I'll fetch something."

"What're you *doing?!*" Wren hissed as soon as her mother was out of earshot.

"I thought I'd have a Coke—"

"*What?!* Why're you doing this to me?"

"'Cause I like you… Beautiful," I said, grinning like the cat that ate the canary.

She made a strangled noise. "I'll get you for this," she said, sotto voce. She started to say something else, but her mother returned with Cokes and cookies.

"Wren baked the cookies," Helen said, setting the plate on the coffee table in front of us.

Wren rolled her eyes and shook her head, denying it.

Disingenuously, Helen said, "Oops, I only brought two drinks. Let me give these to you two and go fetch a third."

"You're playing with fire," Wren quietly warned me.

"Uh-huh," I said with bland equanimity. "And I like it that way. Besides, I always did think you were… hot."

Wren threw up her hands and looked heavenward. "Why do I always do this to myself?"

I merely smirked.

Helen was gone for a suspiciously long time. Wren tried to get me to leave, but I didn't budge. Instead, I talked about anything I could think of, since I was having so much fun watching her squirm. Finally, however, her mother returned.

"So, what've you two been talking about?" she asked as she sat down on the opposite couch. She didn't have a Coke, of course, and I hid a smile.

"Nothing, Mother," Wren said. "We need to leave."

"Aw, c'mon, Wren," I said, crossing one leg over the other, "we can stay a few minutes." Then, as a final touch, I put my arm on the back of the couch. From Helen's perspective, I'm sure it looked like I had my arm around her daughter.

"You two make such a cute couple," Helen said, rising to my bait. "Don't you think so, Wren, darling?"

"*Mother*."

"I was just making an observation," Helen replied, trying to look affronted.

"Okay, well, we'd better get on the road," Wren said breezily.

"Nah," I said, "we've got time."

"Oh, dear," Helen said, "speaking of the time…"

"What?" Wren asked, hoping for a reprieve.

"I told Aunt Rhonda that I'd call her at three o'clock. You two make yourselves comfortable while I go make that call."

"*Mother*, we need to *go*," Wren said.

"Oh, you don't have to leave this instant," her mother said over her shoulder. "I'll be back in a few minutes."

"Yeah," I echoed to Wren, "we don't have to leave this instant."

She frowned. Then she punched me in the ribs. "*You* are impossible!"

I rubbed my side and simply grinned at her.

"And you can *stay* Mysterious, for all I care," she added, crossing her arms beneath her breasts.

"That's fine… but you're still Beautiful."

She tried to maintain her piqued façade, but she gave up after a minute's silence. "Why're you doing this to me?" she asked plaintively. "You *know* my mom's playing matchmaker. Now she's going to be asking about you every time she calls." She mimicked her mother, "'Has he asked you out?' 'What are you going to wear if he does?' 'How are you going to do your hair?' 'Has he kissed you yet?' Ugh! You have no *idea!*"

"If she does," I said seriously, turning toward her, "all you have to do is make up a little white lie to keep her happy; I mean, tell her that I asked you out. Who's to say different? Tell her you wore that vest and skirt," I said, letting my eyes linger on the formfitting outfit, "which looks fantastic, by the way."

She blushed.

"And tell her that you had your hair pulled back so it made you look like an angel."

She looked up at me, her eyes going soft. "Do you really like it?"

"Mmm hmm. Tell her I said you looked absolutely beautiful," I continued softly. Then, on impulse, I brushed the backs of my fingers over her soft cheek. "And when I kissed you, it took your breath away."

Her eyelids drooped and she tilted her head back, her lips parting in invitation.

My fingers light on her chin, I lifted her face as my own descended. Our lips met, and hers were soft and willing. She pulled me down and I felt her fingers twine through my hair. My body reacted automatically, and I leaned in to the kiss.

Inside my head, however, I was screaming, *What're you doing?! Put the genie back in the*

bottle! Put… the… genie… back *in the bottle! Kissing the genie is a bad, bad idea. Oh, no. Don't do that. No… don't… no… no tongue… oh, no, what'd you do* that *for?!*

As we broke the kiss, I pulled back, my eyes closed. When I finally opened them, Wren was just opening hers as well, a dreamy expression on her face. She looked at me for a moment, her eyes unfocused and glassy. Then her features hardened.

"You… are… *impossible!*"

I didn't know whether to cringe or bluster. *Faint heart never won fair lady,* I mentally quipped, quoting my grandfather. "Mmm hmm," I said, deciding to bluster, "I *am* impossible. But you're Beautiful."

She shoved me back, her eyes flashing dangerously. "Mother!" she called, standing up suddenly. "We're leaving!"

Helen burst into the room. "What? What's the matter?"

"Paul and I are leaving. *Now*."

"But—"

"Goodbye, Mom," Wren said. Her tone had softened, but she still sounded willful. "I'll call when I get to my room. *Alone*," she added, eyeing me.

I tried not to smirk when I realized that Helen was calculating how to make the best of the situation. In the end, she simply shook her head in dismay.

"It was nice seeing you again, Helen," I said, extending my hand.

Wren huffed imperiously and looked like she wanted to stomp her foot.

After another round of goodbyes—lingering on my part, terse and impatient on Wren's—we left.

As soon as we got in the Jeep, Wren crossed her arms and looked away from me.

"Look, I'm sorry," I said after the silence drew out.

"I'm not talking to you."

"I was just having fun. You know?" On one hand, I worried that I had seriously offended her. On the other, I worried about the ramifications of *kissing* her—with tongue, no less! Worse, we both seemed to enjoy it. "Besides," I added, trying to lighten the mood, "I was just fooling around."

"Well," she shot back, "if that's your idea of 'just fooling around,' then you'd better warn me when you get serious."

"Look, I said I'm sorry. I don't know what came over me. But it's not entirely my fault—you kissed me back."

"I did *not!*"

"Did too!"

"Did… not."

"Suit yourself," I said.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means that you kissed me back and you know it. You even enjoyed it!"

"I did not."

"Whatever," I said, throwing up my hands.

"I most certainly did *not* enjoy it."

I drove in silence.

"I did *not* enjoy it."

More silence on my part.

"I didn't!"

"Well, that's too bad," I said after a moment, "because *I* did."

Her angry retort died unspoken.

We drove in awkward silence for the next few minutes. A couple of times, she looked like she wanted to say something, but she never did. Just before I turned onto the interstate, however, I cursed.

"What?" she asked, suddenly concerned.

"My skis," I said. "I forgot my skis." I had meant to tie them on top of the Jeep, but in my haste, I'd forgotten.

"It's not too late to go back," she said, the anger from before all but dissipated.

"Yeah," I said, whipping the Jeep into a U-turn.

Back at my house, Wren jumped out when I turned off the engine.

"Where're you going?" I asked suspiciously.

"Hey," she said, "you got to embarrass me in front of *my* mom, so I'm going to return the favor."

"You're not serious, are you?"

She stared at me defiantly.

I didn't blink.

"No," she said at last. Then she looked up hopefully. "But I would like to meet her."

"You'll be on your best behavior?"

She crossed her heart and nodded.

"Okay, but I'm warning you…"

"I'll be good, don't worry," she said, semi-exasperated. Then she muttered, "Although don't blame *me* if—"

"Now who's being impossible?"

"*You*," she snapped, unrepentant.

I gave her a hard look and she backed down.

Inside, I called out to Mom, who was already coming at the sound of the front door. I warily introduced her to Wren, and they exchanged pleasantries. I was afraid to leave them alone together, but I couldn't exactly drag Wren with me, so I headed toward my bedroom by myself.

Unfortunately, it took me several minutes to find the skis' protective canvas travel bag. When I finally found it—under the bed!—I jammed my skis and poles inside and zipped it shut. Back in the living room, Mom and Wren were chatting like long-lost friends.

"Wren was just telling me that her father owns restaurants," Mom said to me. "The Tavern Steak House is one of our favorites," she added to Wren as an aside.

Impatiently, I said, "Yeah, I know." Then I tried to usher Wren toward the front door.

Mom flashed me a look of rebuke. Then she turned to Wren, determined to be polite (and to give me an object lesson, I'm sure). "It was nice to meet you, Wren."

"It was nice to meet you too, Beth," Wren said.

"Bye, Mom," I said, giving her a quick kiss on the cheek. "I'll call when I get to school."

As I tied the skis to the top of the Jeep, I watched Wren closely.

"What?" she finally asked. Then she figured out the gist of my unasked question. "I didn't say anything to your mom."

"I was just checking."

"I *didn't.*"

"Okay," I reluctantly agreed.

When I finished securing the skis, we headed out. For five or ten minutes, we rode in silence.

Finally, Wren spoke up softly. "Your mother's very pretty."

I glanced at her and then nodded, wondering where she was going with the conversation.

"Do you know who she reminds me of?"

I shook my head.

"Christy. Her eyes, especially."

At that, I turned and looked a question at her.

"Christy's got beautiful eyes," she said, almost defensively. "I wish *I* had blue eyes."

"Why?" I asked. "Yours are pretty." (They were hazel, with flecks of gold and green.)

"*I* don't think so."

"Trust me, they're very pretty."

"Thank you," she said demurely. Then she sighed. "She's also… elegant. And poised."

"Christy? Or my mom?"

"Both, actually, but I was talking about Christy." We drove in silence for another mile before she spoke up again. "I'm sorry I got angry," she said.

"About what?"

She rolled her eyes. "You know, earlier," she said. "You… me… the Kissing Incident? I'm sorry I got angry."

"Don't worry about it. I'm sorry I kissed you," I said. "I don't know what came over me. Well, I *do* know, but…" I felt my face heating at the memory. "I enjoyed it and all, but I knew I shouldn't've… I mean, I *wanted* to, of course, but I knew it was… um… what I mean is—"

"That's the thing about guys," she interrupted, "you never know when to quit while you're ahead."

I closed my mouth with a clomp. Then I chuckled softly, ruefully. When I glanced at Wren, she was smiling.

"It's okay," she added. Then she looked at me seriously. "Don't let this go to your head, but you're a good kisser. Just don't do it again, okay?"

"Okay," I agreed.

"I mean, I wouldn't mind kissing you and all, but you've got a girlfriend, and I happen to like her."

In more ways than one? I wondered.

"So… no more kissing."

"Deal," I said, holding out my hand.

She shook it and sat back, happy.

"Do you mind if I ask you a personal question?" I asked a few minutes later.

"You've seen me nude, you know my sexual preferences, and you've recently become acquainted with my tonsils," she said placidly. "So why should I worry about a 'personal question'?"

I shrugged. “I just didn’t want to pry.”

“Go ahead,” she said. “If we’re not past the awkward stage in our relationship, I don’t think there’s any hope for us.”

I grinned at her and she smiled in reply. “Why is your mom so gung ho about finding you a boyfriend? And why don’t *you* want one?”

She sat in silence for a long time, staring at her hands. Then she looked up and took a deep breath. “I had a really bad breakup last year.”

For a moment I thought that was all she was going to say. I kept my mouth shut, though, and she rewarded my patience.

“I was dating this guy on the men’s team,” she said. “The swimming team, that is. I was in love. I thought he might be ‘the one,’ you know?”

I nodded.

“Anyway, I wanted to take him home to meet my parents, because I thought we’d gotten to that point in our relationship. When he called to meet me before we left for Atlanta, I guess I thought he was going to ask me to marry him or something. *Ha!* That shows what I know.”

“What did he do?” I asked softly.

“He said he wanted out. He said he didn’t love me, that he never *had*. I was too wild, he said, too controlling. And he said his parents would never approve of me,” she added, her voice hoarse with emotion. “And to top it all off, he said the only reason he asked me out in the first place was because he was bored. And then he had the gall to tell me that his friend might wanna ask me out, you know, like on a mercy date or something. That *asshole!*”

“Who? The boyfriend, or the other guy? Never mind,” I added hastily, “*both*.”

She smiled wanly and wiped tears from her cheeks.

At that, I pulled to the side of the road. (*What* is *it with the road between Atlanta and Chattanooga?* I wondered.)

“I’m okay,” she said, trying to regain her composure.

“Look,” I said, “not all guys are like that.”

“I know.”

“And I’m sorry I teased you in front of your mom,” I added. “If I’d known…”

She brushed off my apology. “You didn’t do anything wrong.”

I sat in silence, letting her gather her thoughts.

“Anyway,” she said, cradling her hands in her lap once more, “that’s why I’m not real keen on guys right now… present company excluded, of course.”

“Of course,” I agreed. “Is that why you’re not on the swim team anymore? That guy?”

“It’s part of the reason,” she said. “I really *did* have mono, but after… you know… I just didn’t feel like going back to the team. I couldn’t stand to look at his face.”

“That asshole,” I said without heat.

“That asshole,” she echoed, laughing sadly. “Anyway, my mom thinks that a boyfriend is going to make me happy. So that’s why she pushes. She means well, but…”

I nodded in commiseration.

“I don’t need a guy to make me happy. *I’ve* got to make me happy.”

“True.”

“And you know what? I’m pretty happy right now. I like my life. And I like my friends.”

"I'm your friend, right?"

"Yeah," she admitted at last.

"Do I make you happy?" *Where had* that *question come from?!*

"Yeah, you make me happy," she said, laughing.

"I'm glad."

"But no kissing."

"No kissing," I agreed solemnly. "But are hugs allowed?"

She paused theatrically, as if weighing her options. Then, finally, she nodded.

I gave her a hug—a *friendly* hug. I couldn't resist, though, and kissed the top of her head, softly.

She hugged me tighter still in response. When she sat back, she wiped her eyes with the cuffs of her turtleneck, smearing her mascara. Then she laughed ruefully. "Damn," she said at last.

"What?" I asked, since she didn't seem upset about the black smudges on her white shirt.

"I had all sorts of plans for the trip to Chattanooga," she said. "I was going to tease you until you begged me to stop."

"Oh, please, stop," I wailed, affecting a falsetto. "Don't tease me anymore. Please, stop!"

She smiled.

"How's that?" I asked, grinning like an idiot.

"I suppose it'll have to do."

"Good… 'cause it's all you're gettin'."

"Thanks," she said after a moment. "Can we stop at the next gas station, so I can fix my makeup? I'd hate for Kendall to see me like this."

I nodded and put the Jeep into gear.

"Thanks again," she said softly. "For everything."

✧ ✧ ✧

Kendall greeted us at the door when we arrived. She gave me a hug and a kiss and then gave Wren a feminine peck on the cheek.

"Sorry we're late," I said. "I forgot something at home and we had to go back."

Wren and I glanced at each other. We had decided not to mention the Kissing Incident, since we'd come to an agreement not to let it happen again.

"I was beginning to wonder," Kendall said. "But you're here now."

"We're here now," I agreed.

She had a pile of bags in the living room. I had *no* idea how I was going to fit it all in the Jeep, since Wren's and my things already occupied most of the back seat.

"Hi, Paul," Melissa said as she emerged from the kitchen. Then she called to Drew, who came up from the basement with Sherrie.

After introductions all around—Adam had come in from the garage—Drew and I loaded Kendall's things in the Jeep. By the time we finished, the interior looked like the baggage hold of an airliner, packed from floor to ceiling.

I was the only one who wouldn't have something under my feet or in my lap, and that was only because I had to drive. I seriously considered strapping things to the spare tire, bustle-style, but the girls assured me that they'd have enough room to sit comfortably.

Before we left Kendall dragged me into her room, ostensibly to have me grab one last bag. As

soon as she shut the door, however, she kissed me fiercely.

"Oh my goodness," she said, "I've missed you."

"I've missed you too," I said.

"Did you and Wren have fun?" she asked, waggling her eyebrows.

I shrugged.

"What did you talk about?"

"Just stuff."

Kendall, being Kendall, saw through my evasion.

"It's not what you think," I said quickly. "I asked her why she didn't have a boyfriend, and she told me."

"What'd she say?"

"I'll tell you later," I said. "But anyway, after that, I guess we weren't in the mood to tease each other."

Her face fell. "Oh."

"Why?"

She blushed.

I repeated my question.

"I guess I was getting a little worked up thinking about the trip back to Knoxville."

Before she could continue, her mother called to her.

"Just a minute, Mom," Kendall called back. "We'll be right out. Paul's helping me get something out of the top of the closet." The closet was right behind the bedroom door, which would explain why we'd closed it. "We've only got a minute or two," she whispered to me, "and I wanted to show you something."

With that, she raised my hand to her mouth. Her blue eyes sparkled as she gave my index finger a little blowjob. Then, to my surprise, she pulled up her skirt and shoved my hand under it. She wasn't wearing panties, and my saliva-slick finger easily slid into her pussy, where I felt—

"The Ben Wa balls," she whispered excitedly. "I've been using them every day since you left. At first, I had a little trouble with them, but now they fit inside me almost as snugly as you do."

I practically leered at her.

"I thought it'd be fun to wear them on the trip back to Knoxville," she added. Then she leaned close. "And I can't *wait* till we get back to school."

My dick twitched in anticipation. Then I pulled her close and kissed her. Unfortunately, we couldn't delay any longer without arousing suspicion, so we composed ourselves and returned to the living room.

Wren smirked at us.

"What'd you need from your closet?" Melissa asked Kendall, who became flustered.

"It was her overnight bag," I said glibly. "But we already loaded it."

Melissa tried to suppress a smile as she accepted my explanation.

"So we'd better get going," I added, heading off any further conversation.

With that, we exchanged goodbyes and climbed into the heavily loaded Jeep.

"I can't believe we forgot to get something out of the closet," Kendall said as we backed out of her driveway.

"Yes," Wren said, grinning. "And what *were* you two doing instead?"

Kendall's eyes glowed with anticipation as she turned in her seat and faced Wren.

In the rearview mirror, I caught a glimpse of Wren as she grinned.

The girls talked for a few minutes, but then out of the blue, Kendall said, "You're not going to believe what Paul gave me for Christmas."

Wren arched an eyebrow.

"They're called Ben Wa balls, and they're these little gold balls…"

I shook my head in amazement and shifted my growing erection to a more comfortable position.

Kendall didn't spare a detail as she and Wren talked about the balls, vibrators, and more. I was hard the whole time, of course. I almost choked on my tongue, though, when Kendall mentioned her gifts to me, especially the fur-lined handcuffs.

"I have this fantasy," she admitted sheepishly, "where I want Paul to handcuff me and have his way with me."

Wren's eyes widened and then she arched an eyebrow at me.

I'm sure my face was glowing.

"Does Paul ever let you handcuff *him?*" she asked, turning her attention back to Kendall. "'Cause that sounds like fun."

Kendall looked at me demurely.

"No *way*," I said, shaking my head.

"Why not, Paul?" Wren asked, sing-song taunting. "What's good for the goose is good for the gander."

"No it's not."

"Sure it is," she continued relentlessly. "I'm sure Kendall would love to handcuff you and have her way with *you*. That sounds like fun, doesn't it, Kendall, darling?"

To my utter amazement, Kendall half-nodded. When she saw me gaping at her, however, she immediately shook her head.

"Oh, don't be shy, Kendall," Wren urged. "If he likes to handcuff you, then it's only fair that you get to handcuff *him*."

"Hold on a second," I said. "It's not *my* idea to handcuff her."

"But she gave those fur-lined handcuffs to *you*, not the other way around."

I saw where Wren was going with the conversation. "Uh-uh," I said. "No way."

"Why not, Paul?" she asked, her tone deceptively sweet. "Don't you trust her?"

"Sure, I trust her, but—"

"Don't you want her to enjoy herself too?"

"Yes, but—"

"Don't you want *her* to know what it's like to be in control?" she asked, pressing the point home.

"She *is*," I protested. "She's the one who wants to be handcuffed in the first place."

"But you're the one who actually does the cuffing," Wren said, to which I had no response. "That's what I thought," she said, as if she'd won the point. "So, when're you gonna let Kendall handcuff you? I want to know, so I can get the full story afterward."

"How about 'never'?" I answered. Then I looked at Kendall, who was staring at me intently. I didn't need her insight to tell how excited she was. At that, I threw up my hands and muttered

about how the conversation had turned on me.

Wren laughed.

After a moment, Kendall tittered nervously.

"I can just imagine it," Wren said from the back seat, "big, strong Paul, flat on his back, cuffed and gagged—"

"*Gagged?!*" I squawked.

"Don't talk," Wren said, "you're gagged, remember? Anyway, where was I? Oh, yes, cuffed and gagged, doing his best impression of the Washington Monument. So, Kendall, do you think you'll be able to cuff him, or will you need, ahem, reinforcements?"

I shook my head in disbelief as Kendall slowly warmed to the conversation. Wren was obviously baiting me, but I detected a kernel of hidden desire in her suggestions.

Good God, I wondered, *how do I get myself into these situations?*

By the time we neared Knoxville, the girls had plans for me to serve their every whim, waiting on them hand and foot. Kendall had even suggested that they do away with the gag, "since he's good at… um… you know… cunnilingus."

Wren howled with laughter at my expression, but I caught her giving me an appraising glance. She already thought I was a good kisser, and I watched the wheels turn in her mind as she made a few short logical leaps. Then she grinned mischievously.

"I bet I know what you two're gonna be doing as soon as you drop me off," she said.

Kendall's look was practically an open invitation to have sex with her right then and there.

"Uh-huh," Wren said, to me, "I thought so. So, super stud, are you gonna let Kendall use the handcuffs?"

"No!"

"Why not? Don't you want her to get you all worked up and then have her way with you?"

"No. The old-fashioned way works just fine."

"For *you*, maybe," Wren shot back. "But what about Kendall? Don't you care about what she wants? Hmmmm?"

"That's not what I'm saying and you know it."

"So why won't you let her handcuff you? Why won't you do what *Kendall* wants? You don't want to, do you?"

"You're twisting my words," I said. "I didn't say I wouldn't do what she wants."

"But she wants to handcuff you. So what about that, big boy?"

"What about it?" I asked heatedly.

"If I was in bed with someone as hot and sexy as Kendall, I'd definitely let her handcuff *me*."

Kendall and I looked at each other in shocked silence.

"I mean, if I was a guy, that is," Wren added hastily.

"If you were a guy," I said, seizing the opportunity to put Wren on the defensive.

"Of course."

"But would you let her handcuff *you?*" I asked. "If you were a girl, that is… which you are."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"What do you think it means?" I asked.

"Don't be disgusting," she shot back, her eyes flashing angrily.

I wasn't convinced. And judging by Kendall's soft gasp, she wasn't either.

"That's gross," Wren added.

Kendall and I shared another look and then I let the subject drop.

The rest of the drive to campus was quiet and a bit awkward. When we unloaded Wren's things in front of Morrill Hall, she declined my offer to help take her bags up to her room. Then, once Kendall had said goodbye and returned to the idling Jeep, Wren pulled me aside.

"I'm not like that," she whispered harshly.

"Like what?" I asked, feigning ignorance.

"You know, like *that*. I like guys, okay?"

"Sure," I said. "I understand."

She nodded.

"But it's okay to like girls too."

Her eyes darted from side to side.

"Calm down," I said, stepping close. "I know you like guys."

She relaxed, but not completely.

At that point, I decided to go for broke, so I leaned down, my lips close to her ear. "But you know what?" I waited two heartbeats before I continued. "One of the sexiest things in the world is a girl who likes guys *and* girls."

She stiffened.

"And Kendall's *very* sexy," I said. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Wren glance at the Jeep, at Kendall. "And I think *you're* sexy, too," I continued, my voice husky and suggestive. "But are you sexy enough to *admit* it?"

"I'm sure I don't know what you're talking about," she said primly.

I pulled back and studied her expression.

She looked away.

"That's too bad," I said, as nonchalantly as I could.

She met my eyes defiantly. "I said I'm not *like* that."

"Okay," I said at last.

She set her jaw, but didn't say anything else.

To her surprise, I laughed, short and sharp, defusing the tension.

She looked wounded at first, but then her eyes flashed dangerously.

"You're even more beautiful when you're angry," I said, still chuckling.

She huffed.

"And I don't care what you say, I still think you're sexy," I added.

"You're *impossible!*"

Still grinning like an idiot, I nodded.

"Im*possible!*"

"Uh-huh, and you like me that way."

"No I don't. I hate you."

"Well, you've got a strange way of showing it," I said. Then I switched tacks, "Now, are you sure you don't want me to help carry this stuff up to your room?"

Her eyes flashed. "I can get it myself."

"Suit yourself," I replied, my lips quirked up in a half-smile.

She huffed again and stomped her foot.

"I'm impossible, I know. And you're Beautiful."

She crossed her arms, glaring at me.

"But maybe you need a new nickname," I mused. When her eyes widened in growing fear and understanding, I grinned. "I think I'll call you… Sexy."

"You wouldn't *dare*…"

"Well, you *are*," I said, nodding smugly.

She made a wordless growl of frustration.

"G'night… Sexy."

"Don't call me that."

I didn't respond. Instead, I simply winked at her.

"Men!" she said, throwing her hands up and gazing skyward. "Ugh!"

Grinning like an idiot, I turned toward the waiting Jeep.

"Why do I always do this to myself?" Wren muttered behind me.

Before I got into the Jeep, I turned. "I had fun tonight."

She stared at me defiantly.

"Have a nice night—"

Her eyes flashed.

"—Wren. I'm sure you and Kendall will have lots to talk about. And I'll see you in class."

With that, I swung into the Jeep and shut the door.

"What was that about?" Kendall asked.

"I'll tell you later," I said. "Right now, I'm gonna find someplace where I can fuck your brains out."

"I'm feeling pretty brainy tonight," she said as we roared off.

"Good. 'Cause I'm feeling pretty horny."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

The first day of winter quarter was full of long lines: to pick up my schedule, to pay my tuition and fees, and to buy my books. In the process, I wrote two large checks, wiping out most of the money my parents had wired to my account.

That evening, I got together with Trip, Luke, and Jeff. Jeff was giving Luke a hard time, because it seemed like the Cajun had returned to school with half a grocery store.

"*Mais*, y'all," he said, "I need this stuff."

"Okay, okay," Jeff said, "I can understand the Mr. Coffee—"

Luke was always complaining about the weak coffee.

"—but hot sauce, spices, and *vegetables?*"

"I told you," Luke explained patiently, "if y'all used spices up here, I wouldn't *need* to bring any of this stuff. But no one outside of Louisiana seems to've heard of basic ingredients like cayenne, garlic, or paprika. And don't even get me started on The Holy Trinity."

"The Holy Trinity? What the fuck is that?"

"*Mais*, bell peppers, onions, and celery."

"But you can get those *here*," Jeff argued. "Why bring 'em back with you?"

Trip and I merely grinned at each other and ignored the escalating banter. "What're you up to tomorrow?" he asked me instead.

"I think I'm gonna join the Flying Club," I said. "And probably the Snow Skiing Club. Why? What're you up to?"

"I think I'll go with you to check out the clubs," he said. "And I wanted to sign us up for intramural basketball. You still up for it?"

"Have we got a fifth guy?"

He shook his head. "But we'll find one. Don't worry."

After Luke and Jeff stopped arguing about produce, we spent the rest of the night listening to a couple of new albums that Trip had gotten for Christmas (the Police, "Ghost in the Machine," and Joan Jett, "I Love Rock n' Roll").

The next day Trip and I headed down to the University Center, where the extracurricular organizations all had tables set up. Once there, we marveled at the sheer number of activities: student government, the campus newspaper, professional organizations, academic fraternities and sororities, sports clubs, recreational clubs, and more.

When we passed the sports clubs, I made a startling discovery: the Wrestling Club. Even though UT Knoxville didn't have an official NCAA wrestling program, they had the next best thing: a semi-official team, complete with matches against other wrestling clubs within the Southeastern Conference.

Trip ended up joining the Wrestling and Snow Skiing Clubs with me. He'd never done either before, but he *was* a natural athlete, willing to try anything. As planned, we also signed up for intramural basketball. (Trip even listed our unknown fifth player as Pistol Pete, "just to make people nervous," he said.)

At the Flying Club table, I signed up for instrument ground school. Earl Walker, the instructor from my checkride, taught the class. Even better, club members got a discount on course fees and books.

By the time we left the UC, I had shelled out more than a hundred dollars. I'd also added quite a bit to my already full schedule.

The Snow Skiing Club met on the first Monday of each month, but had regularly scheduled weekend trips to Ober Gatlinburg, the local ski resort. They also had a big trip planned to Colorado over Spring Break, although I wasn't sure I'd be able to go (my bank account was pretty anemic).

The Wrestling Club had practice every afternoon, from four to six o'clock. Since the club wasn't the same as a varsity team, the practices were optional, but I planned to attend as many as I could. Matches were held on Saturdays, and were a mixture of home and away.

The intramural basketball schedule was a work in progress, since it depended upon the number of teams that signed up. But we were guaranteed to play at least one game a week, although the coordinator said it would more likely be two.

My ground school class met every Wednesday night, from seven to nine o'clock (in one of the rooms at the UC). The Flying Club itself had meetings every other Thursday, at seven o'clock.

On top of all that, I wanted to take advantage of Susan's gift of flying time. I planned to fly on the weekends, but I'd have to book my time well in advance, since those were the busiest days for both instructors and rental aircraft.

My personal life was equally busy. Kendall's roommates' class schedules weren't as obliging as the previous quarter, but we'd be able to get together in the middle of the day on Tuesdays, at least for a couple of hours. And we planned to eat breakfast together every day, of course.

Last but not least, I had to find time for Gina. While Kendall's schedule more or less matched mine, Gina's was once again very different. We had tried to synchronize them, but without much luck: my classes were mostly in the morning, while hers were mid- and late-day. I was determined to find a way to make it work, though.

When I called Gina that evening, I told her about all my extracurricular activities. Her sorority took up a lot of her time, but she was also planning to volunteer at the UT hospital.

"I think the biggest problem with our relationship," she said, "is that we haven't *consciously* made time for each other. That's one of the reasons I gave you the Ultimate Boyfriend card. I mean, in high school, it was easy, 'cause we saw each other all the time. But now…"

"No kidding."

"Maybe we can have a 'date night' or something. You know, a special night where we've got a standing date. What do you think about that?"

"Sounds good to me. But when?"

"Sorority mixers are usually on Wednesday or Saturday, so how about Thursday or Friday nights?"

"Friday would be better, but I've got wrestling practice till six," I said.

"And after that?"

"I guess I'm all yours," I said.

✧ ✧ ✧

The first day of classes was hectic. I tried to act nonchalant—the very picture of a veteran college student—but inside, I was as nervous as I'd been on my first day at UT.

After breakfast Trip and I headed to the A&A building; our eight o'clock class was Architecture 102. The professor's name was E. Stanford Littleton, although he didn't tell us what

the "E" stood for. I thought it was pretentious, but he seemed like a no-nonsense professor. When he dismissed us, Trip and I headed upstairs for our next class.

Professor Joska strode into the room precisely at nine o'clock, and we grew quiet. My entire project team from the previous quarter had signed up for the same section, and we were sitting together. Gracie Fisher and her team were in our class as well.

"Welcome to Architecture 172, Design II," Joska said, writing the section number on the blackboard. "I am Laszlo Joska," he added, pronouncing his name with the usual soft sibilance. "If you're not supposed to be here, please be kind enough to leave quietly." Then he turned and regarded us with a steely gaze.

One student sheepishly gathered his books. "Sorry," he said.

"A wise man," Professor Joska commented as the guy left the room. Then he turned to the rest of us. "Anyone else? Can I convince any of you to drop this class? No? Okay, I'll sign Drop/Add slips now."

To my surprise, a student actually got up with a slip for Joska to sign, meaning that he was joining the class at the last minute.

"He must not know Joska," I stage-whispered to Trip.

"Yes, Mr. Hughes," Joska said as he signed the slip, "like a spider with a fly, my plan is to catch unsuspecting young architecture students and suck the life out of them."

I felt a flush creeping up my cheeks: I'd meant for the people around me to overhear, not Joska himself.

Joska handed the slip back to the new student and gestured for him to return to his desk. Then he looked at me, his eyes hard.

I set my jaw, prepared for a scathing remark, but I didn't shy away from his gaze.

He held my eyes for a half-dozen long heartbeats. Suddenly, he smiled benignly. "I trust you had a relaxing Christmas break," he said.

Was he mocking me? "Yes, sir," I answered, my emotions tightly controlled.

"Good," he said. "I hope you're rested and refreshed—"

I felt my eyes narrow in uncertainty.

"—so I can drive you until you wonder why you ever wanted to become an architect." He turned to the class as a whole. "As Mr. Hughes is just beginning to understand, architecture is a serious business for serious people. I'm not your mother and I'm not your priest. Nor am I here to make you like me."

The rest of his speech was much the same as the one from the previous quarter. Just when I thought I could safely zone out, however, he launched into something new.

"Most of you have survived your first quarter as architecture students," he said, "which puts you head and shoulders above ninety-five percent of the student body. But from this point onward, things become more difficult. You are no longer novices, and I expect you to avoid the same mistakes you made last quarter. Hopefully, some of you will impress me with the gravity of your *new* mistakes, but I will be pitiless regarding things you should already know."

Most of us looked around nervously.

"Now," Joska continued, "I see that Mr. Whitman and Miss Fisher had the foresight to keep their project teams intact."

For a moment, I panicked, thinking he might break us up.

"Since they went to so much trouble, I plan to reward their efforts. Two of the cornerstones of architecture are planning and execution," Joska continued. "To that end, Mr. Whitman and Miss Fisher will each receive five extra credit points on *every project this quarter*."

A collective gasp went up from the class. Those five points could easily mean the difference between passing and failing a project.

"Let that be a lesson to each of you," Joska added. "Your progress toward a degree in architecture should be like a building design itself—the classes are part of a greater whole, and they build upon each other. Those of you who plan ahead will be rewarded, while those of you who do not will find that your efforts often fall short of success."

At that point, he went through the process of selecting team leaders and assigning the remaining students to project teams. It was almost painful to watch, and I was glad I didn't have to go through it again. When he was done, he looked at his watch.

"And now," he said, "for the *only* time this quarter, class is dismissed early."

We gathered our books and stood.

"Mr. Whitman, Miss Fisher," Joska called out above the din, "please see me for a few moments on your way out."

"I'll wait for you," I said to Trip, who nodded. Five minutes later, he joined me on the balcony above the atrium. "What'd he have to say?" I asked.

"You know those five extra points?"

I nodded.

"We're gonna need 'em."

"Huh?"

"Joska basically told us that we're guaranteed to get the points," he said, "but that he expects us to work harder than anyone else in the class to earn 'em. In other words, he's gonna grade us harder… just because."

"That sucks, man."

"Actually, it's brilliant."

"Are you out of your mind?"

"No. Think about it," he said. "He told the rest of the class that he rewards 'planning and execution,' but he told *us* that there ain't no such thing as a free lunch."

"TANSTAAFL," I said.

"Exactly."

"So why is that brilliant?"

"With one stroke, he's teaching two different lessons," Trip said.

"You sound like you're actually starting to like him."

"I don't know if I'd go that far, but I definitely *respect* him."

"You're nuts."

"No, you're just too focused on hating him," he said. "Sure, he's hard, but he's fair. And yeah, he picks on you, but the sooner you figure out that it's not personal, the better. He's trying to toughen you up. I mean, think about it for a sec… When he made that comment about the spider and the fly, what did you do?"

I shrugged. "Nothing. But what's that have to do with anything?"

"How would you have reacted a couple of months ago?"

Once again, I shrugged.

To my surprise, Trip laughed. “You’d’ve burst a blood vessel in anger.”

I denied it, but privately admitted that he was probably right.

“Trust me, you’d’ve been steamed. But now… what happened? Nothing, that’s what. You just took it in stride and kept your cool. I’m telling you, Joska’s brilliant.”

“Jeez,” I muttered, “five lousy extra credit points and you’re suddenly the guy’s biggest fan.”

“No,” Trip said, “I just recognize talent and ability when I see it.” Then he laughed good-naturedly and clapped me on the shoulder. “Why d’you think I hang around with you?”

I grinned abashedly.

“Besides,” he continued, “I don’t have to like Joska to see what he’s doing to us. That which does not kill us makes us stronger.”

“No fucking kidding.”

“Come on,” Trip said, still chuckling. “You’ll see what I’m talking about sooner or later. Now, where’re you headed to next?”

“Calculus,” I said. “Ayers.”

“I’ve got Accounting, in Glocker. I’ll walk with you, my proud, stubborn friend.”

“I’m *not* stubborn.”

“You are too.”

“Am not.”

“Are too.”

I started to deny it again, but Trip’s laugh disarmed me.

“See what I mean?” he asked rhetorically.

“Who asked you anyway?”

✧ ✧ ✧

My two remaining classes were full of the usual first-day stuff.

Intermediate Calculus was taught by a fidgety, dark-skinned Indian named Prakash Vajpayee. He was a graduate student, and his English was so heavily accented that I didn’t understand half of what he said.

After lunch I headed to Architecture 122, Drawing II. Professor Ledbetter welcomed us and went over the syllabus. Since it was a two-credit-hour class, it only met on Monday and Wednesday. After class, he even pulled me aside and said he was looking forward to working with me. Flattered and a little embarrassed, I thanked him. Then I headed down to Studio 6, where I hoped to catch Siobhan (and Wren, I silently admitted).

“Oh, hello, Paul,” Siobhan said, her brogue cheery.

“Hi, Siobhan. I was just checking to see what the schedule is for modeling.”

She motioned me into her office, where she picked up a calendar. “Today and Friday are just orientation; I’ll be introducing the students to the syllabus, as well as the tools and media. So you and Wren aren’t scheduled until next week.”

“No problem.”

“You wouldn’t be interested in modeling for another class, would you? We had higher than expected enrollment for my Life Drawing class, so they added another section. And now,” she shrugged, “I find myself without models. The class is Tuesday-Thursday at 9:15AM. The pay isn’t much, but you already know that. It’ll double the amount you’re already making, though.”

The previous quarter I had a surplus from my birthday and graduation money. But that was all gone, and I owed my parents four hundred dollars on top of that. They were still giving me spending money—they expected me to repay the four hundred from my summer work—but the extra money from modeling would come in handy. "Sure," I said immediately. "Who's the female model? Wren?"

Siobhan frowned. "I talked to her earlier today, and she's got a class conflict. Do you know anyone? Didn't your girlfriend mention something about wanting to model?"

"Yeah, she did," I said, already considering the possibilities.

"Do you two want to do it together?"

"Sure! Sign us up."

"Shouldn't you talk to her first?"

"Um, yeah, probably," I said sheepishly. "But definitely sign me up. And pencil her in. I'll talk to her tonight and we'll let you know tomorrow. Okay?"

She nodded. "Have her stop by my studio. I'll need to get a model release from her." At that point, she glanced toward the larger studio.

I took the cue and headed for the door.

Once in the main studio, I looked for Wren. Instead, I spotted Christy. She saw me at the same time and smiled warmly. Siobhan and I headed toward her simultaneously. When I pulled up short, the auburn-haired professor grinned at me and gestured for me to go ahead.

I felt my face heating, but headed for the petite blonde nonetheless.

"Happy New Year," she said.

"Happy New Year. How was Hawaii?"

"Great! I love it there," she said. "Unfortunately, my brother's going back to a squadron, so he's moving to San Diego. Well, it's good for him, so not 'unfortunately,' but I won't get to visit him in Hawaii anymore. So it's unfortunate for me."

"That's too bad," I said.

"Oh, I'll survive."

"Now, this is… Harry… right? He's a Lieutenant…"

"Lieutenant Commander," she said.

"And he's the one who flies F-4s?"

"Right, but his new squadron flies F-14s, so he's going to training first."

"Okay, so who flies A-4s?" I asked. "That's… Danny?"

"Mmm hmm. But he's in the Marine Corps. He lives in North Carolina," she added. "Cherry Point."

"Oh, so he's not that far away."

"It's far enough for anyone who doesn't have a car," she said.

"Maybe I'll fly you there some time."

She blushed. Shyly: "I'd like that."

"Okay, so, what about the others?" I asked after a moment. "James…? And… Rich?"

"Mmm hmm. James flies helicopters—Navy—and he's in Jacksonville. Rich is in the Navy too, but he's in Coronado."

"Oh… um… where's that?"

"San Diego," she said, smiling quizzically. "I thought you used to live there."

"Well, not really. I was *born* there, but I only lived there for about two months." At her curious look, I continued. "My mom was visiting her brother and went into labor a month early. After I was born, she lived with my Uncle Hank… until I was old enough to travel, I mean."

"Oh. Then where'd she go?"

"Back to Gainesville, Florida. My grandparents drove to California to pick us up. I don't remember it, though. I was only two months old."

She smiled at my joke.

"Anyway, that's why I didn't know that Coronado was near San Diego. But… back to your brother. What's he fly?"

"Oh, Rich doesn't fly. He's… um… he's a frogman… he does underwater demolition and… um… other stuff."

"Wow, cool." Then I chuckled. At her questioning look, I explained. "I thought I had a hard time keeping up with just one sister. And you've got four brothers to keep track of."

Her eyes tightened. Before I could say anything, she forced a smile and asked, "So, how was your ski trip?"

"Good," I said, a little perplexed at the sudden change in subject. "Really good. We had a lot of fun."

"Utah, right?"

I nodded.

"I've never skied there."

"You know how to ski?"

"Of course," she said. "We went to Hokkaido or Nagano all the time when we lived in Japan. And then in San Diego, we'd fly up to Squaw Valley. I started skiing when I was eight or nine, I guess. My brother used to…" She didn't continue. "I'm sorry," she said at last. "What was I saying?"

"Your brother used to…?"

She smiled wistfully, but didn't answer. "I… I'd better get to my seat. Siobhan's probably waiting for me."

Siobhan was talking to some other students, and the bell to begin class hadn't rung yet. I didn't know what had happened to Christy's brother—or even which one—but her mood had obviously changed, and I didn't want to make things worse by prying.

"I'll see you tomorrow," she said.

With that, I watched her walk to her seat and simply sit there, lost in thought. Then she wiped her cheeks and glanced up. When she saw me, she smiled, but her eyes were sad.

✧ ✧ ✧

Trip and I went to our first wrestling practice that afternoon. The club had actually been meeting since school began in the fall, so we were late-comers. The faculty advisor, Larry Travis, was the coach. He was also the strength and conditioning coach for the football team. Not surprisingly, he advocated wrestling as a way for his football players to stay in condition during the off-season.

I had a low opinion of football players as wrestlers. In high school, we had our fair share of cocky football players who tried out for the wrestling team, convinced that they'd show us how tough they were (compared to us, that is). After all, they said, they'd been through spring

training, summer workouts, and an entire football season.

Invariably, they wheezed their way through the first week's wrestling workouts and told us that we could quit going hard on them, that we'd made our point. I always loved the expressions on their faces when we told them that Coach had been going *easy* on us, since we were all soft from the off-season.

After that, most football players quietly went away, bound for the arms of cheerleaders and the sycophants who adored them simply because they were football players. I was always impressed with the guys who *did* stick around, but they were few and far between.

Consequently, I wasn't all that enthusiastic about wrestling for a man who was also a football coach. It was a petty prejudice, but it was born of experience.

Not surprisingly, my preconceptions took a beating that day.

Coach Travis was anything but the stereotypical football coach. I later learned that he'd been an All-American football player at Michigan. As if that weren't impressive enough, he'd been an All-American *wrestler* as well. The University of Michigan was no slouch in either department.

Unfortunately, he'd injured his knee his senior year, and had to give up a promising career playing professional football. But that didn't stop him from enjoying the sports he loved.

When he found out I was the Georgia state runner-up in the 185-pound weight class, I expected him to immediately treat me as one of his stars. Instead, I was in for a rude awakening.

"You look pretty scrawny for a 185-pounder," he said.

"Actually, I'm down to about 170 now."

"And why weren't you in the Club last quarter?" he asked, brushing off my excuse. "Do you want to wrestle or not?"

"I want to wrestle," I assured him. "I've kept up my workouts and everything. I just didn't know there *was* a Wrestling Club."

"That's no excuse. If you really wanted to wrestle, you would've found us. Anyway, you're here now. At least you haven't gone totally soft, although you look like you're trying to make weight for a class ten pounds lighter than you need to be. And you," he said, turning to Trip, "what's your story?"

"I'm here with him," he said, nodding to me.

"Have you ever wrestled before?"

Trip shook his head.

"Well, at least you don't have any bad habits to break. And you look like the right type. Did you play football in high school?"

"One year, when I was a freshman, and five years before that. But I played baseball and basketball all through high school."

"Good man… well-rounded. Too bad you didn't stick with football though."

"Our first-string varsity quarterback got a full scholarship to Alabama," Trip said. "I was good, but he was better. A *lot* better. Riding the bench isn't my idea of a good time, so I concentrated on baseball and basketball."

"How'd you do?"

"Our baseball team was state champion," he said. "Twice. I was captain both years."

Coach Travis's eyebrows shot up. "And in basketball?"

"We did okay. Not as good as baseball, but we always had a winning season."

"Good man. So, whaddya weigh? About 185?"

"About that," Trip said.

"All right," Coach Travis said. Then he looked at me. "You work out with Will and the 177-pounders. I don't want you to get some harebrained idea to get down to 167 pounds. With your build, you need to bulk up. And you," he added, to Trip, "you work out with the 190-pounders. Lonnie over there'll get you started."

With that, I got a taste of what the high school football players went through. My ad hoc workouts were *nothing* compared to a regimented wrestling workout. I also learned that my wrestling skills had dulled. Considerably. The number-one 177-pound wrestler, Will Treadway, worked me all over the mat. I managed *one* take-down, but he quickly reversed on me.

I did get a good look at the gym ceiling for the better part of two hours, though.

I didn't particularly enjoy the view.

"That was *fun*," Trip said as we walked back to the dorm. "Lonnie was showing me single-leg takedowns."

I nodded.

"I can see why you like it," he added. "All the other sports I've played have been team sports. And it's a *lot* more physical than I thought it'd be. I think I'm going to like it, though." He was excited by his new experiences, and talked about wrestling until we reached North Carrick. "But now we really need to talk about basketball," he said as we walked down the fourth floor hallway.

We entered my suite and I unlocked my door. Trip followed and leaned against the sink while I tossed my things on the bed.

"We still need a fifth guy," he said, "and I don't know who we should ask."

"Hey, Loverboy," T.J. said from the doorway. Then he glanced at Trip. "Hey, Super Jock."

"Hey, T.J.," Trip said, unfazed by the nickname. "What's up?"

"Nothin'. What're you looking for a fifth guy for?"

"Intramural basketball. Why? Do you play?"

I was trying to surreptitiously give Trip the "wave off" sign, but he wasn't paying attention.

"Yeah," T.J. said. "Shooting point guard."

"Are you any good?" Trip asked.

"I'm better'n Loverboy, here. I've seen him play. But if y'all need a fifth player, I could do it. Who else is on the team?"

"My roommate, Luke, and one of the guys from the other side of the suite, Jeff."

"The Ragin' Cajun and Four-eyes, huh?"

Trip frowned.

"Just kidding," T.J. said. "Yeah, I'll be your fifth player. Whaddya think, Loverboy, you want me on your team? Maybe I'll show you a thing or two."

The *last* thing I wanted was to deal with T.J. on a regular basis, but when I saw Trip's hopeful expression, my protest died unspoken. "Yeah, all right," I said at last, although I mentally kicked myself for doing it.

"Cool," Trip said. To T.J.: "Welcome to the team."

"Thanks. When do y'all wanna practice?"

After talking for a few minutes, T.J. headed back to his side of the suite.

"Hey, I'm gonna get cleaned up for dinner," Trip said. "Remember, we're supposed to meet Abby and Kendall at seven."

A moment later the outer door closed behind him and I headed for the shower. As I walked past T.J.'s half-open door, I shook my head in disbelief. Once again, I was stuck on an intramural team with him and his attitude.

"There ain't no justice," I muttered to myself.

✧ ✧ ✧

After dinner we went back to Kendall's apartment. When Trip and Abby settled on the couch, I pulled Kendall toward her bedroom. Once there, I shut the door and told her about the modeling opportunity. She jumped at the chance, since we'd get to do it together.

"I kinda figured you'd want to," I said. "But Siobhan said I should probably talk to you before I just signed you up for it."

"Of course. I can sign myself up."

I tried not to let my mild annoyance show. "Okay, then you need to stop by her studio tomorrow. She needs you to sign a model release."

"This is going to be so much fun," Kendall said. Then she turned pensive.

"What?"

"What about my pubic hair?"

"Oh, shit… I hadn't thought about that."

"I don't wanna stop shaving, but…"

"Maybe you can just wear bikini bottoms," I suggested. "You know, like Susan does at camp."

"Do you think that'd be okay?"

"I guess so," I said. "I mean, Wren wore 'em last quarter whenever she was on her period. So I guess it'd be okay if you wore 'em all the time. Don't you think?"

"It should be okay," she said, still less than confident.

"It'll be okay. I mean, Siobhan said she needed the model, and the class isn't about drawing beautiful pussy lips."

Kendall blushed.

"It's about drawing the human figure. And trust me, you've got one helluva figure. So I'm sure they'll love to draw it. Now, speaking of which," I said, "I think we've got a few minutes before Trip and Abby will miss us. So, do you mind if I inspect the aforementioned figure? Purely for informational purposes, of course."

"Purely for informational purposes," she echoed, her eyes dancing with laughter.

✧ ✧ ✧

"So, what's going on with you and Abby?" I asked Trip as we walked back to Carrick.

"Nothing," he said nonchalantly. *Too* nonchalantly.

"I thought you weren't interested."

"I wasn't," he said.

"Past tense."

He smiled guiltily.

"Uh-huh."

"She's a sweet girl."

"Oh, no argument," I said.

"And I've gotta start dating again… sooner or later."

I glanced at him sidelong.

"What?"

Instead of answering, I simply grinned.

"*What?*"

At that, I shoved him and broke into a run, singing: "Trip and Abby, sittin' in a tree, K-I-S-S-I-N-G!"

With his longer legs, he quickly caught up to me and tackled me. Fortunately, he directed us to a patch of grass, instead of asphalt.

"We *weren't* kissing in a tree," he said, feigning anger.

"Oh, then where *were* you?" I asked, rolling upright.

"We were on the couch."

I arched an eyebrow.

"While you and Kendall were in her room," he elaborated.

"So you're serious?" I asked, suddenly straight-faced.

He contemplated his shoelaces. After a moment he nodded.

"She *is* a really sweet girl," I said.

"Oh, you've got no idea," he said earnestly. "She's warm, and caring, and funny, and smart, and…" Then he grinned sheepishly. "I've got it bad, don't I?"

I nodded, returning his grin. "What are you gonna say to your other girlfriend?"

"*What* other girlfriend? I'm not like you, remember?"

"You know, Rosy Palm…" With that, I jumped to my feet and took off running again.

"You gotta quit trying to run away," Trip said, catching me easily.

We pounded to a stop in the Carrick breezeway, both of us winded and grinning like idiots.

"And for your information," he said, "we haven't done it yet."

"*Yet*."

He inclined his head, conceding the point.

"But she's cute," I said.

"Very."

"And it's been a while since she had a boyfriend."

"True."

"So I guess that means…"

"What?" he asked, once he realized that I wasn't going to finish my thought.

"I guess that means she's got a lot of pent-up, ahem, *energy*."

"Her and me both, my friend. Her and me both."

✧ ✧ ✧

Thursday morning, Trip and I met Kendall and Abby for breakfast. The girls didn't have eight o'clock classes, but they wanted to spend time with us. Kendall spotted Christy and Wren at another table, and invited them to join us.

Trip and Abby seemed oblivious to everyone else at the table, so Kendall, Wren, and I did most of the talking (Christy was sketching, her eyes darting between us and her sketchpad). After

breakfast, Kendall kissed me goodbye and headed back to her apartment. Abby, doe-eyed, walked with Trip to his English class.

"So, I guess it's just us," I said to Christy and Wren. "Bunny, Beautiful, and Mysterious." Then I glanced sidelong at Wren. "Or should I call you—" *Sexy*, I finished mentally.

"Don't… you… dare," she said.

Grinning, Christy silently looked a question at her friend.

"He's being impossible," Wren said, without elaborating.

I simply flashed her a smug grin and shouldered my backpack.

Our Art History professor was an attractive woman named Eugénie Bertrand—*Dr*. Eugénie Bertrand. Her English sounded distinctly British, with a slight French accent, and her enthusiasm was a welcome change from the previous quarter's Professor Dubois.

After class, Wren headed to her Journalism class, so I walked with Christy to Siobhan's studio.

"Wren was telling me about her trip with you and Kendall," Christy said. "That was very nice of you to give her a ride."

I arched an eyebrow, wondering how much Wren had told her roommate.

"Wren's usually so high-strung that guys're always falling all over themselves to do whatever she wants. After meeting Kendall, I can understand why you're immune to her antics."

Not quite *immune*, I thought ruefully.

"She's very nice," Christy said. "She wants to be a doctor, right? A psychiatrist? I think she'll make a good one. I don't know why, but there's something about her that… I dunno… there's just something about her," she finished with a shrug. "And she's very pretty. But you already knew that. I'd like to sketch her sometime. Maybe the two of you together. If you don't mind, that is."

"No, not at all."

"Siobhan said you're going to model for her extra Life Drawing class."

I nodded.

"Maybe I'll sit in on that sometime. If Kendall doesn't mind."

"I don't think she will," I said, suddenly warming to the prospect of Christy seeing Kendall nude.

"I'd like that. She's very statuesque. And you two look good together, although I never pictured you with someone as tall as her."

"Why not?"

She shrugged.

"Seriously, why not?"

"Forget I said anything," she said. "You two look good together, and you obviously love each other."

I nodded.

"I'd better get inside," she said, nodding toward Siobhan's studio. "Bye."

"Um… bye."

As I watched her walk away, I silently wondered why every conversation with her left me with more questions than when I began.

✧ ✧ ✧

My last class of the day was American Literature, at 1:40, with Professor Feller. I'm almost ashamed to say that I deliberately selected one of her sections. My class load was difficult enough without the added stress of a hidebound English professor, so I went for the easy A.

Professor Feller passed out the syllabus and then talked—gushingly—about the reading list. It sounded interesting, but I knew I'd probably have to give up my personal reading to get it all done.

After class I headed back to my room to relax before wrestling practice.

Practice itself wasn't as grueling as the day before, but it wasn't easy, either. Once again, I got my ass handed to me on the mat, but I managed to surprise Will a couple of times. He wasn't in danger of losing his number one spot—yet—but at least I gave him a bit of a challenge.

✧ ✧ ✧

Friday morning's classes breezed past. Even Professor Joska's sardonic comments failed to rile me. Calculus, however, was another matter entirely. Two students arrived late, making a commotion; they needed Professor Vajpayee to sign their Drop/Add slips. As they turned to take seats, I felt my expression harden.

Rod and Neil, I muttered silently. *Fucking great.*

When Rod met my eyes, he looked surprised for a moment. Then he sneered. Not surprisingly, he jostled my arm on the way to a desk at the back of the room.

A couple of times during class, I heard the two Pikes whispering to each other and then chuckling. It took every ounce of willpower I possessed not to turn around and see if they were talking about me. When class was finally over, I gathered my things and stood.

"Hey, fag," Rod said from behind me.

I ignored him.

"I said, 'hey, fag,'" he repeated.

"I don't think the fag can talk," Neil said.

"Fuck you," I said. When I turned and stared them down, they both stopped in their tracks. I snorted contemptuously and headed for the door.

"Where're you goin'?" Rod asked, sing-song taunting. "You don't wanna talk to us, fag?"

"Dude," I said, "learn an original insult. You keep saying 'fag' and someone's bound to think you're looking for a date."

He flipped me the bird.

"Oh, yeah, that's creative… dickhead."

"Ooooh, 'dickhead,'" he said. "How 'original.'"

"Okay, how about 'buttfucker'?"

His expression turned ugly, but then he forced a laugh. "Yeah, I'm a buttfucker all right. I buttfucked your girlfriend."

I started to snarl, but then caught myself. "Whatever," I said, affecting nonchalance.

"Oh, didn't Gina tell you? Regan invited us up to her cabin in Vermont. Me and Neil and a couple of other guys. We had a real good time, especially with your girlfriend."

I stopped, but refused to meet his eyes.

"Yeah," Neil added, "she loves takin' it up the ass, doesn't she, Rod?"

"Oh, yeah," Rod said, "but she *really* got off when I let her suck the Ram Rod. God, that girl loves the taste of jizz."

I clenched my jaw, rooted to the spot. I wanted to leave, to get away from them, but I couldn't. Rod had managed to say the *one* thing that would keep me listening.

"Yeah, she's a major cocksucker," Neil said, as if he were having a casual conversation with his friend. "And that dark little pussy of hers is a real treat, huh."

"Oh, yeah. But I really love watching her dyke out with Regan and Margot."

"Yeah, that's cool," Neil said.

"You know, I think she might like chicks more than guys, though. I mean, she could be a dyke, you know?"

"Man, fuck you," I said at last.

"Oh, didn't she tell you?" Rod taunted. "Maybe she's just waiting for the right time to break it to you, *buddy*."

I wanted to break his face, but I restrained myself, clenching my fists with pent-up rage. Then I took a deep breath and told myself that he was full of shit. Finally, I forced a humorless smile and flipped him the bird.

When I left, their laughter echoed in my ears.

✧ ✧ ✧

Will Treadway didn't know what hit him that afternoon. I made up for a lack of practice with sheer anger-fueled energy.

"Man, what the fuck's the matter with you?" he asked after I nearly ripped off his arms with an illegal full nelson.

"Hughes!" Coach Travis yelled before I had a chance to reply. "Gimme twenty laps around the gym. And if you pull that shit again, I don't care if you're NCAA champion, you're off the team."

Fuck you too, I mentally snapped, but I got up and started running laps. Trip caught my eye and silently asked what was going on.

I shook off his question and kept running.

Unfortunately, that gave me time to think.

I tried to convince myself that Rod had been lying, that Gina would never have sex with him. But how did he know so many details about her? What if she *had* fucked him? What if she'd been drunk, and he took advantage of her?

Had Gina seemed nervous when she got home from Vermont? She said she was sore, but was she sore from skiing, or fucking? And how did Rod know that Gina liked the taste of come? Or anal sex? Regan had probably told him, but what if…?

Would Regan invite Rod and friends to Vermont? In a heartbeat, I mentally answered. She liked to be the center of attention. And with Haley along… Hayley was a bad influence all around.

But why hadn't Gina told me about the guys? Had she known beforehand? Would she lie about it if she had? She'd never lied to me before, but… Rod *must've* been lying. It was just like him, especially if he thought he could exact revenge for the humiliation of the intramural football playoffs.

Unfortunately, I couldn't shake the feeling that his words had the ring of truth.

As I ran my laps, I went back and forth: Gina had lied; no, *Rod* had lied. I trusted Gina. She was my girlfriend; she'd never lie to me.

"She'd lie to me about *this*," I muttered. She knew how much I disliked Rod. So if she *had* fucked him, she'd never tell me.

Worse, when I started thinking about sex outside our relationship, I couldn't escape my own guilt about Felicia.

My guilt fueled my anger. My anger fueled my suspicion. And my suspicion fueled my guilt. It was a vicious cycle, and I was getting more and more worked up by the minute.

When wrestling practice was over, Trip caught up with me as I stalked out of the gym.

"Dude, what's the matter?" he asked.

"Nothing."

"Yeah, right," he said. "Seriously, what's eating you?"

"You wouldn't understand."

"You're not going to start that shit again, are you?"

"Just leave me alone."

"Fine. Whatever. But let me know when you figure out what friends are for."

✧ ✧ ✧

"What's the matter with you?" Gina asked when I met her in her lobby for our date night.

"Nothing."

"You look upset."

"I'm not," I lied. Then, "Look, let's just go eat dinner. What do you feel like?"

"How about Italian?"

"Fine."

At the restaurant, I studied Gina intently. She caught me a few times, and asked what was wrong, but I played it off each time. I went through a thousand questions in my mind, most of them dark.

Had she fucked Rod? Had she just sucked him off? Had she done it willingly? Or was she basically raped?

When I thought about rape, my mind turned to Kendall, and to Big Mistake Guy. *He* was a Pike. And with Hayley involved in both incidents, I had a sick, angry knot in the pit of my stomach. Hayley was bad news: sex, booze, and drugs.

Drugs?!

At that, I studied Gina even more intently, looking for signs of cocaine (as if I'd know what to look for!). If Hayley had given Kendall cocaine, she'd probably done the same to Gina. And Gina wasn't *nearly* as self-disciplined as Kendall.

"What's the matter?" Gina finally asked, setting down her fork with an angry *clink*.

"Nothing."

"Then why do you keep staring at me?"

"I'm not staring at you."

"You are too."

"Sorry," I said tersely. "I didn't know it was against the rules to look at my girlfriend. I'll try to do better next time." Then I stuck a fork in my spaghetti and started twirling petulantly.

With that, a tense, fragile silence settled over us. Unfortunately, silence was my worst enemy, since it gave me time to think. We made it back to Gina's dorm room before my anger finally boiled over.

"Was Rod in Vermont?" I demanded.

"What?" She tried to look innocent, but her eyes gave her away.

"I said, 'was Rod in Vermont?' That's a pretty simple question, isn't it?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Just answer the question," I said.

"Don't snap at me."

"He *was*, wasn't he?"

"Why does it matter?"

"Was he there or not?" I ground out.

"Why're you interrogating me?"

"Was… he… there… or… not?!"

"Yeah, okay, he was there."

"Who else was there?"

"You know who else was there: Regan, Margot, Jess, Hayley—"

"Which other *guys* were there?" I asked testily.

"What difference does it make?"

"Then why won't you tell me?"

"Fine. It was Rod, Neil, Tommy, John, and Rusty," she said.

I didn't know who Tommy, John, or Rusty were, but I knew all too well who Rod and Neil were.

"There, now you know," Gina said. "Are you happy?"

"Why were they there? Why didn't you tell me? What were you doing with them?"

"What was I— What do you mean 'what was I doing with them?'"

"Which part of that don't you understand?" I asked sarcastically.

"For your *information*," she said, "I wasn't doing anything with them."

"*Sure* you weren't. Then how come Rod knows you like the taste of come?"

"Like the taste of— What's that supposed to mean?!"

"Just answer the question," I snapped.

"Regan probably told him. How should *I* know? But if you think—"

"Did you fuck him?"

"Did I *what?!*" she shrieked. "No way! *God*, no." Finally, her expression turned hard. "Is that what this is about? You think I screwed Rod?!"

"Well, did you?"

"I already said I didn't. I didn't screw *anyone* in Vermont. And if you think I'm going to screw you tonight, then you're sorely mistaken."

"I wouldn't want sloppy seconds anyhow!"

With that, I stormed out, slamming the door behind me. A detached part of my mind realized that I shouldn't be roaming around South Carrick unescorted, but I didn't care. Woe be to the RA who confronted me about it. Fortunately, no one stopped me as I rode the elevator down to the lobby and then stormed toward North Carrick.

When I got to my room, Billy took one look at me and silently gathered his books. As the door shut behind him, I snatched my weights from under the bed. Without even taking off my date clothes, I started doing curls, my eyes vacant as I stared at the mirror.

✧ ✧ ✧

Gina and I didn't talk to each other for six days. I'd like to say that I was too busy to care, but that wasn't the case.

Oh, I was busy, all right, but I thought about Gina almost constantly.

I felt guilty for getting angry with her. If I loved her, then I should trust her. But I just couldn't come to grips with her not telling me that Rod had been in Vermont.

I tried to look at things from her perspective: if she didn't do anything with him, and she knew it would only make me angry to know that he'd been there, why should she stir up trouble by telling me?

I even rationalized that my situation with Felicia was the same. What happened with Felicia had been a one-time thing, a night of weakness on my part. If it wasn't going to happen again, and it would only make Gina and Kendall angry to know about it, why would I cause problems by telling them?

Unfortunately, I was doing a lot of rationalizing. Worse, I was probably ascribing some of my guilt to Gina. In other words, since *I* hadn't told her about having sex with Felicia, then she was obviously hiding her sex with Rod.

I honestly didn't know *who* was telling the truth: Gina or Rod. I wanted to believe Gina. I *really* wanted to believe Gina. But the seeds of doubt festered until I couldn't think about anything else.

My life continued, however, whether I wanted to stop and think things through or not.

On Saturday, I took my first instrument lesson with Earl, a two-hour flight to Kentucky and back, most of it "under the hood" (using a hat with a blinder-like shield on it, so I had to focus on the instruments). On final at Island Home Airport, I was brooding about Gina instead of paying close attention to my glide path, so I had to do a power-on approach and "drag in" my landing. Earl didn't say anything, but I could sense his disapproval.

I spent most of Sunday with Jeff, who taught me the ins and outs of my computer and its word processing program. I immediately recognized its potential to revolutionize the way I wrote research papers, but I couldn't even enjoy the discovery, since my thoughts invariably returned to Gina.

Christy and Wren joined us for breakfast on Monday, but even that didn't raise my spirits. Later that day, I came within a hair's breadth of beating Rod to a bloody pulp. He laughed when I mastered my emotions and walked away, but I don't think he realized how much danger he'd been in.

In Siobhan's Figuring the Body class, she introduced Wren and me to a new crop of students. In addition to Christy, I recognized an attractive brunette who'd been in the Life Drawing class. I didn't recognize any of the others, but I didn't give most of them a second glance.

Wren and I took off our robes and Siobhan had us pose together, almost touching. Wren tried to get a rise out of me—literally and figuratively—but I was too preoccupied. While we were getting dressed in Siobhan's office, Wren tried to tease me some more, but I brusquely told her that I had to get to wrestling practice.

On Tuesday, Kendall had *her* first day of modeling (she would have a week by herself and then I'd have a similar week). I met her afterward, and she eagerly told me all about it. She was excited, so we headed back to her apartment.

Since it was Tuesday, her roommates were all in class. One thing led to another and we began having sex, but when I started fucking her from behind, my mind drifted. I angrily shook off thoughts of Gina only to realize that I was *slamming* into Kendall. Worse, she was crying out in pain each time I rammed into her.

In shock, I sat back on my haunches, my erection pointing at the ceiling as I panted in horrified silence. Without explanation, I stood and headed for the bathroom. Kendall followed.

I eventually calmed down, but only after a lot of crying on Kendall's part (not to mention a lot of soothing on *my* part, since I had to convince her that I wasn't angry with *her*). At her urging, I related the bare details of why I was so upset. To my utter relief, she didn't make a single disparaging remark about Gina. Instead, she hugged me tight and told me how much she loved me.

At that point, we took a shower and then made love. I went out of my way to be gentle and considerate. Afterward, we lay entangled in her sheets, panting from the force of our orgasms.

"Maybe we can get together with Gina," Kendall said, softly.

I shrugged.

"I should be able to tell if she's lying or not."

I shook my head. "She's telling the truth," I said, trying to convince myself. "*Rod's* the one who's lying."

"How do you know?"

"I know Gina," I said. "She'd never do something like that. Sure, she's wild and all, but she's faithful."

"But didn't she have sex with Regan? And Margot? And who knows who else?"

"Yeah, but they're girls," I said, as if that explained everything. "Gina wouldn't have sex with a guy… not without asking me first."

"Are you sure?"

"Believe it or not, I am," I said, my voice barely wavering. "I *know* Gina. I can still see the look on her face when I asked her if she fucked Rod. I can tell when she's trying to hide something, and she was completely blindsided when I asked her about Rod."

"But still, you can't be sure."

"I'm sure," I said, although I hadn't managed to convince myself—not entirely.

Kendall took a breath, as if to speak, but fell silent instead.

In the ensuing silence, my thoughts turned back to Gina, and I tried to convince myself that what I'd said had been true.

✧ ✧ ✧

"Are you okay?" Christy tentatively asked.

We were walking from the A&A building toward the dorms. Wren had headed off to her Journalism class, so we were alone.

"I'm fine," I lied. "Why?"

"You seem preoccupied. And… upset."

"I'm not," I said stiffly.

We walked for a minute in silence before she spoke up. "Paul? We're friends, right?"

"Yeah, sure."

"Then… can I show you something?"

I nodded.

We stopped and she pulled out her sketchpad. She flipped it open but then held it against her chest, looking pensive. Finally, she mastered her uncertainty and looked up at me.

"I normally don't show these to people, but… I like drawing faces," she said in a rush. "They're hard to draw, since they've got so many muscles, but that's why I like them. They're even harder than hands. Anyway, that's not what I wanted to talk about. Whenever I need to think, I draw. It's 'me' time, if that makes sense. I draw people with interesting expressions, or people who don't know I'm watching, or… people I… um… people I like. You know, like… friends."

"Okay."

"They're just sketches, but they're my way of relaxing. Some people read, some people do crosswords, some people listen to music. I draw. I guess you could say that I'm a people-watcher, too, since that's where I get my inspiration. It's almost like meditation, if that makes sense."

"Yeah, I guess it does."

"So I see a lot. People don't realize how much you can tell about them from their expression and posture, but— Sorry," she said, blushing. "When I get nervous, I chatter. My mom said that's why she gave me my first sketchpad, to keep me quiet, but you probably don't wanna hear about that. Anyway, where was I? Oh, yeah, last weekend. Um… I don't wanna be nosey or anything, but…"

"But…?"

"Something happened to you last weekend, didn't it? And you're still upset, so… well… I guess I wanted to make sure you're okay."

"What do you mean 'something happened to me last weekend'?"

"Oh dear, I knew I wouldn't say it right. Here, I'll show you."

To my surprise, her sketchpad was full—several pages, at least—of drawings of me. They were mostly of my face, as she'd said, but there were others where I was doing things: eating breakfast with Kendall, sitting in Art History class, and walking back from wrestling practice.

"This was Friday morning," she said, pointing to a sketch of me teasing Kendall. I was straight-faced, but my eyes danced with laughter. "And this," she continued, turning the page, "was Monday morning." I looked brooding and tense. "This was Tuesday in Art History class." Me looking upset. "And this was yesterday," she said, blushing as she pointed to a nude sketch of me as I posed for class. Not surprisingly, I looked angry. "I drew this last night, from memory," she explained diffidently. "Now do you see why I don't show these to many people?"

I nodded, my own cheeks heating.

"Anyway, that's why I asked if you were okay. Something happened to you this weekend, and I wanted… well… I don't know *what* I wanted. I guess I wanted to tell you that you can always talk to me."

"Thanks," I said. On a whim, I decided to tell her. "Um… I got in a fight with… one of my best friends."

"A girl?"

I nodded.

"I could tell. Don't ask me how, though. I just have this sense about people. And I thought it

had to do with a girl. But it couldn't've been Kendall, because she looked concerned *for* you, not about something between you. So then I thought it might've been Wren. She's so high-strung. I mean, she sometimes does dumb things without realizing the consequences. But she told me she hadn't said two words to you since Monday. So then I started wondering what could've hap—I'm doing it again," she said, blushing apologetically.

She took a deep breath. "I'm supposed to be listening to you, and I'm doing all the talking. Maybe my mom was right to give me a pencil and paper. Anyway, let's start over." With that, she composed herself and silently invited me to speak.

I told her an edited version of the story—in short, that I thought Gina had done something behind my back.

To my surprise, Christy looked at me for a moment, as if peering into my thoughts.

"What?" I finally asked.

"I'm sorry," she said, shaking off her hesitation. "You were telling me that you and Gina had a fight."

"Yeah," I said heavily. "I said some things that I really regret, but… well… I guess I'm still not convinced that she didn't… um… do what I thought she did."

"This guy who told you about… what you thought she did…," Christy said, using my circumlocution. "Rod, right?"

I nodded.

"You're not really friends with him?"

My hard expression was answer enough.

"Right, I already knew that. Anyway, if you don't like this Rod guy, and he doesn't like you, why should you take his word over Gina's? After all, he's got every reason to lie to you."

"That's what I keep telling myself," I said. "I mean, I know it here"—I tapped my chest—"but I keep over-analyzing it, and I can't help but wonder…"

"Do you trust Gina?"

"Absolutely."

"Then why don't you trust her *now?* I mean, how long have you known her?"

"Since we were thirteen."

"And you've know Rod for a couple of months?"

"More or less."

"Then don't be silly."

I felt my eyebrows shoot up involuntarily.

"Sorry. I guess I'm too blunt sometimes. *Another* reason why my mom encourages me to draw; I'm a lot subtler with my hands. Anyway, that's beside the point. You need to trust Gina. If she's really your best friend, then you need to give her the benefit of the doubt. If she says she didn't do… whatever… then you need to take her word for it. Has she ever lied to you before?"

"Not that I know of."

"Then why would she start now?"

I shrugged.

"So call her. Apologize. And tell her you're sorry you didn't call sooner." Then, almost to herself, "I *knew* I should've said something sooner." She looked into my eyes but then glanced away bashfully. "I just… I guess I had to work up the nerve to ask you. And… I didn't want to

do it around Wren. I knew you were really upset, and she'd just tease you before she realized that this was serious."

"Thanks," I said, genuinely grateful.

"Anyway," she continued, "I knew it wasn't between you and Kendall, or you and Wren, but I couldn't figure out what was going on. And I was worried."

"Well, now you know," I said.

She nodded. "So… are you going to call Gina?"

"I guess."

"Good. 'Cause I'm sure she's just as unhappy as you are."

"Yeah, you're probably right."

"Then don't throw away your… friendship… because you were too proud—or too embarrassed—to call her and apologize."

✧ ✧ ✧

That night, I heeded Christy's advice.

"Hi," I said when Gina answered the phone.

"Hi."

We both paused, the silence deafening.

"Look, I'm sorry I—" "Paul, I swear, nothing—"

"Me first," I finally said. Then I took a deep breath. "Look, I'm sorry I got angry. And I'm sorry I doubted you."

"Paul, I swear, nothing happened in Vermont."

"I know," I said, with more conviction than I truly felt, Christy's pep-talk notwithstanding.

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you about the guys, but I didn't know they were gonna be there until they showed up. Hayley and Regan invited them at the last minute, and—"

"You don't have to explain," I said.

"You've got to believe me, Paul… *nothing* happened."

"I believe you."

"You don't sound like you do."

She knows me too well, I thought. "I do. You're my girlfriend. I love you, and I trust you. If something really did happen, you would've told me. So I'm sorry I doubted you."

For a long moment we were silent.

"What made you think I had sex with Rod?" she finally asked.

"He's in my Calculus class," I explained, "and we sort of got into it last Friday."

"Did *he* tell you we had sex?" she asked, incredulous. "Ha!"

"What?"

"He came on to me, but I turned him down flat."

"Really?"

"Yeah," she said. "He even tried to get in the shower with me. But after that, I remembered to lock the bathroom door. I mean, he's a total jerk. He thinks that just because he's got a big dick, he's God's gift to women or something. I don't know why Regan puts up with him. Well, I *know* why, but… I mean… um… anyway, Jess and I partied with everyone, but when things got really wild, we usually just watched."

I knew I liked Jessica for a reason. "So you and Jess didn't do anything with the guys?"

"No way."

Something in her tone tickled the back of my brain, though. "Did you and Jess… I mean… um… did you two…?"

Silence.

"It's okay if you did," I said. "You know how I feel about you and other girls."

"Yeah," Gina said, her voice soft. "We maybe fooled around a little."

I chuckled.

"You said you don't care about other girls, remember?"

"I remember."

"But I didn't do a *thing* with the guys. You've got to believe me. Ugh! Rusty's okay, but still…"

"I believe you," I said.

"So you're not angry about Jess?"

"No."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm sure," I said. "So what *did* happen with you and Jess?" I could almost hear her blushing. "Tell me," I said, faux-stern.

"Jess's boyfriend is a Beta, and he's kinda straitlaced. They're pretty serious, but he doesn't want to have sex until they're married. And he doesn't want her to have any… um… you know… toys, either. He thinks they're disgusting. What does he know, right? Well, needless to say, Jess doesn't like the no-sex thing, but she's in love with this guy, so… Anyway, since I had Rocky with me, I offered to…"

Luckily, Billy was at an audition for a new play, so I had the room to myself. Since Gina was alone as well, she described the first time she and Jessica fooled around. I extracted my erection and started playing with myself. Mid-stroke, however, I realized that I was missing a golden opportunity.

"What're you doing right now?" I asked, interrupting Gina's description.

"I'm telling you about Jess," she said, perplexed. "Weren't you paying attention?"

"Of course I was paying attention. But do you know what *else* I was doing?"

"I bet I can guess."

"Mmm hmm," I said. "And do you think I'd be doing that if my roommate were here?"

"Are you thinking what I'm thinking?"

"Probably."

"Meet me in the lobby?"

"I'll be there in five minutes," I said.

"Why so long?"

I laughed. "It's gonna take me that long to stuff my hard-on back into my pants!"

✧ ✧ ✧

"You seem like you're in a better mood," Trip said as we walked to class the next morning.

"Yeah, Gina and I had a big talk last night."

"Is that what you were so upset about? Gina?"

I nodded.

"Things still haven't improved, have they?" It was an accusation, not a question.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"You want to have your cake and eat it too; you want *both* girls. But you still haven't done anything to fix the situation."

"That's not what *this* was about," I said. Then I told him a condensed version of the Vermont story, as well as Rod's accusations.

"Holy shit. Do you think she really did anything with Rod?" Trip asked.

I shook my head vehemently. Probably a little *too* vehemently.

He recognized my uncertainty and whistled softly. "Boy, no wonder you were upset."

"No kidding."

"But you need to decide whether you believe her or not. If you trust her, then you need to *act* like it. Even I can tell that you're not sure, and Gina probably knows you a helluva lot better than *I* do. But you still need to *do something* if you want to fix things with her and Kendall."

"That doesn't have anything to do with this," I countered.

He scoffed.

"Things're getting better between the girls."

"Ha! Are things really getting better? Or have you just convinced yourself that they *might?* For instance, I never see the three of you together anymore. And at breakfast, I can't remember the last time I heard you mention Gina."

"So? That's 'cause Christy and Wren are there."

"That's only been in the past week."

"Well, Abby's there too, and—"

"Bullshit," he said flatly. "Do you honestly think Abby doesn't know what's going on? She's been Kendall's roommate for years. C'mon, dude… she's probably known about the three of you longer than *I* have."

I tried not to recoil in alarm. "Do you really think Abby knows?"

"She knows," he said. "She hasn't said anything to me—she's not like that—but I can tell. Trust me."

"But how do you know? You can't be sure. I mean—"

He cut me off with a gesture. "Dude… she knows. Take my word for it."

I looked at him askance.

"You know," he mused, "you're the most stubborn person I know. And for all your experience with women, you sometimes miss the most obvious things. But it doesn't matter if you believe me or not. The point I was trying to make is that you're living two separate lives: one with Kendall, and one with Gina."

I scowled. "What? Do you and Abby sit around discussing us or something?"

"Well, duh! Of course we do. Kendall is Abby's best friend, and you're *my* best friend. And even though I don't know Gina very well, she seems like a nice girl, and she deserves better than this. Kendall deserves better. Hell, my friend, *you* deserve better. You may be happy now, but it's the calm before the storm. You sulked for a week about your fight with Gina. A *week!*

"And Kendall was walking on eggshells around you the whole time." he continued. "Abby was worried sick, and you had me pretty worried too. Hell, even T.J. could see how upset you were."

I stopped walking, shocked.

Trip nodded. “Why do you think he hasn’t been giving you shit during basketball practice? Yeah, he’s a smartass, but he’s not so bad once you get to know him.”

“You don’t know him as well as I do.”

“Maybe not, but your judgment is pretty questionable when your emotions are involved.” At that, he held up a placating hand to cut off my reply. “There’s nothing wrong with that, dude… as long as you realize it. I mean, you think Joska hates you, but you can’t see how much he pushes you to succeed.

“You think T.J. hates you,” he continued, “but he’s been pretty nice to you for the past week. Is that the sign of a guy who doesn’t like you? You don’t like Joska or T.J., so you think they don’t like you either. You see *your* emotions in their behavior.” He paused for a moment, letting his words sink in. “Your judgment’s a problem with Kendall and Gina, too.”

“How?” I asked, my brow beetled suspiciously.

“You love them, so you want to think that things are working, but they’re not. I’m telling you, things’re headed for disaster. And you’re not doing shit about it. I know you’re probably gonna get angry with me, but that’s tough shit. Somebody needs to tell you the truth, since you won’t admit it yourself. And if I didn’t do it, I wouldn’t be able to call myself your friend. Friends don’t tell you what you *want* to hear, they tell you what you *need* to hear.”

“So you think you’re my friend?!”

“I know I’m your friend. I know it like I knew I was in love the first time I saw Lori.”

“And look how right you were about that!”

He abruptly stopped walking.

I immediately felt guilty and turned to face him. “Look,” I said. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it like that.”

“Maybe I *was* wrong about you after all.”

At the thought of not having Trip as a friend—my best friend—my stomach knotted. “No,” I said apologetically, “you’re not. At least I *hope* you’re not.” After a long pause, I continued. “Maybe you’re telling me what I need to hear, but that doesn’t mean I have to like it.”

“You wouldn’t be human if you did,” he said simply. “Look, maybe I don’t have all the answers, but I can see this train wreck from a mile away. And I’ve told you before, you’re not going to solve any of your problems by sitting on your ass.”

“I’m not exactly sitting on my ass.”

“Then what have you done to fix your relationship? Besides *hope*, I mean.”

“I…”

“You may not like the truth,” Trip said softly, “but that doesn’t make it any less true. Look, dude, I’m just trying to tell you what I see. What *Abby* sees, too. Yeah, we’ve talked about it, because we care about you and Kendall. And Gina too, I guess. But you’re the center of this messed-up love triangle, and you’re the only one who can fix it… or change it. But you can’t keep doing nothing.”

I sighed heavily.

“Man, if you don’t do something, you’re only hurting everyone involved.”

“But I can’t make that choice.”

“Indecision is a choice, but it’s hardly a good one. Things might be fine… *now*. But what about the next time something happens between you and Gina? Or you and Kendall, for that

matter? And you said the girls used to get along great, they even… you know… did it with each other. But what happens if *they* get in a fight? Not a silent-treatment fight… a real screaming match. What then? How long will you sulk? I'm serious, dude. You can't keep doing nothing."

"I know," I said, so softly that I almost didn't hear my own words.

"And while I'm giving you shit," he said, starting toward the A&A building once again, "you gotta start eating right. It's really bugging Kendall. She worries about you. Besides, I think she's right. You don't eat enough and you exercise too much. Hell, I eat twice as much as you, and I've lost five pounds since we started working out."

"Listen," I said, emotionally drained, "lemme deal with one crisis at a time. Okay?"

"Fair enough," he said. Then he leaned close, as an aside, "Although I think the next crisis is the fact that we're fifteen minutes late for class."

I looked at my watch in shock.

"Hey, man," he said, smiling as he clapped me on the shoulder, "some things are more important than class."

✧ ✧ ✧

When Professor Vajpayee faced the class, I could usually tell what he was saying. But when he wrote on the chalkboard while he lectured, his speech became almost incomprehensible. I was struggling to take notes when something hit me in the back of the head.

I looked down at the crumpled wad of paper and then shook my head at Rod and Neil's juvenile antics. I thought about turning and flipping them the bird, but decided not to give them the satisfaction. So I started taking notes again, concentrating on Professor Vajpayee's almost-English.

Another crumpled piece of paper hit me and then a few minutes later, a third. At that, I deliberately turned, my temper flaring. Neil smirked. Rod simply raised his eyebrows in challenge.

The bell to end class rang before I could say anything. As the other students filed out of the room, I stood and blocked the aisle, cutting off Rod and Neil. When the two Pikes looked at me defiantly, I forced a smile (even though I was boiling inside).

"Listen, guys, let's let bygones be bygones," I said. Then I extended my hand. "Okay?"

They sneered at me.

"No hard feelings?" I said again, trying to appear as genuine as possible, my hand still outstretched.

"Shake his hand," Rod said to Neil, laughing arrogantly.

When Neil tentatively took my hand, I half-growled and pulled him close, my grip tightening.

He grimaced in pain and bit back a yelp.

"*Don't* fuck with me, frat boy," I hissed, my hand inexorably crushing his.

"Hey!" Rod cried.

Since Neil was incapacitated with pain, I flashed Rod a withering glare. "And the same goes for you, *buttfucker*. I'm tired of putting up with your shit. If you fuck with me, you'll regret it. Are we clear?"

"Fuck you!"

Neil sagged to his knees, but I didn't relent.

"I said, 'are we clear,' mister?!"

Neil gasped in pain.

Rod's eyes darted to his friend and then back to me. One look at my murderous expression convinced him not to take a swing at me. "Let go of him!" he said instead.

"Are… we… clear?" Out of spite, I ground Neil's hand.

Rod glared at me, mute with fury.

At that point, I realized that he wasn't going to back down, no matter how much I hurt his friend, so I looked at Neil and repeated my question.

"We're clear!" he cried, his voice thready with pain. "We're clear. Okay?"

I released him and he crumpled to the floor, clutching his right hand.

"I mean it," I said to Rod. "Don't fuck with me."

"Fuck you, asshole."

I grabbed him by the shirt and pulled him close. He tried to fend me off, but I was far too strong. I thrust my face into his and—

"What's going on in here?!"

Rod and I didn't separate, but we both looked toward the voice. An older man, a professor, stood in the doorway.

With a mutual glare, Rod and I let go of each other.

"I said, 'what's going on in here?'"

"Nothing," Rod said immediately, abiding by the universal "no snitching" code among guys.

"Yeah," I said, "my friend just dropped his books."

In truth, Neil *had* dropped his books when I started crushing his hand.

"We were just helping him pick them up," Rod added. With that, he reached down to suit action to words. When he stood, he flashed me a venomous look.

I returned it with sanguine malice.

"I guess we'd better get going now," I said to him.

He helped Neil to his feet.

Once in the hall, we all felt the professor's eyes upon us.

"If you ever pull that shit again," Rod hissed, "I'll fucking kill you."

"Try it, Rod," I whispered through a rictus smile, "and I'll break every bone in your body."

Behind us, the professor was still staring at our retreating backs.

With that, I turned and headed down the stairs. At the landing I glanced back and saw Rod gently examining his friend's hand.

I didn't *think* I'd broken it, but I savagely decided that Neil deserved it if I had.

✧ ✧ ✧

"What happened with you and Rod?" Gina practically shouted when I called her after wrestling practice. It was date night, and I was looking forward to seeing her. At the sound of her voice, however, something within me hardened.

"What do you mean?" I asked, affecting nonchalance.

"Rod says you jumped Neil and broke his hand. And now he's talking about coming over to your room with a bunch of Pikes to beat you up."

"Super."

"What happened? You didn't jump Neil, did you?"

"No," I said, unwilling to give more detail. Gina hated it when I reacted with violence, and

she'd only scold me if I told her what happened.

"Then how did he break his hand?" she asked, her tone full of suspicion.

"He broke his hand?" I asked disingenuously.

"Two metacarpals. He's wearing a splint."

"Oh. I'm sorry to hear that."

"You are *not*. What happened?"

I didn't reply.

"Paul Hughes," she said, "what did you do?"

"What time do you wanna go to dinner?" I asked.

"Answer my question."

"I need to shower first. So… pick you up at seven?"

"Paul!"

"Okay, that sounds great," I said. "I'll see you in the lobby at seven." With that, I hung up.

✧ ✧ ✧

Gina was waiting for me at seven o'clock, but she was *not* happy.

"What did you do, Paul?" she asked, her dark eyes glittering angrily.

"Nothing more than he deserved."

"Paul, you *broke* his hand."

"It'll heal."

"That's not the point."

I stared at her, surly and impassive.

She frowned.

"Are you ready to go to dinner?"

"So that's it? You're not going to tell me?"

"I was thinking Chinese," I said. "Or maybe pizza. What do you think?"

"Paul, this is serious. Initiation Week starts tomorrow, and if Rod wants me blackballed, he can do it."

"Yeah, Chinese sounds good."

"Are you listening to me?"

I nodded. "But I don't wanna talk about it. I want to go to dinner."

"So that's the way you're going to be?! Fine!"

Dinner was tense. Gina was angry about my altercation with Rod and Neil, and more so about my steadfast refusal to discuss it.

In retrospect, I think I was angry with *Gina* as well. I still didn't fully believe her about the Vermont trip, and I guess I was being a jerk on purpose. Unfortunately, I didn't realize it at the time. Gina realized it all too well. When we got back to the dorm, she headed for South Carrick without so much as saying goodnight.

"Don't you want to come up?" I asked, nodding toward my side of the building. I don't know what I expected, but I thought she was being rude by simply walking away.

Before she could answer, the doors from North Carrick flew open with a clatter.

"There he is!"

I whirled to find myself facing a group of Pikes, led by Rod. Neil straggled through the door behind them. As Gina had said, he was wearing a splint.

Under the stark glow of the breezeway lights, I glared at Rod. Since he was backed by his fraternity brothers, he didn't retreat from my withering expression.

"What do you want, Rod?" I finally asked.

"Your ass."

"Yeah, I heard that about you," I mocked. "You like fucking guys in the ass. Or is it the other way around?"

Beside me, Gina stiffened. "What are you doing here, Rod?" she asked.

"This doesn't have anything to do with you, Gina," he said. "We're gonna kick his ass."

"All five of you?" I taunted. "So you're too much of a pussy to fight me by yourself?"

"I don't need them to kick your ass, faggot."

"Then why'd you bring 'em?"

"To make sure you fight fair," he said. "I told 'em how you jumped Neil outta nowhere."

"That's bullshit and you know it."

"Hey, Loverboy, what's going on?"

I tried to hide my surprise as T.J. stepped up beside me. A half-second later, someone moved Gina aside and I felt Glen's presence where she'd been.

"What's going on, T.J.?" a girl asked, from somewhere behind us.

"We'll be with you in a sec, babe," T.J. said. Then he turned back to Rod. "So, Richie Rich, are you lost? Slumming with us poor folk? Or were you and your boyfriends just out for an evening stroll?"

The Pikes collectively glared.

"Yeah, Rod," I jeered, "what the fuck were you and your boyfriends gonna do?"

"Cool it," Glen said quietly.

My blood coursed with adrenaline, but I reluctantly admitted that Glen was right. What did I think I was going to do, start a brawl with five Pikes?

As the tableau drew out, people were beginning to stare, drawn by the confrontation. We were sure to draw the attention of a passing RA sooner or later.

As if on cue, the doors to North Carrick swung open behind Rod and his gang. Wade, the Hall Director, strode into view.

"What's going on here?" he asked. Then he caught sight of me. When he looked at Rod and the Pikes, he frowned. "Do you live here?"

"Do we look like dorm fags?" one of them said derisively. "C'mon, Rod, let's get outta here. These assholes aren't worth our time."

"I'll show you who's worth your time, rich boy," T.J. snapped. Before he could move, Wade stepped between the two groups.

I put my hand in front of T.J., blocking his path. (Some part of my brain still had a grip on rational thought.)

"Okay, gentlemen," Wade said, "the party's over. Everyone, go home."

Rod and the Pikes didn't move.

"Or I could call the Campus Police," Wade added. "I'm sure they'll be kind enough to escort you off the premises."

"C'mon, Rod, let's get outta here," Neil said from the back of the group. "Fuck him anyway. And fuck Gina too, the slut."

At that, I saw red, and launched myself across the gap between our two groups. To my utter surprise, I stopped abruptly, choking on my shirt as Glen's massive fist gripped my collar, holding me back.

"We don't want no trouble," he said to the group at large. Then, to Neil: "But one more crack from you, and I'll teach you some manners myself."

Neil visibly wilted.

I straightened and took a half-step back to ease the pressure on my windpipe.

After another tense moment, Wade repeated his demand for the Pikes to leave.

"This isn't over," Rod said, glaring at me.

"Yes, it is," Wade said. "If I see you near my dorm again tonight, I'm calling the Campus Police."

"Fuck you, man," Rod said, sneering. "I *own* the Campus Police." Wade didn't reply, and Rod eventually turned to his fraternity brothers. "C'mon. Let's get the fuck outta here."

As they walked to their cars, Wade turned to me. "I'm not going to ask what that was about," he said, "but you should know better, Paul. And that goes for you too, T.J."

I simply stood there, mute.

T.J. bristled, but didn't say anything.

Then Wade thanked Glen with a slight nod.

Glen inclined his head, taciturn as ever.

"All right then, I'll let you gentlemen go back to your dates," Wade said, including the girls with a glance. Then, his expression stern, he made eye contact with T.J. and me in turn. "I trust this business is over?"

"It's over," Glen rumbled, the voice of finality.

After a strained moment, T.J. and I nodded. With that, Wade headed into the dorm.

Gina came up to me as two girls moved toward T.J. and Glen.

"What was *that* about?" one of them asked T.J.

"Just some rich boys who shouldn't've messed with us, babe," he said. "Ain't that right, Loverboy?"

I stared at him for a moment, a little dazed by the sudden release of tension.

"Man, what the fuck?" he groused when I didn't reply. Then he shook his head in annoyance and headed for the dorm with his date in tow. Before he opened the door, I called his name, and he turned.

"Um… thanks, man," I said.

He gazed at me for a moment and then nodded, almost reluctantly.

Without saying another word, he entered the building.

Gina silently hugged me.

I suppressed a tremor from the after-effects of the adrenaline.

"Don't *ever* scare me like that," she whispered, tears flowing. When she finally looked up, she closed her eyes and lifted her chin for a kiss.

I bent my head and brought my lips to hers.

She returned the kiss with a lot more passion than I expected. Then she practically dragged me toward South Carrick. Upstairs, she didn't waste time with preliminaries. She simply kissed me—hard—and started pulling off my clothes. Our sex was fast and intense; I didn't even break

a sweat until *after* my orgasm.

With a bit of jockeying in the single bed, I rolled to my back and Gina hugged herself to my side, both of us breathing hard.

"I thought you were angry with me," I said.

"I *am*. You were a real jerk at dinner. But I'm also scared about what Rod'll do."

"I'm not," I said. "What can he do to me?"

"Maybe you're not worried about yourself," Gina said, "but what about me? You can't stop him from blackballing me. I mean, I'm still a pledge, at least until next Saturday. After 'I' week, I'll be a full sister. And then it'll be almost impossible for Rod to do anything. But until then…" She sighed in disgust. "Anyway, that's not the point. I'm still worried about what he'll do. You don't understand, Paul, he's like a spoiled child. He's had money all his life, and no one's ever said no to him."

"I'll say no to him. Hard."

"And that's what I'm worried about. You can't solve every problem with violence."

"I know," I said reluctantly.

"And if he blackballs me now, I'll *never* get into Chi O. And I'll have wasted an entire quarter. I'll also lose all my friends. I mean, who am I supposed to hang out with? Faith? Ha! Kendall? Not likely." Then her mood changed. "She still doesn't wanna have anything to do with me, does she?"

"It's not that…"

"Then what is it?"

"Well…"

"Did you tell her that I wanted to get together with her? With you two?"

My guilty silence was answer enough.

"Paul?! Can't you see what this is doing to us?"

"I know," I said softly, weakly.

"Then *do* something about it. Talk to her. If she won't listen, then…"

"Then *what?*" I asked hotly. "Break up with her?"

"I didn't say that."

"But that's what you *meant*."

"I did *not!* Don't put words in my mouth."

"The words were in your brain before I put 'em in your mouth," I said.

"No they weren't!"

"Whatever."

"Paul!"

"Listen," I said, sitting up suddenly, "I'm not going to break up with Kendall, and that's final." Then, angrily, I started gathering my clothes.

"I didn't say to break up with her. I just meant—"

"You might not've said it, but you were *thinking* it!"

"I was *not!* You don't know what I was thinking."

"Whatever," I said caustically. "I gotta go."

"So that's it? You're just leaving?"

"Evidently."

"Fine! Go!"

With that, I left, my shirt still unbuttoned and un-tucked. Once again, a corner of my brain realized that I was unescorted in the female dorm, but I didn't care. I wasn't about to break up with Kendall—the very thought left a knot in my stomach—no matter how much Gina wanted me to.

When I got back to my room, I flung the door open. Before I could close it, T.J. called to me from his side of the suite. Then he appeared in his door. From the sound of things, he and Glen were partying with their dates.

"We sure showed them, huh, Loverboy?" he said, exuberant.

"T.J., I'm really not in the mood."

"Man, what the fuck is your problem?"

"You, T.J.," I said, lashing out. "*You're* my problem."

Before he could rush me, Glen grabbed him from behind and easily wrestled him back into their room.

I heard T.J. cursing at me from within.

A moment later Glen appeared in the foyer and then deliberately shut his door behind him.

"He was just trying to be nice to you," the big man said. "Why'd you have to go and be a jerk?"

I bit back a hot reply.

Glen waited silently.

"Look," I said, my emotions beginning to cool, "I'm sorry. I've had a rough night, okay?"

Glen nodded. "But you'd better figure out who your friends are." Then, in a rare burst of conversation, he continued. "And those guys tonight, those Pikes, they could cause you a lot of trouble. Your Chi O friend, too. You shouldn't mess with 'em. And you definitely shouldn't provoke 'em."

"So… what?" I asked semi-rhetorically. "Should I let 'em do whatever they want? Should I turn the other cheek? I'm not a pussy."

He looked at me for a long, hard moment, as if considering his next words carefully. "Do you think I'm a pussy?"

"Huh?"

"Do you think I'm a pussy?"

"No, of course not."

"But I turn the other cheek. Whenever I can, that is. Does that make me a pussy?"

"No, Glen, but that's not what I—"

"I know what you meant," he said, cutting me off, "but you're wrong. I'm not a pussy, but what good does it do to provoke them?"

I set my jaw, but didn't answer, because I knew he was right.

"Self-discipline is more important than settling a score. That Pike will never stop. For everything you do to him, he'll do something worse in return. Guys like him don't have self-discipline, and they're weak. So why do you wanna be like him?" He regarded me levelly for a moment before his usual quiet nature reasserted itself. After a meaningful look, he returned to his room.

Back in my own room, I changed into a pair of workout shorts. Then I dragged out my

barbell.

Unfortunately, I couldn't get Glen's words out of my mind. I *didn't* want to be like the Pikes, but I couldn't escape the conclusion that by taunting them, I'd done just that.

I could delude myself by saying that Rod had deserved it (not to mention Neil), but was that really true? And what good had it done? I got the satisfaction of goading them, but that would probably cause trouble in the long run. Worse still, it might cause trouble for Gina.

At the thought of Gina, I went back over the past week in my mind. I *wanted* to trust her about the Vermont trip, but a tiny part of me still wondered if Rod might have been telling the truth.

Doubt is an insidious thing. Once planted, the seeds grow in silence, unseen. If I didn't deal with my doubts about Gina's fidelity, they'd consume me and poison our relationship. They already *were* poisoning our relationship.

My own guilt over Felicia didn't help, either. Kendall would call it a defense mechanism: when I felt guilty, I got angry. I felt guilty about my night with Felicia, so I went on the offensive. In the repetitive calm of my workout, I realized what I was doing. But that didn't make it any easier to change my behavior in the heat of the moment.

Maybe Glen had been right after all. Maybe I didn't have as much self-discipline as I thought. I didn't like admitting it, but I was too honest with myself not to.

Polonius, I cursed silently.

As I switched to doing shoulder presses, my thoughts turned to my conversation with Trip (which seemed like a lifetime before, but had only been that morning).

He was right, I *did* need to fix things.

Or I need to change them, I mused sullenly.

When I thought about breaking up with either girlfriend, I faltered and almost dropped the heavy barbell. But if I couldn't get Kendall and Gina to talk to each other, things would only get worse, and I'd *have* to make a choice.

Decision and action are two different things, though. If I did choose, would I have the courage to actually break up with one of the girls?

That question weighed on me almost as much as the choice itself.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Saturday dawned cold and clear. After a quick breakfast—by myself—I drove to the airport for an instrument lesson with Earl. We flew to Asheville and back, and once again, I spent most of the time under the hood. Back at Island Home, I paid attention to my landing and greased the Cessna onto the runway. I think even Earl was impressed.

Afterward, I hurried back to campus for my first wrestling meet. It was against two clubs: one from Kentucky and the other from a school in south Georgia. Will Treadway was still the number one wrestler in my weight class, so he got the points matches.

I had to settle for a round-robin series of matches against the guys in my weight class from the other schools. I won one by a pin and one by points. My skills had come back rapidly, and I was still as quick and strong as I'd been in high school. It wouldn't be long before I'd challenge Will for the number one spot on the team, and he knew it.

Trip got to wrestle in his first competitive meet, and he did pretty well. What he lacked in skill he made up for with natural ability. He won one of his matches and lost the other on points.

"That was a blast!" he said afterward. Then he grew serious. "Those near-fall points in the second match killed me, though. So, what did I do wrong?"

"When the other guy sank the half nelson and reached for your opposite wrist," I said, "you should've…"

I was still explaining counter moves when Kendall and Abby joined us. After a quick shower and lunch at their apartment, Trip and I headed to the HPER courts for our first intramural basketball game. As we warmed up and waited for the game on our court to finish, I pulled T.J. aside.

"Look," I said awkwardly, "I'm sorry about last night."

"About what? About the dickhead Pikes? Aw, hell, Loverboy, that was *fun*."

"Not that," I said. "About later, back in the suite."

"I figured you'd just had a fight with one of your girlfriends. Don't worry about it. At least you're not light in your loafers like your roommate or Cary the Fairy."

I gave him a hard look.

"Man, what the hell is your problem, anyway? I'm just kidding, but you're always so high and mighty and judgmental. Who died and made you God?"

"No one, T.J.," I said, angry with myself for thinking I could be nice to him. "Let's just play basketball."

We lost the game, which didn't improve T.J.'s mood. (It didn't improve *my* mood either, but I never had delusions of being a great basketball player in the first place.)

"Man, how can you be so uncoordinated?" T.J. ranted at me. Then he rounded on Jeff. "And you're even worse."

"Hey, fuck you!" Jeff shot back.

"Cool it!" Trip said. "We lost, okay. It happens. You can't win 'em all, and you know it, T.J. We just need more practice is all."

"Four-eyes can practice all he wants, but—"

"T.J.!" Trip shouted, cutting him off mid-outburst. "I don't like that nickname. Come up with another one or call him Jeff. And if you wanna play on a team with us, you gotta be cool. You're

either with us, or not. So, which is it gonna be?"

T.J. stared at Trip for a long, angry moment. Finally, he backed down. "I'm with you," he said at last.

"Good," Trip said. "Then act like it."

T.J. looked at him sullenly, but didn't reply.

"Jeff's not gonna get any better with you yelling at him. Look, T.J., you've got a good inside game. Why don't you teach Jeff a little ball-handling, and maybe work on some basic skills. Can you handle that?"

"In my sleep."

"Is that okay with you, Jeff?"

"Whatever," Jeff said.

"It's not gonna be my fault if he still sucks, though," T.J. said defensively.

"But it'll be your fault if you don't *try* to teach him anything. So… are you ready to put your money where your mouth is? Or are you all talk?"

"I'm not all talk, man!"

"Then put up or shut up, T.J."

"Who made you captain?"

"*You* did," Trip said evenly. "When you signed up to play on my team. Now, are you gonna work with Jeff or not? It's up to you, T.J., but I think you're a good player, and you've got a lot you could teach him. So, what'll it be?"

"Yeah, I'll teach him," T.J. said after a long moment.

"Good," Trip said.

With that, we headed back to the dorm. Abby beamed at Trip, and even I looked at him with a new respect. He had defused a tense situation *and* gotten T.J. to be a productive member of the team. I still didn't like T.J., but at least I could respect Trip's solution.

✧ ✧ ✧

The Snow Skiing Club planned a night skiing trip to Ober Gatlinburg, and Trip talked me into going. Despite being worn out from wrestling and basketball, I was looking forward to hitting the slopes.

The trip wasn't limited to club members, so Kendall and Abby joined us. I took one look at the rocky, icy slopes, however, and decided to spare my nice new skis. I rented a beat-up pair instead.

Once Kendall, Abby, and Trip finished in the rental shop, they headed for the beginners' group on the bunny slope. I joined some of the more experienced skiers on the black diamond runs. Unfortunately, I was too tired to enjoy myself; my legs were rubbery from the day's exertion, so I decided to retire to the easier slope with Kendall and the others.

Trip had quickly picked up the basics of skiing—the wedge, slaloming, etc.—but Kendall and Abby were having a difficult time. Neither of them were athletes, and they had to learn an entirely new set of skills.

I tried working with Kendall, but she quickly gave up. When I tried to coax her back to the tow rope, she balked, complaining that she was tired and sore.

Hell, I thought peevishly, *I won two wrestling matches, lost a basketball game, and skied for more than an hour on the expert slopes. So quit whining about being tired and sore!* Outwardly,

however, I tried to be accommodating.

Kendall probably saw through my front, which didn't improve her mood at all.

"I'm dead tired anyway," I said, popping the bindings on my skis. "So, do you wanna get some hot cocoa?"

"Absolutely!"

In the lodge, we warmed up by the fire, our stocking feet propped on the stone hearth. When Kendall was suitably warm, I gestured for her to sit in my lap.

"I'm sorry I got frustrated," I said.

"And I'm sorry I can't ski."

"Don't worry about it. It took me a while to learn. Besides, this way, we can relax in front of the fire."

With that, she snuggled close. Then she started nuzzling my neck with soft kisses. When she began teasing me by whispering things she wanted to do back at her apartment, I had to shift my erection to a more comfortable angle.

Since Trip was as worn out as I was, he and Abby joined us a little later. The rest of the group skied for another hour before the resort shut down for the night.

By the time we returned to campus, it was almost midnight and I was truly exhausted. But I was still horny, and judging by the look in Kendall's eye, she was too. Trip and Abby sensed our mood, and decided to head up to his room.

Vivian was camping with her boyfriend and Phoebe had gone home for the weekend, so Kendall and I had the apartment to ourselves. I'd like to say that we had wild, passionate sex, but the truth is pretty unexciting: I fell asleep.

I awoke with a start, my eyes snapping open. Kendall was snuggled next to me—for a change—and it took me a minute to figure out why the room was so bright. My head was still a little muzzy as I looked at my watch; it was after seven.

As my eyes adjusted, I realized that Abby's bed was still made. I smiled slyly when I realized that she had probably spent the night with Trip.

Since Kendall and I were still alone, I nestled my morning hard-on against her ass and contemplated making amends for neglecting her the night before.

✧ ✧ ✧

On Monday, I dreaded going to Calculus. I'd begun to feel bad about breaking Neil's hand, but I was determined not to let the two Pikes harass me without consequences. Deep down, though, I knew that Glen was right; Rod would never back down, and sooner or later, Bad Things would happen (to me, to him, or to someone else, like Gina). So I vowed to let tensions die down, if possible.

To my surprise, Rod and Neil didn't show up for class. I didn't have time to think twice about it, though, since Professor Vajpayee launched into his lecture. He was facing the blackboard, of course, so I missed every other word, which meant I'd have to study even harder.

Fortunately, I'd begun to "see" the math in my head. Conic sections were no longer rote-learned formulas; I saw them as visible slices of a cone. Derivatives weren't random letters and numbers; they were a tangent on a curve. Even integrals suddenly made sense; I saw them as a shaded area under an irregular curve.

Once I realized that the numbers and formulas translated into visual representations, I had a

much easier time with calculus. Consequently, I concentrated on taking notes, and stopped worrying about Rod and Neil.

After class I headed to one of the architecture labs to do some preliminary sketches for a Design project. We had to do drawings and a design analysis of one of the buildings on the World's Fair site, and I had chosen the centerpiece Sunsphere.

After about an hour, the lab filled with upperclassmen. They must've had a project due, because they all got to work in groups of three and four.

For a few minutes I let my imagination run wild as I pictured myself leading a project team, designing a landmark like the Sunsphere. When my stomach growled, however, I came back to reality and decided to grab some lunch.

The Morrill dining hall was crowded, but I quickly got my tray and found a seat. I had just started eating when two hands covered my eyes.

"Guess who!" a girl's voice said.

I tried to place the voice, but in the din of the dining hall, I couldn't.

"Do you need a clue?"

I nodded.

"Mysterious," she whispered in my ear.

"Wren?"

"Uh-uh."

"Christy!"

"Right," she said, uncovering my eyes. "Do you mind if I join you?"

I gestured at the seat across from me.

"Thanks," she said. "I hate eating alone."

"Me too."

For a few minutes, we talked about life in general. Then the conversation turned to relationships.

"So, how did you and Kendall meet?" she asked.

"At summer camp," I said. "I know it sounds lame, though. I mean, don't ten-year-olds go to summer camp?"

"Actually, summer camp sounds fun. Did you two hit it off immediately?"

"Ha! I wish. I used to be pudgy and shy. And Kendall… um… kinda developed early, if you know what I mean."

Christy nodded, her blue eyes sparkling with mirth.

"She was The Goddess Kendall, and I didn't think she'd ever be interested in me, not in a million years. But she was. Go figure."

"So how did you first get together?"

"Believe it or not," I continued, "*she* talked to *me* first. Well, me and Gina. Kendall and I didn't start going together until a year later, though. Since she was from Chattanooga and I was from Atlanta, we didn't get to see each other except at camp."

Christy asked a few more questions and I answered them, omitting details here and there to hide my nudist upbringing. I didn't think she'd be shocked, but I simply didn't discuss my family's nudism with people who weren't *very* close friends (or nudists themselves). After I told her about my early relationship with Kendall, though, I turned the conversational tables.

"So when do I get to meet Simon?" I asked.

Christy laughed.

"What's so funny?"

"You really don't know? No, I guess you wouldn't."

I looked a question at her.

"Every time Simon has come up, Wren's around. And you know *her* opinion of him, so I guess I don't bring him up very often," she finished with a rueful look. "Anyway, I don't know when you'll get to meet him. He graduated last May, and now he goes to school in England."

"Really? Cool. Where in England?"

"Oxford University. He's studying Classics at Trinity College."

"So how'd you meet him?" I asked.

"He was in my Astronomy class last year. We had a project where we had to go up to the roof of the Astronomy building at night, and I was cold. He lent me his coat, even though he was shivering, and we started talking. He asked me out, and the rest is history."

"That doesn't sound all that bad," I said, "so why doesn't Wren like him?"

"She thinks he took advantage of me."

I raised my eyebrows in surprise.

"Not like that. I'm not a blushing virgin. No, Wren thinks he asked me to marry him when… when he… I mean, when *I* was… um…"

My eyes narrowed in a mixture of concern and curiosity.

"Last spring… something happened." For a long moment she didn't speak. After she wiped her eyes, she smiled bravely and asked to change the subject.

"Sure, no problem," I said. "Um… so, what're you doing after lunch?"

"I was going to work on some drawings. Do you want to hang out, like we did last quarter?"

"Well, I've got an architecture class," I said, looking at my watch, "but we can hang out till two."

"Do you mind if we go back to my room first? I need to pick something up."

"No problem."

Upstairs, Christy unlocked her door and then gestured for me to wait. "I've got a guy with me," she said into the room, her voice pitched to carry.

"C'mon in," someone called. "We're decent."

Christy flashed me a diffident smile and then preceded me into the room.

"Who is it?" asked the girl who appeared from the other side of the suite. She had finely chiseled features, with dark reddish-brown hair and dark eyes. She was a little taller than Christy, but not as slender. When she saw me, she stopped, her eyes roaming over my physique. "Well, who're you, handsome?"

"Oh, Ash," Christy chided.

I had to suppress a blush.

"Yeah, who is it?" another girl asked, this one a lithe brunette with an angelic face. She stopped behind Ash and looked at me as well.

"Paul, these are my suitemates," Christy said, "Ash and Zoë."

"Hi," I said, extending my hand.

"I'm Aisling," Ash said, pronouncing her name "*ash*-ling." Then she smiled, her eyes soft and

seductive. “My friends call me Ash, but you can call me *anytime*.”

“I’m Zoë,” the other girl said, laughing.

“Paul’s the guy I was telling you about,” Christy said to Ash. “You know, the one who’s modeling for your mom.”

“*The* Paul?” Ash said, her eyes widening. “I *knew* I should’ve modeled for Mom when she told me she had an opening.”

“‘Mom’?” I asked, my brow furrowed.

“Ash is Siobhan’s daughter,” Christy said.

Once she mentioned it, I could see the family resemblance.

“So,” Ash mused, her eyes undressing me, “I’ve seen you in sketches, but in the flesh, you *are* hunky.”

“Sorry, Ash,” Christy said, laughing. “Paul’s taken. His girlfriend models with him in the Life Drawing class.”

“That’s too bad,” Ash said.

Suddenly, I had a flash of revelation: Ash reminded me of Wren, both her personality and looks. “Are *all* your roommates like this?” I asked Christy.

“High strung, you mean?” Christy asked, immediately sensing the gist of my question.

“I’m normal,” Zoë said, laughing. “Ash and Wren are just nymphos.”

“I’m an *aspiring* nympho,” Ash said. “Besides, you’ve got a boyfriend. So it’s easy for you to be normal. I’m still looking for my future ex-husband.”

“Well, you’ll have to keep looking,” Christy said, shaking her head at her friend’s antics. Then she turned to me. “Let me just get a snack and I’ll be ready to go.”

“It was nice meeting you, Paul,” Zoë said, taking the cue.

“Yes, it was very nice meeting you, Paul,” Ash echoed, gliding close to shake my hand. She tried to look sultry, but laughed brightly when I arched an eyebrow in challenge.

“It was nice meeting you,” I said. When the two girls returned to their side of the suite, I leaned down to Christy. “Was she for real?”

“Who, Ash?” She rolled her eyes and shook her head. “No, she’s a lot of talk. Even more than Wren. Ash flirts with lotsa guys, but she doesn’t date much. She’s really picky about what kind of guy she likes. Besides, you’re not her type.”

“Oh?”

“You’re too serious. And you’re too young. She’s into older guys.”

“Older? How *much* older?”

“Nothing too far out,” Christy said with a laugh. “I think the last guy she dated was twenty-five.”

“Ah.”

“Okay, lemme get a snack and I’ll be ready to go. Is there anything special you want?”

“Snack? We just ate lunch.”

“I know. But I’ve got a high metabolism, so I need to eat five or six times a day. If I don’t, I lose weight, and I’m trying to stay in the triple digits. So… what do you feel like?” With that, she knelt to open a small refrigerator under her desk. Her eyes flicked over the contents. “I’ve got carrots, celery, radishes, apples, oranges, plums, and one pear left. I’ve also got granola and graham crackers, and I *may* have some peanut butter, if you want.”

"You've got all *that?*"

"Mmm hmm. I like variety. Also, I want to stay healthy, so I eat well. Mostly fruits and vegetables, but nuts and a few other things too."

"You don't eat meat?" I asked, thinking back over the times I'd eaten with her.

"I *love* seafood, and sometimes I eat chicken, but no pork or beef."

"Why not? Are you a vegetarian or something?"

"Uh-uh. It's a Buddhist thing."

My eyes flew wide in surprise. "You're a Buddhist?"

"Not really. I was raised Catholic—I mean, my parents had six kids—but when we lived in Japan, I used to spend a lot of time at this beautiful Buddhist temple. There were always tourists for me to draw. Some of the monks noticed me—who wouldn't? I was a pesky, skinny blonde girl with a sketchpad." She smiled in self-deprecation.

"Anyway," she continued, "a couple of the monks took me under their wing and taught me a lot about Buddhism. I'm still a Catholic girl at heart, but I agree with a lot of Buddhist teachings. But I'm being a chatterbox again. Snacks… do you want anything?"

"Not really."

"I feel like a pear, an apple, and some granola. And I think I'll take some carrots too."

"You say you're trying to *gain* weight?" I asked semi-rhetorically. "Jeez, I've got the opposite problem."

"Your problem isn't your weight," she said matter-of-factly. Then she gathered her food and put it in a brown paper bag, which she deposited in her backpack as she stood.

"Okay, so what *is* my problem?"

"Sorry," she said. "Forget I said anything."

"No, tell me. What's my problem?"

"You don't eat right," she said bluntly. "You obviously care about your body; you wouldn't look like you do if you didn't. But then you turn around and eat a cheeseburger and fries for lunch." Without pausing, she called goodbye to her suitemates.

"What's wrong with a cheeseburger and fries?" I asked as we walked down the hall.

"What about vegetables?"

"I had a pickle on my cheeseburger."

"How about *real* vegetables? Or a salad? What you eat for breakfast is almost as bad. Toast and cereal… sometimes an orange or a banana… that's all I've ever seen you eat."

"What's the matter with that? I'm trying to watch my weight. I mean, I'm not lucky like you, I don't have a high metabolism."

"So? What's that have to do with not eating right?"

As we walked, Christy told me more than I ever thought I needed to know about a proper diet. Strangely, she didn't sound like she was lecturing. It was a lecture, all right, but I didn't bristle defensively when she told me that my eating habits were all wrong.

In the atrium of the A&A building, she smiled diffidently. "I'm sorry," she said. "I didn't mean to give you a lecture about your diet. I just… I know you work out, and you take care of your body, but a balanced diet is part of that. You're too cute to mess up your body with poor eating habits."

"You think I'm cute?" I asked, eager for the chance to change the subject.

She blushed and looked down bashfully.

I chuckled. “I think you’re pretty cute too,” I said at last. “Now c’mon, let’s find someplace to draw. I’ve got some sketches to do for class, and you mentioned something about your portfolio…”

She smiled gratefully, her cheeks dimpled.

We ended up finding a quiet spot at the end of one of the balconies. When two o’clock rolled around, Christy walked to Professor Ledbetter’s classroom with me. Then she smiled and gestured for me to wait as she rummaged in her backpack.

“Here,” she said at last, “take these.”

“Don’t you need ’em?” I asked, eyeing the proffered bag of carrots.

“Not as much as *you* do. Take them.”

Hesitantly, I did.

“Now go,” she said. “Shoo. I’m going down to Siobhan’s office so I can finish my drawing.”

Surprisingly, though, she was waiting for me when my class was over. Her blue eyes lit up when she smiled.

“You got me thinking about Japan,” she said. Then she gestured for me to look at her sketchpad. “This is Nobu.”

Her drawing showed a bald man wearing loosely draped robes. His eyes gleamed with wisdom and laughter. He looked like someone I’d want to meet.

“He was my favorite monk. He taught me the most about Buddhism. And he helped me with my calligraphy.”

“Calligraphy?”

“Writing Japanese,” she said simply. “Nobu was a very educated man. He was a college professor before he became a monk—he taught Tokugawa-era literature—and his calligraphy was just beautiful. I’ll have to show you sometime.” She sighed and turned nostalgic. “I think I miss him the most. Well, him and Mariko, my best friend. Anyway, we’ve got to get to Siobhan’s class. I can show you sketches of Mariko later. Right now, I want to work on your shoulders.”

“My shoulders? Huh?”

“Mmm hmm. On my sculpture. Your shoulders are so well-defined that they’re actually a bit difficult to do. Your individual deltoids stand out when you flex. Wren has beautiful shoulders—she *would*, she’s a swimmer—but yours are just… wow. Besides, I need to work on your chest too—your sculpture’s chest, I mean—because I haven’t gotten your pectoral muscles right. You’re so muscular that you’re fun to sculpt. It’s kind of Zen-like,” she said. “When I’m working with the clay, I just…”

I decided that she didn’t chatter only when she was nervous; she did it when she was excited, too. I smiled and simply nodded at the appropriate times.

✧ ✧ ✧

The rest of the week was more or less routine. Modeling for Siobhan’s Life Drawing class was a little boring by myself, but I only had two classes to endure before Kendall and I modeled together.

After Tuesday’s class, Kendall was waiting for me in the hall. One look at her expression confirmed her mood, so we hurried back to her apartment. In the elevator up to her floor, we

were all over each other.

We barely made it to her apartment before shedding our clothes, and we ended up having sex in the entry hallway. Without even pausing, we moved to the bedroom for round two. We didn't have *constant* sex for three hours, but it was close. Finally, I dragged myself away and took a quick shower before heading to my American Literature class.

Thursday wasn't quite as passionate, since Vivian was in the apartment, but Kendall didn't hesitate to have sex in the relative privacy of her bedroom. Afterward, we lay together, comfortably entwined, and talked about life, the universe, and everything.

✧ ✧ ✧

Rod and Neil didn't show up for Calculus class on Wednesday, and I was beginning to hope they'd dropped the class. Unfortunately, they dashed my hopes on Friday when they showed up for our first test.

Rod smirked at me. "Good luck, dickwad."

I bit back a snide reply and gritted my teeth. *Self-discipline,* I told myself. Then I took a deep breath and tried to follow Professor Vajpayee as he gave last-minute instructions.

Rod and Neil finished early and flashed me a smug look as they left. It didn't take a rocket scientist to figure out that they'd probably cheated.

There ain't no justice, I silently cursed.

✧ ✧ ✧

Christy and I ate lunch together on Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday. And each day we went up to her room to pick up snacks afterward.

"Where do you get this stuff?" I finally asked. The snack shops on campus only carried things like candy, chips, and Cokes, and the nearest grocery store was a couple of miles away.

"Ash and I make a grocery run every weekend. Siobhan lets her use her car."

"That reminds me," I said, changing the subject. "If Ash is Siobhan's daughter, how come she lives in a dorm? I mean, why doesn't she live at home?"

Christy laughed. "Ash says it's so her mom doesn't know who she's dating, but she doesn't date that often. Personally, I think it's so she's got someplace to call her own. Siobhan is a sculptress, but Ash is more into photography. She's got an incredible eye, but her mother wants her to be a studio artist, instead of a photographer. Anyway, Ash doesn't want to live at home because her mother's always trying to get her to draw, or sculpt, or something. Besides, since Siobhan's a professor here, Ash's tuition is free, so her father only has to pay for her room and board."

"So her parents are divorced?"

"Mmm hmm. Her father seems nice, but I've never met him. He lives in Chicago. Siobhan talks about him sometimes, but I think she's a lot happier without him. Ash misses him though, and they talk on the phone a lot. Ash and her dad, I mean. Gosh, I'm chattering again, aren't I?"

I smiled and shook my head. "I like listening to you."

"Whatever for?"

"Maybe it's 'cause I don't have to be 'on' around you."

She cocked her head to the side in question.

"Wren's fun and all," I said, "don't get me wrong, but I'm always having to *think* when I'm

around her. I mean, it's like a wrestling match, where I gotta work for an advantage and worry about what I need to counter. You know? With you… it's different. I can relax, I guess. Does that make sense?"

"Sure. I think that's why I like hanging around with you, too. Besides, I love seeing what you draw. You're really good, you know. I wish I could draw buildings like you do."

"Ha! I wish I could draw people like *you* do."

She smiled.

"Between the two of us, we're a pretty well-rounded artist."

"We are," she said, blushing. Then she changed the subject. "So, what do you want for an afternoon snack? We need to finish the celery sticks—"

"I'm not a big fan of celery."

"Radishes?"

"I'm not a bunny, Bunny."

She frowned good-naturedly. "I'm all out of carrot sticks. You ate the last of them yesterday, so who's the bunny now? Anyway, what'll it be, an apple or an orange?"

"An orange."

"Do you want me to peel it for you?" she asked, faux-patronizing.

"That would be splendid," I said, waving my hand haughtily. Then I cracked a grin.

She rolled her eyes and tossed me an orange. "You need some fiber too," she said. "Here, have some granola. We need to finish this box anyway. I'll have to remember to get more tomorrow. I think I want to get some dried fruit, too, and maybe some peanuts or something. I wish I could get macadamia nuts here. Have you ever had them? They're from Hawaii, and they're *wonderful*. But I can't find them in the stores around here. I brought some back with me after Christmas, but— I'm doing it again, aren't I? Anyway, where was I? Oh yes, I need to get more granola at the store."

"Since I'm eating you out of house and burrow," I said, grinning, "*I* could take you to the grocery store."

"Ash takes me. I'm fine."

"I don't mind," I said. "Really."

"Are you sure?"

I nodded. "I've got a flying lesson tomorrow morning, but we could go afterward."

"Flying lesson? I thought you already had your license…"

"I'm getting my instrument rating," I said.

"That sounds like fun. I love flying. I used to fly with my brothers all the time when they were first learning. They tried to teach me, but I couldn't even see over the instrument panel." She laughed. "They used to stack phonebooks *this high*"—her hands were a foot apart—"so I could see." She chuckled again, nostalgically. "Oh, my. I hadn't thought about that in a while."

"I'll have to take you flying sometime," I said. "I mean, I'm willing to sacrifice a hundred pounds of useful load to have some company—"

"A hundred pounds?! I'll have you know that I'm up to a hundred and *eight!*"

"Anyway, as I was saying, before I was so rudely interrupted by a 108-pound bunny, I'll have to take you flying with me sometime. Maybe we could go see your brother in North Carolina. I need to make a couple of long-distance cross-country flights for my IFR certificate, so that'd be

perfect."

"I'd like that," she said.

"But in the meantime, we can go grocery shopping after I get back from my lesson tomorrow. How's that sound?"

"That sounds perfect. Now, let's head to the A&A building. You don't have your Architecture class today, right? So I want to do some sketching before Siobhan's class. Maybe we can find an empty studio and I can get you to take off your shirt for me. I still need to work on…"

As we walked to the A&A building, she talked about my shoulders and chest, describing all the muscles I'd worked so hard to build. She had an astonishing grasp of anatomy, but I probably shouldn't have been surprised. I knew the muscles because I'd been building them for years, but she knew them because she'd been *drawing* them. (She even knew things like muscle origin and insertion, which I barely remembered.)

We ended up using Siobhan's private studio, and Christy had me strip to the waist so she could add details to her sculpture of my torso. I used the time to alternate between watching her work and doing mental sketches for my Design project.

✧ ✧ ✧

At wrestling practice, I got on the scale: I had lost two pounds, which was enough to drop me into the 167-pound weight class. Coach Travis absolutely refused to let me move down, though.

"I told you," he said, "you don't need to drop any more weight. So you'll just have to wrestle heavier guys until you bulk up to your body's natural weight. I won't have underweight wrestlers on my team, Paul. Either maintain a healthy weight or get used to having to overcome a ten-pound advantage."

I blinked in surprise. Then I started to protest.

"My decision's final," he said gruffly. "I've seen a million guys with your build, and I know what you should weigh. If you're soft, 155 or 160. But you're not soft; you're lean and well-built. Muscle weighs more than fat, so you should weigh at least 175 pounds. *More* if you really get serious about conditioning and get up to a good fighting weight, say the low 180s."

I stared at him in near-horror. I didn't *ever* want to be that pudgy again.

"Since you're not moving down to 167," he continued, "do you want the top spot in the 177-pound weight class? Do you think you can beat Will?"

"Absolutely, sir," I said without hesitation, all thoughts of gaining weight forgotten. The club had a meet Saturday afternoon, and I wanted to wrestle in the points match.

"He outweighs you, *and* he's got a longer reach."

"I'm lower to the ground, sir," I said with a predatory grin. "And no offense to Will, but my technique is better, and I'm a lot quicker."

"Show me," he said simply. Then he hollered for Will Treadway.

The match went a full six minutes, back and forth, but I beat Will on points, 6–1.

✧ ✧ ✧

After practice, Trip and I headed back to the dorm.

"Date night tonight, right?" he said.

"Mmm hmm. Although I haven't said more than five words to Gina all week. I've left messages for her and she's left 'em for me, but we keep missing each other. She's been busy

with her sorority, though, since it's Initiation Week."

"Yeah, I know. Luke's been in and out all week, and Jeff has come home late every night. In a way, I'm glad we didn't join a fraternity. I think we would've had fun, but can you imagine doing frat stuff *and* projects for Joska's class? Not to mention all the other stuff we do?"

I shook my head.

"Anyway, have fun tonight. D'you know where you're going to dinner?"

"Someplace cheap," I said, grimacing.

He laughed and clapped me on the back. "Don't worry," he said. "When we get our business going this summer, you'll have more than enough spending money next year, even after you pay tuition and set some aside to reinvest. You're still up for it, right?"

"Yeah. I've *got* to work this summer. I mean, I still owe my parents four hundred bucks from Christmas."

"Dude, that was just dumb. I mean, four hundred bucks for a dress and some shoes? I hope it was worth it."

Visions of Kendall and Felicia sprang to mind and I nodded enthusiastically. Then I ruthlessly suppressed an image of Felicia as I fucked her on the manager's desk. When I finally cleared my mind—treacherous imagination—I flashed Trip a calm and collected look.

He laughed at my expression. "Whatever, man. Have fun tonight. I'll see you tomorrow."

✧ ✧ ✧

The phone rang while I was in the shower. T.J. answered it.

"Hey, Loverboy," he called over the noise of the water, "it's your girlfriend."

I almost asked, "Which one?" Instead, I quickly finished my shower and wrapped my towel around my waist.

"Hello?" I said, trying not to drip into the receiver.

"Paul?" It was Gina.

"Hey, sweetie, what's up?"

"Um…"

"What's the matter? Is everything okay?"

"Yeah, everything's fine, but…"

"But what?" I asked, concerned.

"Can we reschedule our date tonight?"

"Is everything okay?"

"Yeah. But no. I mean, nothing's wrong or anything, but I've got something I *have* to do tonight."

"What?" I asked, my voice flinty. "Something with the sorority, right?"

"You know it's 'I' Week," she said in a rush. "I've been busy every night this week. You *know* how important this is to me, Paul. Please don't be angry with me. I didn't know we had a mixer tonight."

Like hell, I thought. Sorority mixers weren't planned on the spur of the moment. "How long will it last?" I asked, hoping to salvage *some* of the evening.

"Um… well… that's hard to say. And besides, we've got… something… to do afterward."

"Something? What *kind* of something? Something with the Pikes?"

"Paul, it's not what you think," she said. "It's not like that. It's just a Greek thing."

"A Greek thing? Like *Vermont* was a Greek thing?"

"Paul, that's not fair!"

"Right," I said sarcastically. "Whatever."

"Paul, why do you do this to me? You *know* how important this is, but you make me feel bad for everything I do with the sorority."

"It's not the sorority I've got problems with," I said, which wasn't *quite* true.

"Well, what am I supposed to do? It seems like *they're* my only friends. I mean, you're always spending time with Kendall, but never with me."

"Then what's tonight about?" I asked hotly. "*I'm* not canceling our date tonight, *you* are."

"Paul, I don't have a choice. Can't you see that?"

"Sure you do," I said. "Besides, what if I use my Ultimate Boyfriend card?"

Silence.

"Huh? What then?"

"Paul," she said, her voice quiet and pleading, "don't make me choose between you and the sorority."

"Yeah, well, I guess you already have," I said. "Bye!"

"Paul, wai—"

I hung up.

"Trouble in paradise?" T.J. called from within his room.

"Cool it, T.J.," Glen rumbled.

I bit back a venomous reply.

T.J. started to say something else, but Glen cleared his throat ominously. "What?" T.J. asked defensively, looking at his roommate. "I didn't say anything!"

I shook my head in angry wonder, but then caught Glen's eye and nodded in thanks.

"Why d'you always gotta give him shit?" I heard Glen asking T.J. as I shut my bedroom door.

Inside, I dressed in casual clothes. Then I cast about for something to do. I had the room to myself, since Billy and his friend Jamie were working on their latest play. Trip was taking Abby to the movies, so I couldn't hang out with him. I didn't want Kendall to feel like she was my backup plan, but I didn't want to sit in my room alone, either. Finally, I decided to call her.

"Hi," I said when she answered the phone.

"Hi yourself." She paused. "I thought you had a date with Gina."

"She's doing something with her sorority," I said acidly.

"She chose her sorority over *you?*" Kendall asked, easily reading my resentment.

"Listen," I said, "don't start in on Gina, okay?"

"I won't," she said softly. "I just hate it when she does this to you. I know how much you love her, but…"

"Exactly."

"Do you want to come down? I could cook dinner for you. Abby's out with Trip, and Vivian and Phoebe are… *somewhere*," she said, laughing at her lack of knowledge. "We'd have the place to ourselves."

"What do you feel like doing?"

"Maybe we could get some groceries and I could cook for you. How does spaghetti sound?"

"How about a D&B?"

"A 'D&B'?" she asked.

"Mmm hmm," I said, my mood changing from sullen to optimistic. "You know, like a B&B, only with dinner."

"I think I could be persuaded," she said.

"If *not*," I said, keeping my voice low, "then I've got some handcuffs I could use to help convince you." I grinned at the catch in her breathing. "How's that sound?"

"How soon can you get here?"

"I thought you wanted to cook dinner first?" I asked with feigned innocence.

"We can pick up a pizza. *Later*."

"Let me pack a change of clothes—and a few other, ahem, necessary items—and I'll be right down."

Ten minutes later, I stood at Kendall's door, a little breathless and grinning like an idiot. When she let me in I immediately pressed her against the foyer wall and kissed her, kicking the door shut at the same time.

"Oh, Paul," she whispered between kisses, "you make me so hot."

"And you make me so hard," I said breathlessly, reaching for the buttons on her blouse. "Who needs Gina anyway?"

In between heated kisses, Kendall and I stripped each other. Then I turned her around and pressed her against the wall with my body. She looked over her shoulder at me, her dark hair hiding her expression.

I slid my erection between her soft thighs and felt the heat of her arousal. She gasped in response and thrust her ass against me. I reached between us and gripped my shaft, aiming it at her pussy.

Her pussy was dry, but I nudged her open and used my glans to spread her growing moisture. When she was slippery enough, I pulled back and set the tip of my cock against her opening. She gasped in anticipation.

"You want me to fuck you, don't you?" I said, my voice husky with desire.

She swallowed hard and nodded.

"Say it."

"Fuck me, Paul. Please fuck me."

I didn't hesitate. The last word had barely left her lips when I eased my manhood into her. She was as tight as ever, and it took two more thrusts before I buried my length inside her. She groaned softly when my hips met the plush roundness of her ass. Then I gripped her wrists and pinned them to the wall over her head.

With short, measured strokes, I began fucking her. She whimpered and arched her back, pushing her ass against me with each thrust.

"Oh… yes," she gasped. "That… feels… so… good."

Her pussy gripped me each time I pulled back, and I thought I felt a flutter as her internal muscles contracted.

"Have you been using your Ben Wa balls?" I asked, never breaking my rhythm.

She nodded wordlessly.

"I can feel it."

"I… hoped… you… would."

In reply, I began slamming into her and she grew too preoccupied to use her nascent talent. When I was ready to come, I pulled out and turned her around. She immediately dropped to her knees and started sucking me.

With my hands braced against the wall, I watched her fellate me. Then I groaned and threw back my head as I emptied my balls into her throat. She swallowed and swallowed again, finally coming up for air as my orgasm subsided.

"Oh my goodness," she said at last. "I think I like date night."

After several minutes of quiet recovery, I asked when her roommates would return.

She looked up at me, her lips still shiny from kissing my flaccid penis. "Phoebe probably won't be back till Sunday," she said. "And Viv might spend the night at her boyfriend's apartment, but if she doesn't, she still won't be back till after midnight. Abby told me not to wait up for her, so I think she'll probably spend the night with Trip. *Why?* What're you thinking?"

"Something you'll like," I said. I lifted her to her feet and turned her to face the wall. Her breasts flattened against it as I used my hip to hold her in place. Then I reached for my backpack.

She whimpered with lust when she heard the clink of the fur-lined handcuffs. She play-struggled for a moment, but I easily overpowered her. Then I drew her arms behind her like I'd seen cops do on TV. I held her wrists, but then found myself in a quandary: I couldn't figure out how to cuff her with only one hand.

"Don't move," I commanded. Then I released her hands and unbuckled the first handcuff.

She shuddered with pretend fear—and eagerness—as I cuffed each wrist.

"Follow me," I said curtly. With the leather traces firmly in hand, I led her toward the living room.

"What are you going to do?" she asked nervously, playing her part.

"Quiet! On your knees."

She started sucking me when I thrust my limp cock in her face. After several minutes, I pulled my shaft from the tight circle of her lips and ordered her onto her back. Her breasts flattened to the sides as she stared up at me, but her nipples were crinkled and hard, a sure sign of her arousal.

With deliberate casualness, I tied each of the leather thongs to a leg of the couch. With her arms outstretched above her, her body formed a "Y". Then I stood over her, straddling her waist. I gazed down, her generous alabaster breasts framing my hard-on. She looked from it to my face with feigned panic.

"What are you going to do?" she asked again.

Instead of answering, I nudged her legs apart and stepped between them. Then I pushed her thighs further apart—far enough to accommodate my shoulders—and lay on the floor.

She squirmed when I began gently blowing on her damp, super-heated labia. Then I scooted forward and tasted her arousal, the metallic twang making my cock twitch. Her thighs quivered as I began wagging my tongue through her sensitive folds, coating my cheeks with her juices.

When I thrust my tongue under the protective hood of her clit, she gasped and bucked her hips. I smiled to myself and held her down, my tongue continuing its assault. She writhed in ecstasy for the next several minutes as I alternated between teasing her with short licks and sucking her clit. Finally, I pulled back and grinned in anticipation of what I was about to do.

She looked up in confusion when I stood up.

"You said you wanted a pizza," I said disingenuously. "I'm gonna run out and pick one up."

"*Now?*"

"Mmm hmm."

Without waiting for her reply, I headed to her bedroom. I knew she kept her new vibrator buried under the sweaters in her dresser. She hadn't even put the batteries in it yet. I withdrew the little plastic device and tore open the pack of batteries with my teeth.

"Don't worry," I said as I returned to the living room, "I wasn't going to leave you without some company."

"Without some…?" Her eyes grew wide as she saw the vibrator. "You're not serious, are you?"

I nodded. Then I re-spread her legs and resumed my position between them. She gasped when I kissed her lust-swollen labia. Then she sighed deeply as I began licking her again. When she heard the vibrator's soft buzz, however, she tried to squirm away.

"Hold still," I ordered.

I rubbed the buzzing vibrator over her slit, eliciting a yelp in response. Her hips shot upward when I circled her clit with the vibrator's tip. Since she wasn't used to the little device, I decided to reduce its speed. After all, I didn't want her to come too soon.

"I think you're going to like this," I said softly, the vibrator poised at her opening. With that, I eased it into her, the white plastic spreading her open like a small penis. I slid it in and out for good measure, to lubricate it with her juices.

"What're you going to do, Paul?" she asked, her voice quavering with conflicting emotions.

"I told you," I said, "I'm going to get the pizza."

Then, without warning, I stood and returned to the foyer for her panties. The vibrator might slip out of her if I didn't do something to hold it in, and her underwear was the perfect solution.

She looked at me with wide eyes when I gently slid her underwear over her legs. When I told her to raise her ass, she did, and I tugged the panties into place over her hips. The base of the vibrator protruded against the crotch of her panties, so I gave it a tap for good measure. Predictably, she jumped and tried to struggle away from the vibrations tingling through her loins.

"You can't leave me here like this," she protested when I stood.

"Yes I can, and I'm going to."

"Paul, please. What if someone comes home?"

"Then you'll have some explaining to do."

Her eyes flew wide.

I decided to soothe—and tease—her some more, so I knelt by her chest. I fondled her breasts, working her sensitive nipples in circles. She closed her eyes and grimaced in ecstasy.

"Please don't go," she said. "I want you to stay. I want you to fuck me. Is that what you want me to say? That I want you to fuck me? Please, Paul. Please. Please fuck me."

"When I get back."

"I want it now. I want to feel you inside me… instead of this… *thing*."

"Oh, you'll feel me inside you. When I get back."

"I changed my mind," she said, grasping at any excuse to keep me, "I don't want a pizza. I'm not hungry after all."

"Well, I am."

"But you can't leave me like this! Especially with this *thing* inside me."

"The *vibrator* is inside you because I want you nice and horny when I get back."

"I'm nice and horny now. Please, Paul," she begged, "I want you to fuck me. There, I said it. Now take it out… take the *vibrator* out. I said 'vibrator,' are you happy? Will you fuck me now?"

With one last look, I shook my head. "I'll be back in ten or fifteen minutes."

She begged me not to leave as I strode toward the entry hallway. She called out as I began getting dressed, but I ignored her. With a final check of my pockets—car keys, apartment keys, wallet, etc.—I headed out.

Fifteen minutes later, my pizza was ready, and I drove back—*sped* back—to the apartment. At the thought of Kendall lying bound and naked on the floor, I had to shift my hard-on to a more comfortable angle. Then I thought about the vibrator buzzing within her, driving her crazy. I smiled to myself, my imagination on overdrive.

"Who's there?" Kendall asked as I entered the apartment.

"Pizza delivery, ma'am," I said cheerfully as I set the steaming box on the table.

Kendall looked up at me with lust-crazed eyes, her breasts swaying as she struggled against her restraints. She had managed to pull the couch away from the wall, but the heavy piece of furniture hadn't moved more than a few inches.

"You ordered a large pepperoni," I said, smiling at the double entendre.

"Please fuck me."

"What's that?" I tormented.

"Fuck me, Paul. Fuck me now. I'll do anything you want. *Anything*."

An evil grin spread over my face as a sudden thought struck me. "Would you fuck me in front of your family?"

"Yes," she said without hesitation.

"Say it."

"I'd fuck you in front of my family."

"And your father?" I prompted.

Her cheeks flushed, but she nodded.

"Would you ask him to *join* us?" I asked, my erection throbbing sadistically.

"Yes! I'd suck him. I'd fuck him. I'd let him come on my face if that's what you want. But *please*, fuck me. Fuck me now. I need it, Paul. You have no *idea* how horny I am."

"How about Drew?"

"Paul," she said, her eyes deadly serious, "I'd do it with my entire family if I thought it'd get you to fuck me sooner. This vibrator is driving me *crazy*. I can't believe you left it inside me. My whole pussy is quivering, I'm so horny! So please, I'll do anything you want me to—*any*thing—but please fuck me. Please. I know you want to, I can see the bulge in your jeans. I need it. I need it *now*."

I chuckled at her unbridled desire. Then I stripped off my clothes. My erection bobbed when I freed it from the confines of my pants.

"Oh, yes," she said, licking her lips.

"Would you really have sex with your father?" I asked, suddenly more curious than horny.

"Yes! You know I would, damn you."

My eyes widened at her fervor (not to mention her uncharacteristic profanity).

"He'd never speak to me again," she continued, "but right now, I don't care. All I want is for you to fuck me. Fuck me, Paul. Fuck me and I'll do whatever you want."

I was tempted to tease her some more, but the look in her eye warned me not to. She was close to breaking, and I wanted her *horny*, not distraught. So I knelt over her chest and brought my jutting manhood within inches of her lips.

"Oh, *thank you*," she groaned, microseconds before engulfing my shaft.

I let her suck me for a minute or two but then reached back to touch the panty-covered base of the vibrator.

She jumped as if bitten by a snake.

I grinned to myself as I withdrew my cock from her mouth and moved toward her hips.

I lifted her legs and tugged off her underwear. The crotch of her panties was soaked, and her labia were pink and puffy with arousal, shining with a sheen of her own juices. The trail of moisture ran down the crack of her ass.

I grasped the base of the vibrator, and the buzzing grew louder as I withdrew the little device. Kendall groaned at the loss and then strained at her bonds, her breasts swaying as she writhed.

"Please, you promised," she half-whined.

Instead of answering, I lifted her legs and held them together. Her pussy winked at me from between her soft thighs, her slit wet and plump with arousal. I aimed my erection at her opening. She groaned when my manhood filled her. Then I looked down at her.

"Better?" I asked, semi-facetious.

Her nostrils flared as she nodded raggedly. "Now *fuck me*," she said. "Please, please, fuck me."

I began thrusting, my hips slapping her ass each time we connected. I held her ankles together, over my shoulder, and her already tight pussy gripped me even tighter.

Her breasts bounced with each thrust, her nipples circling wildly as I slammed into her. Less than a minute later, she tensed up and tugged at the leather traces holding her arms outstretched. Then her stomach quivered, her internal muscles gripping me fiercely. Her face turned red as the force of her orgasm made her hold her breath.

I kept pounding into her, driving her higher. Still in the throes of her climax, she balled her fists and tugged against her bonds. To my surprise, the couch actually moved an inch or two.

I kept thrusting into her until she let out an explosive breath, which was the only sound she'd made in more than a minute. For several moments she panted, her eyes clamped shut from the force of her climax. I slowed my pace but never stopped moving within her.

To my complete surprise, she cried out softly and her muscles tensed again. She was having another orgasm, or the first one hadn't completely subsided (I couldn't tell which, and besides, it didn't really matter). I kept fucking her, my stiff cock filling her completely with each thrust.

Finally, after nearly a minute, she sucked in a great breath and shuddered. When I slowed my pace, she shook her head, her lips white from holding them shut.

"Keep fucking me," she whispered hoarsely. "Keep fucking m— aaaah!"

For a third time, she tensed, and an orgasmic silence settled over her. Her internal muscles spasmed wildly, and I had a tough time thrusting into her. My cock bent as I tried to enter her, but I lowered my hips and continued battering through her resistance.

When her orgasm subsided, she panted, aftershocks rippling through her body. At that point I decided to withdraw from the vise-like furnace of her pussy. I still hadn't come yet, so I set the tip of my cock at the rosette of her ass. She gasped when I eased forward, spreading her sphincter. Then she groaned in pleasure and tugged at the leather thongs holding her in place.

"Oh, yes, fuck me in the ass," she said softly.

The juices from her pussy had run down the crack of her ass, lubricating her. I easily pushed into her and then drew back, pausing before my next thrust. Her legs were still over one shoulder, so I spread them and put an ankle on either side of my head. When I finally buried myself in the tight confines of her ass, her internal muscles fluttered and she grew quiet.

Another one?! I silently marveled.

As I began thrusting into her ass, her pussy spasmed, transmitting the sensations to my cock. Her face turned rosy as she held her breath. I was close to my own release, and after a few more thrusts, I felt my balls draw up and begin to tingle.

Kendall silently writhed beneath me, her arms straining against the pull of her handcuffs. Fascinated, I watched her facial expression, twisted by the combination of her orgasm and the pleasure of my cock in her ass. Then I closed my eyes and concentrated on my own release.

After several thrusts I buried myself as deep as I could. Her pussy clenched again and her ass tightened around the base of my shaft. For a moment, I felt like I had semen backed up to my eyeballs. Then her sphincter relaxed and I exploded within her, jets of come bathing her insides. As my orgasm subsided, my head grew light and I slumped forward.

When I finally opened my eyes, Kendall was bent in half beneath me, her arms still outstretched, held in place by the handcuffs attached to the couch legs. She was panting, her chest, neck, and face still flushed. My cock hadn't gone soft at all, and it was still buried to the hilt in her ass. Her eyelids fluttered as aftershocks rippled through her.

"Wow," I said, my mouth dry from panting.

Her nostrils flared as she nodded.

A thin sheen of sweat covered us both, testimony to our orgasmic exertions. I eased my hips back and my dick slid from within her ass. She groaned softly when I let her legs unfold and stretch out.

She rattled her handcuffs and glanced at me in silent appeal. When I freed her, she wrapped her arms around me and held me close, both of us still panting.

"I love you so much," she whispered. "Even if you *did* leave me here for twenty minutes with the vibrator inside me, you horrible man."

"You enjoyed every minute of it," I countered.

She didn't deny it.

✧ ✧ ✧

"You weren't serious about my father, were you?" Kendall asked later, after we'd taken a shower and cleaned up.

I feigned ignorance. "About what?"

"You know… about… having sex with him."

"Do you *want* to?"

"No!"

I arched an eyebrow.

"Okay, you know I do. But I never will. That's just a *fantasy*, Paul. And it's one I won't ever live out. I don't *want* to live it out. Incest is… yuck!"

I wobbled my head side-to-side, equivocating. Then I looked a question at her. A *pointed* question.

"Okay, okay, so it's fun to think about. But that's *all*… just thinking. Can you imagine having sex with your mother? She's pretty, but… you'd never actually *do* it!"

I wisely decided not to correct her misconception.

"But I can't believe the things you made me say."

"I didn't *make* you say any of them," I said.

"Oh yes you did. I wouldn't've said *any* of that if you hadn't gotten me so worked up by leaving the vibrator inside me."

"You loved it and you know it."

Her guilty silence was answer enough.

"You'll have masturbate with it sometime."

She firmly shook her head.

"Why not?"

"The old-fashioned way is just fine. Besides, I haven't had to masturbate in a long time. Not since you came to school."

"Not once?"

She shook her head. The she looked at me in disbelief. "Why? You don't still masturbate, do you?"

I laughed. "I jerk off every morning in the shower."

"*Every* morning?"

"Sometimes I skip a day, when you've drained me dry, or Gina has—"

A hint of a frown flickered across her face, but it was gone before I could react.

"—but yeah, I jerk off just about every day. Sometimes twice a day, depending on how horny I am."

"I can't believe you still need to jerk off."

"That's just the way I am, I guess," I said, shrugging unrepentantly. "I mean, I've got to get off at least once a day, or sex is all I think about."

"*Really?*"

"Mmm hmm."

"Wow," she said softly.

"Maybe I'll let you watch me sometime. And I can watch you."

I could see her considering the possibilities. Then she grinned, her eyebrows lifting in tentative agreement.

"But not anytime soon," I said. "I mean, I think I'm pretty well drained for the night. Well, I *could* go again, but—"

"I believe you," she said, holding up a forestalling hand. "But you wore me out."

"No kidding. I don't think you've ever come that hard. What was it, four times?"

"I lost count," she said sincerely. "It was *at least* four big ones, and a bunch of smaller ones. Wow!"

"Wow," I echoed.

"But you weren't serious about… you know… my father, were you?"

"I'll let you off the hook," I said. "*This* time."

Her eyes flew wide and I just grinned.

✧ ✧ ✧

While Christy and I were at the grocery store, I told her about my fight with Gina. I edited out some of the details, but she got the gist of it. As we were loading our groceries into the Jeep, however, she paused and looked at me seriously.

"What?" I asked, trying not to fidget.

"Nothing," she said, shaking her head. "Sorry." We were almost back to campus before she spoke up again. "Do you mind if I ask you a personal question?"

"I guess not. Why? What's up?"

"I don't really know how to ask this, and I always ask things the wrong way, but… I mean, you don't have to answer if you don't want to. But I was thinking, and this is just a crazy idea, but… well… I don't know why I thought of this. Anyway, I get these crazy ideas about people sometimes. I guess it's 'cause I'm a people-watcher, and I try to figure out why people act the way they do. I've done it as long as I can remember— Uh-oh."

"What?"

"I'm doing it again," she said sheepishly. "Chattering nervously."

I smiled and silently agreed with her.

"Gina's not just your 'best friend,' is she? She's more than that, right? There, I said it! Now, you can tell me I'm crazy if you like, but at least I got that off my chest."

I blinked at her.

"Are you upset? Oh, I'm so sorry. I *knew* I shouldn't've said anything. I said to myself, 'Christy, keep your big trap shut. It's none of your business.' But no, I never listen to myself. That's the thing about me," she said, glancing at me as she wrung her hands, "I give myself the best advice and then I ignore it. I always—"

"You're doing it again," I said softly.

She shut her mouth with a clomp. Then, her blue eyes round and beseeching, she looked at me. "You're not upset, are you?"

I shook my head. "But what makes you think Gina's… um… more than just a friend?" I asked, deceptively calm.

"Lotsa things," she said. "But the big one is how upset you get when you have a fight with her. I mean, you'd never get that upset if you didn't care. You know? And the way you talk about her… it's like you love her. I can hear it in your voice. I can see it in your eyes, the anguish when you know you've said something nasty to her. You said she was your best friend, but… she seems more like a girlfriend." With that, she shrugged and fell silent.

"If I tell you," I asked, "will you promise you won't tell anyone?"

She crossed her heart and made a key-locking motion by her lips.

"Yeah," I said, "Gina's my girlfriend."

"Does Kendall know?" Christy asked softly.

I pulled into a parking space in front of Morrill and sat silently for a moment, arguing with myself about whether or not to tell her.

"She does, doesn't she?"

I nodded.

"So you have *two* girlfriends?"

"And all the problems that go with it," I added heavily.

"I knew you wouldn't get so upset if Gina weren't your girlfriend," Christy said in quiet triumph. "I *knew* it. But how did you end up with two girlfriends in the first place? Never mind, that's not important. Does Gina know about Kendall?"

I nodded.

"Do they get along?" Christy asked, a little incredulous.

"They *used* to," I said. "But not anymore. Not since Gina and I came to UT."

"Do you want to talk about it?"

"Maybe some other time. But do me a big favor, okay?"

"Anything," she said earnestly.

"I know you promised not to tell anyone, but that means Wren, too. *Especially* Wren."

"Why?" she asked, genuinely perplexed. "I mean, of course I won't tell her, but why *her?* Specifically, I mean."

"I don't want her to think that because I've got two girlfriends, I need a third."

To my utter shock, Christy laughed, genuine and bright.

"What?" I asked, a little wounded.

"I'm sorry," she said quickly. "It's just that…"

"Just what?"

"I probably shouldn't be telling you this," she said, "but… Wren doesn't want to be your girlfriend."

My jaw dropped in shock (and disappointment, I silently admitted).

She put her hand on mine. Then she tried to suppress a smile, but failed.

"*What?!*"

She burst into giggles.

I tried not to glare at her, but I don't think I succeeded.

She covered her mouth, but couldn't stop giggling. After half a minute, she finally got control of herself and wiped her eyes, sighing with mirth.

"What's so funny?" I asked, my voice tight with suppressed emotion.

"Like I said, I probably shouldn't be telling you this, but… Wren doesn't want to be your girlfriend. She just wants to have sex with you!" Then she burst into giggles again.

In spite of the situation, I found myself chuckling at the insanity of it all.

"You see why it's so funny?" she asked, tears of laughter filling her eyes. "Most guys would be in heaven if they had your problems, but you've got too *much* pussy." At that, she covered her mouth with her hand, her eyes wide. "Oops! I probably shouldn't've said 'pussy,' but— Ha! I did it again."

"It's okay," I said, still laughing. "I know what the word means."

"I'll *bet* you do!"

When we calmed down and stopped laughing, several minutes later, Christy looked at me earnestly.

"Time to get serious again. You need to call Gina," she said. "You need to talk to her about why you're upset."

I nodded solemnly.

"I'm sure you're under a lot of stress, but she probably is too, especially with her sorority initiation. It sounds like she's trying to split her time between them and you, and you're getting the short end of the stick. But I've only heard things from *your* perspective. I'd imagine that Gina probably thinks *she's* getting the short end of the stick. She may be right, too. I mean, you've got to split your time between her and Kendall."

"Yeah, you're probably right."

"But you still need to call her and talk about it."

"I will. But do you mind if I ask you something?"

"Not at all," she said, her expression open.

"How come you weren't shocked when I told you I had two girlfriends?"

She shrugged. "I don't know, really. I guess you just seem like such a nice guy that it makes sense, in a weird way. I mean, not many guys could keep two women happy at once."

"Yeah, well, I haven't done such a good job of it."

"Maybe; maybe not. I don't know enough to judge. But at least you're *trying*."

"And failing," I groused.

"Aw, cheer up," she said, full of optimism. "I'm sure you'll work things out."

"I hope so."

"You will. I have faith in you. Now, let's get these groceries upstairs and put away. Do you feel like a snack before your wrestling match? Do you mind if I come watch? My brother Rich used to wrestle, and I loved going to his matches when I was a little girl. I remember watching them and biting my nails, hoping Rich would win. I even…"

I rolled my eyes at her girlish enthusiasm and scooped up the grocery bags full of bunny food. Then I smiled to myself. Maybe bunny food wasn't so bad after all.

✧ ✧ ✧

Christy actually came to my wrestling match. She sat with Kendall and Abby, and cheered along with them as I won by a pin in the second round. Afterward, I went back to the dorm, alone. I took a shower and mustered my resolve to call Gina.

One of her suitemates answered—I couldn't tell Naomi from Iris on the phone—and then asked me to wait. I heard her open the door and shout down the hall for Gina.

"Just a minute, Paul," the suitemate said. "She just left, but I caught her. Here she is."

"Hi!" Gina said.

"Hi yourself. What're you so happy about."

"I'm not supposed to tell anyone, but we had initiation this afternoon. I'm a full-fledged member, Paul! Can you believe it? No more 'Pledge Gina'! I'm a *sister* now."

"Congratulations." After a suitable pause, I apologized for being a jerk the night before. I could almost hear her shrug over the phone.

"It's okay. I know you didn't mean it. We just haven't spent much time together, and—"

"Well, we can fix that," I said. "I'm going skiing tonight at Ober Gatlinburg, with the Snow Skiing Club. Trip and Abby will be there, and so will Kendall. You could come with us."

"Oh, Paul, I'm sorry, I'd love to, but… we've got a party tonight."

"Oh. Okay. Well, I guess I could go to the party instead of skiing."

Silence.

"Hello?"

"I'm here," she said softly. "But tonight's a Greek-only party. We've got our new pledges and… well… you understand, don't you?"

"Sure," I said as lightheartedly as I could. "No problem. Maybe some other time."

"I could do something tomorrow," she said. "Maybe you and I can get together with Kendall and… I dunno… just talk or something."

"Yeah, I guess that sounds good." *Now I've got to convince Kendall,* I thought with sinking confidence.

"Do you want me to call you?" she asked.

"Yeah, that sounds great."

"I'm sorry," she said again, about the party. Then she called to someone in the hall. To me: "I've got to go, Paul. I love you. I'll call you tomorrow. Bye."

And with that, she was gone.

I sighed and hung up the phone.

"What's goin' on?" T.J. asked from his room.

I turned. "Huh?"

"What's goin' on?" he asked. He even seemed to be genuinely interested.

I shrugged indifferently.

He stood and walked toward me. Then he paused in the doorway, intent on his shoelaces. "Look," he said at last, "I don't think I was a dick last night, but Glen—you know how he is—he said I should apologize. I don't think I need to, but… you know…"

I tried to hide my shock.

"I was just joking, you know? Anyway, we're cool, right?"

"Yeah, sure," I said, too surprised to even work up a good pique at his non-apology apology.

He nodded and returned to his desk without another word.

✧ ✧ ✧

Kendall, Abby, Trip, and I went skiing that night, but once again, the girls quit early due to fatigue. Trip and I hadn't played a basketball game, but we were both tired from our wrestling matches, so the girls easily persuaded us to join them in the ski lodge.

When we returned to campus, Trip and Abby headed to his room while Kendall and I went to her apartment. The next morning, the four of us ate breakfast together and made plans to see a movie with Luke and his new girlfriend.

I had completely forgotten about my plans with Gina.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

When I returned to my room after wrestling practice, I found a note from T.J. taped to my door: *Loverboy, call your girlfriend!*

I picked up the phone and dialed Kendall's number.

"Hi," I said. "You called?"

"No." She sounded perplexed.

I stared at T.J.'s note. "You didn't?"

"Uh-uh. Why?"

Then it hit me: Gina! "Oh, sorry," I said, wincing sheepishly. "T.J. left me a note to call my girlfriend—"

"And you called *me* first?" I could hear the elation in her voice, although she quickly composed herself and continued. "He probably meant Gina."

"Yeah, I'd better call her." After I told her I loved her and hung up, I dialed Gina's number.

"What happened yesterday?" she asked. "I tried calling you, but…"

"Yesterday?" *What was I doing yesterday? Kendall and I went to the movies with—*

"Duh, silly, we were supposed to get together with Kendall. What happened? Is everything okay?"

"Sorry," I said, my face heating. "I… um… I forgot to tell you… I had to work on a Design project, and I spent most of the day at the World's Fair site, making sketches." It was a bald-faced lie, and I mentally kicked myself. Then, for good measure, I did it again. I *hated* lying, and I'd just panicked and done it without a second thought.

"Oh, okay," Gina said, obviously disappointed.

"I'm sorry I didn't call you, sweetie."

"That's okay. I'm just glad you're okay."

"Yeah, sorry," I added lamely.

"Do you want to get together tonight? Maybe Kendall too?"

"I've got an Art History exam tomorrow," I said, "and a bunch of us are getting together to study."

"Oh, okay. I probably need to study Chemistry anyway. I've got a big lab tomorrow, and I haven't even read the write-up yet."

"Maybe some other time?"

"How about tomorrow night?" she suggested.

"I can't. I've got a basketball game. And Kendall and Abby are fixing dinner for Trip and me. Maybe Wednesday? I've got my instrument class till nine, but afterward…"

"We've got a mixer for the new pledges."

"How about Thursday sometime?" I suggested. "Maybe during the day?"

"Uh-uh. I've got class, then I volunteer at the hospital from twelve till three."

"How about after that?"

"I'm in class till four thirty. But then I've got work to do for the Winter Formal. You remember, right?"

Winter Formal? "Um… yeah, sure," I bluffed. Then I wracked my brain, trying to remember what she was talking about.

"You don't remember," she said, an unvoiced sigh in her tone.

"Yeah, of course I remember," I said, trying not to sound testy. Then I mentally repeated the conversation, searching for clues. "Your Winter Formal is… Friday… and, um"—I remembered!—"it's with the ATOs. It starts at seven, at the Hilton. Of course I remember."

"I'm sorry, I thought you'd forgotten." She sounded tremendously relieved. "I'm wearing a green dress, and I've got a matching cummerbund for you. Have you made a reservation for a tux?"

"Uh, no," I said absently, silently scolding myself for not remembering her dance.

At that, she did sigh. "Do you want me to do it?"

"No, I can do it. Besides, my schedule's pretty full, so I'll need to figure out when I've got time."

"Okay."

"So, what's the plan for Friday night?" I asked, changing the subject to cover my brusque reply about the tuxedo.

"Jess's father reserved a bunch of rooms for us, so I thought we'd spend the night at the hotel. Is that okay?"

"Sure."

"The dance should last till one or two, but afterward, the party will probably move upstairs."

"Whatever," I agreed.

"Oh, Paul, I'm really looking forward to it. It's going to be so much fun! Don't you think? And maybe this weekend, we can get together with Kendall."

"Yeah, that sounds good."

"Okay. I need to read my lab write-up, so I'd better go," she said. "Don't forget to reserve your tux. I love you."

"I love you too. Bye."

✧ ✧ ✧

After two weeks of modeling separately, Kendall and I were excited about finally posing together. Consequently, I found myself daydreaming instead of paying attention to my Art History exam.

As usual, Christy finished quickly. And since I was fantasizing, even Wren turned in her test before I did.

"So, Mysterious," she said as I joined the two of them in the hallway, "I bet I know what *you're* thinking. Judging by how many times you had to, ahem, make an adjustment during class, I guess it's not so 'mysterious,' is it?"

I blushed suitably.

"And Kendall sure was excited this morning at breakfast. I'll have to call and ask her about it. *Afterward*, I mean."

"Be nice, Wren," Christy chided.

"I *am* being nice."

Christy scoffed politely.

"Fine, take *his* side," Wren said. She tried to sound indignant, but she couldn't pull it off.

"You'd better not tease him," Christy continued. "After all, you have to model with him too."

"Exactly," I said. "And I'm pretty good at teasing."

"You're not half as good as I am," Wren shot back.

I arched a skeptical eyebrow.

"You're not," she said defensively.

Christy turned mischievous. "Is that why you take a cold shower afterward?"

Wren's jaw dropped, and Christy smiled smugly.

"So you take a cold shower after Siobhan's class?" I asked.

"That's none of your business," Wren sputtered.

I held up my hands, silently conceding the point. But then I couldn't resist needling her: I chuckled.

She stopped walking. When Christy and I turned, she stomped her foot and huffed. "*You*," she said, glaring at me, "are impossible."

Christy and I broke into snickers that quickly turned into full-fledged laughter.

Wren huffed again. "I've got to get to class."

"Bye, Beautiful," I said through laugh-teary eyes.

"Im*possible!*" she threw over her shoulder.

When Christy and I calmed down, we shared a guilty smile.

"I shouldn't do that," she said, "but she's so much fun to tease. She'll probably be upset about the cold shower thing, but I couldn't resist."

"Does she really take cold showers?"

"I'm sorry," Christy demurred, "I really shouldn't have said that. She doesn't want you to know how attracted she is to you."

"As if I couldn't tell?"

"I tried to tell her that," Christy said, "but she still thinks she's got you fooled. Well, she *wants* to think she's got you fooled. She's not stupid, though; deep down, she knows that you know. Besides, she told me about your no-kissing rule. And I'm sure you've got an unwritten no-sex rule, too."

I nodded vigorously. I liked Wren—and I wanted to have sex with her—but I didn't need that kind of complication in my already complicated life.

"She likes Kendall, and she really likes you too. As a friend, I mean. Yeah, she wants to have sex with you, but she respects you, too. She's never met a guy who could resist her, so I think she sees you as more than just a challenge."

I raised my eyebrows in question.

"Trust me, guys fall all over themselves for Wren. She likes you even more because you obviously *want to*, but don't. Does that make sense?"

"I guess."

"So Wren wants to get to know you better. For instance, do you remember when you gave her that 'high school prick-tease' speech?"

I nodded.

"I think that really got through to her. Yeah, she still flirts with you, but I think she's also having fun getting to know you. So you see, you've already made her life better. Just don't break any of your rules, even the unwritten ones."

"No kidding," I said softly.

"Anyway, I'd better let you get to Siobhan's class. I want to sit in on it sometime, if Kendall

doesn't mind. Maybe next week?"

"I'll ask her, but I think that'd be all right. Do you mind if I ask why, though?"

"Kendall's very pretty. And you make an attractive couple, so I want to sketch you together. Besides, you're hard and muscular, while she's soft and curvy, and I like the contrast. Anyway, I'm turning into a chatterbox again, so I'd better let you go. I'll see you tomorrow. Bye."

For a moment, I watched her walk away, a petite bundle of energy and mystery. Then I glanced at my watch and hurried toward Siobhan's studio. Kendall was waiting for me when I arrived. She threw her arms around my neck and kissed me soundly.

"Hi," she said after we broke the kiss.

"Hi yourself."

"I can't *wait* for class to start! This is so exciting."

I pulled her close, enjoying the curves of her body as she pressed against me. "Are you thinking what I'm thinking?"

"Probably," she said, her eyes glittering. Then she held her lips to my ear and continued. "I'm thinking about what I want you to do to me when we get back to the apartment."

My dick twitched.

"And I have to make a confession. After breakfast, I went back to the apartment and… I used my vibrator a little."

I pulled back in surprise.

She blushed.

"Did you get off?" I asked quietly.

She shook her head. "I like it better when you do it. But I wanted to try it again. Oh, Paul, I came so hard the other day. I had no *idea*…"

I smiled smugly.

She rolled her eyes. "Okay, you were right."

Before I could gloat, the bell to end classes rang and students began streaming into the hallway. Kendall and I slipped into Siobhan's studio after the first rush, and headed straight for the office.

Once inside, I shut the door and pulled Kendall into my arms. As we kissed, I lifted the back of her skirt and cupped her panty-clad ass. She tugged my shirt out of my pants and began unbuttoning it. In less time than it had taken us to walk across the main studio, we stripped each other.

"How much time do we have?" she asked breathlessly, gripping my erection and squeezing gently.

"Not enough. Five minutes, maybe less."

"Are you sure it's not enough time?"

I nodded, the big head firmly in control. Then I steeled my resolve and pulled her hand from my manhood. "This isn't going away by itself," I said, "and unless you can get me off really quick, we'd better cut it out."

"I think I can do it," she said, already sinking to her knees.

I caught her and shook my head. "Uh-uh," I added for emphasis. "We can't."

With a reluctant sigh, she took a half-step back. Then her eyes darted to my jutting hard-on. "What do you want me to do? Can I help?"

"Just give me a minute," I said. Then I closed my eyes and started thinking about the most unsexy things I could.

When Siobhan finally knocked on the door—it felt like an eternity later, but was probably a few minutes—I wasn't exactly soft, but I wasn't ramrod straight either. My cock was in that semi-hard state where it was as long as it was going to get, but not fully erect. When I looked at it, I had to suppress a chuckle: it looked like a sullen sausage, hanging its head in frustration.

Kendall sensed my mood and laughed softly.

"Don't do that," I said, my voice tight.

"What?"

"Don't laugh. When you do, your breasts shake, and I think about how they bounce when I'm fucking you."

As if on cue, my dick twitched and started to rise. I clamped my eyes shut and imagined Rod getting fucked from behind by Regan and her strap-on. That did the trick. I took a deep breath and gestured toward the door.

"Oops," Kendall said all of a sudden. "I almost forgot my bottoms."

I rolled my eyes—we'd *both* forgotten our robes as well. I donned mine and held hers as she slipped into her cream-colored bikini bottoms. A moment later we opened the door and walked to the middle of the semicircle of easels. Siobhan posed us about three feet apart and then waited as we removed our robes. My cock hadn't softened a bit, but it still hung "limp," pointed at the ground.

"Just sit naturally," the auburn-haired professor said. "I don't need a specific pose."

Kendall and I nodded.

With that, Siobhan began giving instructions to her class. I looked at Kendall and sighed in relief. For the moment, I had things under control.

I spent the next forty-five minutes in a minor hell of arousal. Twice, I happened to glance at Kendall at the wrong time, and my dick predictably jerked to attention. Each time, I gritted my teeth and imagined something sure to turn me off.

By the time Siobhan brought our robes, my nerves were thrumming with pent-up sexual energy, and I was ready to explode.

"Are you okay?" she asked quietly. "Are you sure you'll be able to pose with your girlfriend?"

"It's harder than I thought it'd be," I said.

She laughed at my gaffe.

I'm sure I turned six shades of purple. Even Kendall had to suppress a chuckle.

"You did fine," Siobhan said, smiling at my predicament. After a moment, she shook her head semi-wistfully. "Oh, to be young again." Still grinning, she turned to talk to a waiting student.

I practically bolted for the office. When Kendall shut the door behind us, I didn't bother with preliminaries; I simply pulled her robe open and pinned her against the door with my body. Then I kissed her, my tongue forcing her lips open.

She was as horny as I was, and clutched me passionately. I broke the kiss a moment later and picked her up. Her legs automatically circled my waist as I started sucking her nipples. She gasped when I gently bit one of them. Then she ran her fingers through my hair and held me close.

"I want you inside me," she said, her voice low and husky with desire. "Fuck me, Paul."

I thought about it for a moment but reluctantly shook my head. I didn't want Siobhan or any of her students interrupting us. "Let's go back to your apartment," I said at last. "Don't worry about getting dressed, though. Just put on your skirt and coat."

She nodded and I lowered her to her feet. Then she sank to her knees before I could stop her. When she wrapped her lips around my erection, I didn't *want* to stop her. But she pulled back on her own a minute later, my dick shiny with her saliva.

With that, we hurriedly dressed. I didn't bother with underwear, simply stuffing my erection into my khakis. I had a noticeable bulge, but I didn't care. Kendall tossed her un-donned clothing into my backpack and then we made sure we were presentable before heading out.

Halfway to the apartment, I pulled her aside and unzipped her coat. Her nipples hardened in the January air as she looked around nervously. I'd deliberately chosen a spot that was fairly secluded, though, so no one was near enough to tell what we were doing. I teased her nipples for a moment and then grinned at a sudden thought.

"Don't zip your coat," I said.

Her eyes widened.

"No one'll be able to see anything," I said. "It mostly hangs closed, even without the zipper."

"I don't know…"

"Trust me. Besides, it'll be sexy walking along knowing that anyone who's paying attention will catch a glimpse."

She looked dubious for a moment, but then nodded.

Surprisingly, few people even noticed that she was exposed. Those who *did* notice were past us before they could get a second look. When we reached the elevator lobby of her building, we were alone, so I opened her coat and cupped her breasts.

I suppressed a chuckle when she jumped as the elevator sounded its arrival, but the car was empty, so I didn't bother closing her coat. Once in the car itself, I lifted her skirt and cupped her ass.

"Paul, what're you doing?" she hissed when I reached for her skirt's zipper. She tried to fend me off.

I continued implacably and hooked my thumbs under her waistband.

She gasped when she felt her skirt and bikini bottoms sliding downward.

"Your coat comes to the top of your thighs," I said. "Besides, we just have to make it from the elevator to your apartment. And I'm sure no one will be in the hallway."

"But what if someone *is?*"

"They probably won't even notice."

"But, Paul…"

"Trust me," I said, directing her to step out of her skirt. Clad only in her winter coat, she shivered.

I smiled to myself; her shiver was from more than just the chill.

True to my prediction, the hall was empty. Kendall tried to quicken our pace, but my hand on the small of her back kept her in check. When we were about thirty feet from her door, I tugged her to a stop.

"Take off your coat," I directed.

She looked at me, eyes wide.

"Take it off."

She trembled with a combination of fear and desire as she let the coat slip from her shoulders. When I held out my hand, she gave it to me, along with her purse. Then she stood straight, on display. Wearing only a pair of shoes, she walked the remaining distance to her apartment. After a moment of panic, she reached for her purse to retrieve her keys.

Before she could open the door, however, I put my hand on hers. Then I turned her to face me and pressed her back against the door with my body. We kissed for nearly a minute, heedless of who might see us. Fortunately, no one entered the hallway, so I grew bolder.

"Take out my cock," I said.

She hesitated for a moment but then reached for my zipper.

"Now get on your knees and suck me."

Fully under my spell, she sank to her knees and wrapped her lips around my swollen shaft.

I let her suck me for several minutes, my hands braced on the door. In truth, my own coat hung down as I bent over; it hid her bobbing head. The hallway was dim enough that anyone coming down it wouldn't immediately realize what Kendall was doing.

Despite that, I still felt a surge of panic when I heard a door open. It was between us and the elevator, though, and the two girls who emerged never looked toward us. I sighed in relief and looked down at Kendall, who was staring up at me with wide, anxious eyes.

"Let's get inside," I said, chuckling.

Surprisingly, she shook her head and resumed sucking, her tongue forestalling any objection on my part. Unfortunately, I heard the elevator ding in the distance. A moment later I heard the sound of someone coming toward us. At that point I pulled my slippery manhood from Kendall's lips and turned the key in the lock.

"Get inside," I hissed. "Quick."

She looked up at me for a heartbeat, confused.

"Someone's coming!" Out of my peripheral vision, I saw two figures round the corner, headed our way. "Get inside!"

For precious seconds, Kendall hesitated. Then my words registered and she scampered inside.

I turned and looked down the hallway. The two girls had just noticed us. They were sixty or seventy feet away, but I think they'd figured out what we were up to. I scooped up my backpack and Kendall's things.

With my erection pointing at the open doorway, I took one last look at the girls. They were standing wide-eyed in shock. Inexplicably, I waved at them. Without thinking, they waved in reply. I laughed at the absurdity of it all and then calmly walked into Kendall's apartment.

"Oh my goodness," Kendall said as I shut the door behind me, "do you think they know what we were doing?"

I nodded, grinning lecherously.

"What if they call the police?"

"They won't," I said, with more assurance than I truly felt.

Before Kendall could raise another objection, I kissed her, hard. My erection bumped against her thigh, reminding her of its presence.

"Oh, Paul," she breathed, "you make me so hot. I don't *care* if they call the police."

"Me either."

With that, I began tugging off my own clothing.

We didn't even make it to the bedroom. Instead, I pressed her against the wall and fucked her from behind. When I felt my orgasm approaching, I told her to turn around and kneel in front of me. I quickly reached the point of no return and erupted in her mouth.

She nuzzled my shrinking cock while I recovered. After a minute or two, I lifted her to her feet and nudged her toward her bedroom.

There, I merely admired her as she lay on her bed, her breasts flattened, nipples stiff with desire. Then I grinned down at her and stroked her silken thigh. I nudged her legs apart and lay between them.

Her pussy was slippery with arousal. When I gently blew cool air over her slit, she quivered with anticipation. Then I began licking her in earnest, my tongue on overdrive.

By the time she was ready to come, I was hard again, so I sat up and scooted forward. She gazed up at me as my erection probed her opening. Then she closed her eyes as I sank into her. Once I settled myself above her, she wrapped her legs around my thighs, her arms hooking under mine at the same time.

"Fuck me," she whispered. "Fuck me hard."

Who was I to refuse?

With my cock pounding into her, she quickly reached the edge of orgasm. When I started playing with her clit, she crashed over, her pussy contracting with the force of her climax. I struggled to enter her, but a gush of heat and moisture eased my passage.

As another wave of pleasure took her, I felt my own orgasm boiling up. With a grunt, I buried myself as deep as I could. My cock swelled within her and then loosed a torrent of semen to bathe her inner walls.

Pleasure assaulted us as our orgasms mingled and fed each other. Her pussy clamped around me, milking my spurting shaft. The pleasure was so intense that I had to concentrate to keep from passing out.

Finally, panting, I collapsed against her and she held me close, her breathing in sync with my own.

"Wow," she said at last. "Wow."

I swallowed to clear my cottony mouth. Then I pulled back and gazed down at her. "I love you," I said.

Instead of answering with words, she simply pulled me down for a kiss.

✧ ✧ ✧

"How was modeling yesterday?" Christy asked as we walked toward her apartment after lunch.

I felt my face turning red.

"That good, huh?"

"Is it that obvious?"

She nodded, grinning. "You and Kendall couldn't keep your hands off each other at breakfast."

I'm sure my blush only deepened.

"How're things with you and Gina?" she asked, tactfully changing the subject.

"Better," I said. "We've got her sorority's Winter Formal this Friday."

"Oh, that should be fun. I *love* formal dances. That's one of the things I miss most about high school."

"Yeah," I said, chuckling, "it seems like fraternities and sororities are just extensions of high school. They drink more beer, but…" I shrugged meaningfully.

"How come you didn't join a fraternity?"

"I thought about it," I half-lied, "but decided that I probably needed to concentrate on school. I mean, my parents are spending a lot of money to send me here, especially with out-of-state tuition and all."

"Tell me about it," she agreed ruefully.

"Besides, my schedule's pretty full without a fraternity. How come you didn't join a sorority?"

"I was never really interested," she said. "Working with Siobhan keeps me busy, and it's easy for me to meet people. I've got my mother's personality—she's so friendly and outgoing. At least I *hope* I've got my mother's personality."

"You do," I said, laughing.

"Anyway, I guess I never really thought about joining a sorority."

"Ah, okay."

"So, what do you want for a snack today? We need to finish the bananas. And I can make you some peanut butter and graham crackers. Or, I could put peanut butter on some celery for you—But you're not a fan of celery… hmm… how about peanut butter on an apple? Would you like that? I remember when I was a little girl, my mother used to cut an apple in half and spread peanut butter on it. Crunchy peanut butter, not smooth—"

I nodded in agreement and then smiled as she chattered happily. I felt like I didn't have a care in the world; for some reason, being around Christy was relaxing.

"—Nobu liked apples too. Mariko and I used to get them at the Base Exchange and take them to the temple for the monks. Did I ever show you my sketches of Mariko? She's very pretty. And exotic. Her mother's Japanese and her father's American, and she's got the most exquisite bone structure. I really miss her. Which reminds me, I'll have to write a letter to her after I finish my current one to Simon. And then I was thinking about starting a new sculpture of you, if you don't mind. I want to do something like Michelangelo's *David*, but with a modern feel. Still realistic, mind you, I don't much care for abstract sculpture, but—"

Once again, I found myself smiling.

✧ ✧ ✧

After wrestling practice, I rushed back to my room to shower before my instrument class. I was just about to step into the stall when the phone rang.

"Hello?"

"Howdy, stranger," a female voice said.

I furrowed my brow. From some dark corner of my brain, warning bells were going off, but I couldn't place the voice.

"Do you know who this is?"

I scratched my head, still wracking my brain.

"It's Felicia," she said at my awkward pause.

My skin prickled icily. “Oh… um… hi.”

“So, what’re you doing?”

“I was just about to get into the shower. I’ve got a class in a few minutes.”

“Ooh, a shower,” she said. “That sounds like fun. I wish I could join you.”

I had to steer the conversation to safer ground, so I ignored her comment. “So, what’re you up to?” I asked instead.

“I just got home from work. And I was wondering why you hadn’t called me. Did you lose my number or something?”

“Actually,” I said, as sheepishly as I could, “I did.” In reality, I’d deliberately thrown it away. I felt guilty enough about what I’d done; I didn’t need the reminder of a scrap of paper with her phone number on it.

“Oh. Let me give it to you again. Do you have a pen?”

“Um… not really,” I said. “I’m standing here in just a towel.”

“Oh, yeah, you were about to shower.”

“Mmm hmm.”

“I wish I was there with you. I could wash your back.”

“I guess,” I said, my eyes darting about nervously.

“I could wash more than that, too.”

I silently cursed as her words battered through my resistance and my dick twitched in response.

“I could wash your big, hard cock.”

I swallowed hard. The conversation was *not* going well. I decided to cut her off before I lost control completely. *What* is *it about this girl?!* I silently railed. *Full lips, perfect breasts, clenching muscles— Stop it!* “Um… yeah,” I said. “I can probably take care of that myself, though.”

“Since you’re there and I’m here,” she said, laughing, “you’ll *have* to.” She turned serious, and sultry. “When’re you coming back to Atlanta?”

“Um…”

“Or I could drive up to Knoxville.”

“I dunno,” I hedged.

“I could take a couple of days off and drive up there. We could get a cabin in the mountains or something. I hear they’ve got mountains in Knoxville.”

“They’re not very big mountains,” I said. “Not like Utah, at least. Anyway, I’ve got to go. I’m running late already.”

“Oh. Okay.”

I felt bad when I heard the disappointment in her voice, but I mustered my resolve. “Yeah. Sorry. Maybe you could call me some other time. Tomorrow.” *Why did I say tomorrow?!*

“Yeah, I guess I could.”

“Okay. Well… it was good talking to you. Bye.”

“Bye.”

I hung up and took a deep breath. Then I looked down at the towel-covered bulge of my erection.

“What *is* it with this girl?” I asked aloud.

Not surprisingly, my hard-on didn't have any answers.

I hate to admit it, but I ended up jerking off in the shower with visions of a big-breasted blonde bouncing through my imagination.

✧ ✧ ✧

Felicia called again on Thursday. I was working on my Sunsphere sketches when the phone rang. T.J. answered and then hollered for me.

"Another girlfriend, Loverboy?" he asked as he held out the phone, his hand thankfully covering the mouthpiece.

"T.J., would you like it if I called you 'Weasel'?"

He shrugged indifferently. "Why should I care? Besides, I'm just kidding."

"Well, why don't you give it a break. I mean, you don't have a nickname for Glen."

"Because I *like* Glen," he said, grinning.

"Whatever." I took the phone as he chuckled and returned to his room. "Hello?"

"Howdy," Felicia said. "What're you doing? I didn't catch you at a bad time, did I?"

"I was working on some sketches for a project," I said, the long phone cord trailing behind me as I headed back to my room. Unfortunately, Felicia was in a talkative mood, and started telling me about her day at work. Worse, I was too polite to interrupt.

"So," she asked at last, "when're you coming to Atlanta?"

"Maybe Spring Break," I said vaguely.

"When's that?"

"The end of March."

"That long?" she said. "Aren't you coming home before then?"

"Probably not. Why?" As if I didn't know.

"I want to see you. I owe you a T-bone dinner. And you're welcome to anything else you want."

Once again, it didn't take a rocket scientist to figure out what "anything" meant.

"I bought some new lingerie I want to show you, too. I got a sheer silk camisole, with a little pair of g-string panties. The panties are sheer too, so you can see my pubes. I also got a slinky nightgown. My tits barely fit, so they might pop out. But you'd like that, wouldn't you."

I took a deep breath and tried to will my erection to subside.

"And I've still got my Marilyn Monroe gloves. You really liked those, didn't you?"

"Yeah," I said, as noncommittally as I could, "those were pretty cool. I'd love to see 'em again some time." *What was I saying?!* "But right now, I really need to work on this design project. I've got to give the sketches to my teammates tomorrow, and I still need to finish them. So I'd better go."

"Oh, okay. Are you sure you can't talk longer?

"I really should get back to work."

"Well, it was nice talking to you," she said, disappointed.

"It was nice talking to you too. Bye."

"Bye."

I was just about to hang up when I heard her call my name. I returned the phone to my ear. "Yeah?"

"You forgot to write down my number."

"Oh, yeah," I said, my heart sinking. I hadn't forgotten. With an inner sigh, I grabbed a pencil from my desk. Unfortunately, the desk itself was littered with drawings.

I probably should have simply pretended to take down her number, but some honest corner of my brain refused to go along with the subterfuge. So I actually wrote her number on the corner of one of my Sunsphere sketches.

"Okay," I said, "I've got it. I'll call you sometime."

"Well, I guess I'd better let you get back to your project."

After I hung up, I thought about jerking off. I could easily picture Felicia in a skimpy camisole, her pink nipples straining at the fabric, her dark pubic hair inviting me to experience her clenching muscles.

Instead, I decided to call Kendall. I felt guilty—as if I were simply using her to satisfy my own desires—but I made the call anyway.

"Hi," I said when Phoebe handed Kendall the phone.

"Hi yourself."

"What're you up to?"

"O. Chem. I've got to write up a lab report. The clothes I was wearing *still* stink, so I thought I'd do some laundry too. Why?"

"Do you wanna get together? Billy's working on his play, or over at Jamie's apartment, or… wherever. We could fool around."

"Paul, I really need to work on this lab report. I can't do what I did last quarter." She had come to the conclusion—probably correct—that she'd spent too much time with me the previous quarter, and her grades had suffered accordingly.

"You can work on your lab report after… you know." I squeezed my erection through my pants. "Besides," I added, "I've got to work on drawings for Design class. So we can't fool around long."

She could obviously hear the desire in my voice, but she remained steadfast. "I'm sorry, Paul. I've got to get this lab report done."

"Are you sure?" I asked, trying not to wheedle.

"It's not that I don't *want* to come over," she said, "but I *need* to finish this report."

"Yeah, all right. I should probably work on my drawings anyway. Joska's being an absolute stickler, and I guess I need to go over my site sketches again."

We talked for another minute or two and then hung up. I wasn't very happy, but I wasn't upset either. I was just horny, although I couldn't expect Kendall to jump every time I called.

Unfortunately, my erection didn't go away, no matter how hard I stared at my drawings. So I changed into my workout shorts and grabbed my barbell. Thirty minutes of curls and presses didn't take the edge off my ardor, and I thought about calling Kendall again.

In the end, I decided to take a shower, where—not surprisingly—I jerked off. I tried not to think about Felicia, but I couldn't help myself. When I came, I nearly collapsed from the sensation, my erection throbbing long after I stopped spurting.

I shook my head to rid myself of images of Felicia bouncing, squeezing—

I reached for the soap and began to lather my chest. "Thank God for an endless supply of hot water," I muttered, angry with myself.

✧ ✧ ✧

Rod and Neil hadn't shown up to Calculus class all week. When I noticed a girl in the front row turn in three pages of homework—Rod and Neil's, in addition to her own, I guessed—I gritted my teeth.

I was tempted to tell Professor Vajpayee about their scam, but decided against it. Glen's words echoed in my mind: *"For everything you do to him, he'll do something worse in return."* Besides, I wasn't a snitch.

After lunch, Christy and I headed upstairs to her room for snacks. She could tell that something was eating at me, but she didn't pry.

I hated the idea that Rod and Neil were getting away with cheating. After all, *I* had to actually go to class and do the homework. So did the other students. What made Rod and Neil special?

One word: money.

They were probably paying the girl to turn in their homework, if she wasn't doing it for them in the first place as well. Worse, they had somehow managed to cheat on the first test. (Neither of them seemed like math geniuses, so I doubted they'd aced the test on their own.)

What they were doing was *wrong*, plain and simple, and it grated on me. But unless I wanted to make an issue about it with the professor, I couldn't do anything to stop them. Still, it made me angry.

"Do you want some macadamia nuts?" Christy asked, shaking me out of my sullen reverie.

"Huh?"

"Macadamia nuts. My sister-in-law sent them to me," she said, holding up a blue can of Mauna Loa nuts. "Here, I'll make us a bag for later."

I nodded absently.

"Are you upset about tonight?"

"What?"

"Are you upset about tonight?" she repeated. "About the formal, I mean."

I shook my head. "Why?"

"You brood when you're upset about something. Did you and Gina have a fight?"

"No, it's nothing like that," I said. "I haven't even *seen* Gina in a week. She's been busy with school, or her sorority, or volunteering at the hospital, or… *something*. I guess I've been busy too, but still…"

"Then what're you upset about? Do you want to talk about it?"

I quickly explained about Rod and Calculus.

"Yeah, that'd make me angry too," she said. "That's just wrong."

"But there's nothing I can really do," I said, "short of making a big deal about it, and I'm *not* a snitch."

She nodded in understanding. She'd grown up with older brothers, so she undoubtedly knew about unwritten codes among guys.

"It just bugs me is all," I said.

"But if there's nothing you can do about it…"

"Yeah," I said, agreeing with her unspoken advice, "let it go."

"C'mon," she said. "I've got macadamia nuts, granola, carrots, and celery for us. Well, the celery's for me, but you can have some if you want."

"I'll pass," I said.

"I thought you would, but I'm gonna keep trying. Anyway, I wanted to work on my sculpture, if you don't mind. So let's go somewhere I can get your clothes off," she added, flashing me her bright, irrepressible grin. "Well, your shirt, at least. And then when I finish this sculpture, I think I'm going to use it in my mold-making class.

"We're learning about the lost-wax method," she continued, unabated, "and I think you'd make an excellent bronze, if you don't mind me saying so. For my next sculpture, though, I think I want to do something a bit less realistic, but still not abstract. I mean, I can do nudes all day long, but I have trouble with geometric shapes. Not that I don't like sculpting nudes, I do, but I've got to be well-rounded if I want to succeed as an artist. Critics are fond of abstract these days, and I'm not one to cater to the critics, but…"

I smiled and hefted my backpack, happy to listen to her talk.

✧ ✧ ✧

After wrestling practice, I headed to meet Gina. She was waiting for me in the Carrick breezeway. Her dark eyes lit up when she saw me, and she stood on tiptoe to give me a kiss.

"Did you remember to get your tux?" she asked.

"Yep. It's upstairs. I've already packed a bag and I'm more or less ready to go. I want to take a quick shower first, though, if you don't mind." For emphasis I plucked at the sweaty shirt under my warm-up jacket.

"No problem, pitter-pat man," she said.

With that, I reached for her familiar overnight bag while she protectively carried the hanging bag with her dress.

Upstairs, I stripped off my workout clothes and jumped into the shower. A minute later, however, the phone rang.

"Do you want me to get it?" Gina called over the noise of the shower.

"If you don't mind."

I could hear her talking, but I couldn't make out the conversation, short as it was.

"Who was it?" I asked when she hung up.

"Felicia," she said.

My skin prickled and I froze mid-lather.

"She didn't leave a message," Gina continued.

What had Felicia said?! A thousand questions ran through my mind, all of them with messy answers. I didn't want to say anything, though, for fear that Gina would know a lie for what it was. But saying nothing would be just as telling, and I—

"I told her you were going out tonight and wouldn't be back till tomorrow," Gina said, her voice devoid of suspicion. "I hope that was okay. She said she'd try back then."

"O-oh, okay. Thanks."

I couldn't tell if Gina suspected the truth—especially without seeing her expression—so I quickly rinsed off. I didn't even finish drying off before I thrust the shower curtains aside and hurried toward my room, leaving a trail of wet footprints as I went.

Gina was sitting at my desk, looking at my Sunsphere sketches.

"Wow," she said as I entered the room, "these're really good."

"Um… thanks."

She turned to face me. With a smile, she crossed her legs and smoothed her skirt.

I studied her face for a moment, searching for signs that she was angry. She cocked her head to the side in question, so I smiled nervously, hoping to put her off. When she started talking about the dance, I relaxed a bit.

But I was still on edge, so I hid my nervousness with action; I stuffed my toiletry kit into my bag and got dressed. I barely remembered to comb my hair and I completely forgot to shave, but Gina didn't seem to notice.

"I thought I'd shower and do my hair at the hotel," she said. "Even though you've already had a shower, maybe you could join me. I might need some help washing my hair," she added, her eyes glittering suggestively.

"Um, yeah, that sounds good," I said, even though sex was the furthest thing from my mind.

"And you'd better get one of my razors."

I looked at her, my brow beetling with confusion.

"One of my razors," she repeated with mild amusement, pointing at my medicine cabinet. "You know, so I can shave."

I still didn't Get It, and my expression advertised the fact.

"Duh, silly," she said with mock exasperation, "so I can *shave* for you. You know, my pubic hair. I realize it's been a while since we slept together, but you *do* still like me to shave, right?"

The thought of Gina's smooth, dark vulva pierced my guilt-induced confusion. "Oh, jeez, yeah, *now* I get it. Sorry, I guess I was preoccupied." *Don't ask about what!* "Yeah… a razor… that's a good idea." I hurriedly tossed one of her pink disposable razors into my bag.

She flashed me a quizzical look, but didn't press the issue, so I shouldered my bag and reached for hers. Then I stood, waiting as she gathered her dress bag. When she didn't move toward the door, I furrowed my brow, worried that she might be suspicious about the phone call after all. My eyes flicked toward the door in an unspoken suggestion.

"Aren't you forgetting something?" Gina asked.

I almost broke down and confessed about Felicia, but I kept my mouth shut. Instead, I merely looked at her, my expression as blank as I could make it.

"Your tux…," Gina prompted.

"Oh, yeah! Jeez, I don't know where my mind is."

I shifted her overnight bag and reached for the hanging tuxedo bag. I grabbed the box with my polished dress shoes almost as an afterthought.

"You're *such* a goof," Gina said, shaking her head in amusement. "But you're my goof."

✧ ✧ ✧

The drive to the hotel took less than ten minutes, but it felt like an eternity. By the time we arrived, however, I had convinced myself that Gina didn't suspect a thing.

The Hilton was a modern hotel, complete with a computer system for guest registration. The manager printed our reservation and I signed the form. Then he handed me the key and wished us a pleasant stay.

Upstairs, Gina opened the room's curtains and looked out upon the city. Knoxville didn't have a large downtown, especially compared to Atlanta, but it was nice at night. Well, it was as nice as possible with the World's Fair construction site still gaping on its periphery.

"It's not the Peachtree," Gina said, nearly echoing my thoughts.

For our high school proms, we had always stayed at the Peachtree Plaza, one of the nicer

hotels in downtown Atlanta. *It* had a nice view. A really nice view.

"But I suppose it'll have to do," she continued. Then she turned to me and her expression brightened. "The dance technically starts at seven, but no one will be there before nine. Well, the pledges and their dates will be there—they *have* to be—but most of the cool people won't show up till nine or ten. Some people are having parties in their rooms, but I told Regan and Margot that I'd probably skip them. You know, since it's been a while since you and I had some time alone."

I nodded.

"So… we've got a couple of hours to kill."

"What did you have in mind?" I asked, as if I didn't already know.

"I was thinking we could make up for lost time."

I felt my dick twitch in response.

"You know, screw each other silly." She giggled, but her eyes shone with lust.

"That sounds good to me."

With that, she walked toward me, her eyes never leaving mine. We held each other for several quiet minutes, until she tilted her head up for a kiss. Instead of heating up, our kiss was lingering and passionate, full of promise and comfort and familiarity.

"I believe you mentioned something about a shower," I said when we finally pulled apart to catch our breath.

To my surprise, she shook her head. "I want to take a bath instead. That's one of the things I miss about living at home."

Hand-in-hand, we headed toward the bathroom. While Gina tested the water, I undressed.

"Don't forget my razor," she said.

I waggled my eyebrows at her as she began unbuttoning her blouse. I returned a moment later, razor in hand, erection leading the way, and she smiled at me.

"Does someone need some attention?" she asked, eyeing my manhood.

I nodded goofily and looked down at my hard-on. "He says 'yes' too."

"He does, does he?" she asked, laughing. "Well, we'll just have to see what we can do."

"He was thinking about a blowjob."

She arched a dark eyebrow.

I nodded, still grinning like an idiot.

"I think we can arrange that," she said. She stepped into the tub and sighed as the hot water swirled around her calves. Then she extended her hand in invitation.

The back of the tub was cold on my skin as I settled into the water, but it quickly warmed. Gina sat between my legs, her back toward me. My erection was trapped between us, but I wasn't in a hurry. She sighed again as she rested her arms on my knees. The water had risen to her chest, and I took the opportunity to cup her breasts.

"Mmmmm, that feels nice," she said. She leaned her head against my chest, her lustrous black hair silky against my skin.

We relaxed in the tub for fifteen or twenty minutes. When the water began to cool, Gina sat forward and turned on the tap, adjusting the temperature. Once she had it warm enough, she flipped the drain lever to keep the water level constant. After several minutes, the tub was steaming hot again, so she closed the drain, turned off the tap, and sat back.

"I just want to relax for a while," she said. "Do you mind?"

"Nope." In reality, I was sinfully comfortable. My erection had softened to the point where it was no longer a throbbing distraction, and I was enjoying the feel of Gina's body against mine.

We lapsed into companionable silence again. After several minutes, I let my hands idly roam over her water-slick skin. She sat forward just enough to snake a hand behind her, where she captured my dick and squeezed it gently. Then she turned her head and tilted it up for a kiss.

Our kisses heated as the water cooled, and by the time we needed to re-warm the bath, Gina had turned and was stroking my erection, her eyes smoldering with desire.

"Do you want me to shave *you?*" she asked, her eyebrows arched in challenge. She cupped my balls for emphasis.

I nodded.

Unfortunately, I had left the razor and shaving cream on the counter. Gina rolled her eyes, but quickly retrieved them. Then she turned and opened the drain, lowering the water level. When it was low enough, she grinned at me.

With that, she gently spread shaving cream over my cock and balls. Neither of us liked the completely shaved look for me, so she made sure to leave a patch of hair above my dick. Then she began running the razor along my skin, taking care not to nick me. When she finished, my balls and the base of my cock were smooth and tingling.

"There," she said, admiring her handiwork. My dick was rock hard, so she stroked it for a moment, her eyes glittering with anticipation. "Now, do you want to do me?"

I eagerly nodded as she handed over the razor. With a little contortion on her part, she was able to situate her hips in my lap, her legs spread around me.

I took my time shaving her, taking care to remove any trace of hair or stubble. When I was done, she ran her hand over her smooth mons. With a sly grin, she eased her hips back, and my hard-on sprang up.

"Oh, my," she said theatrically, "what do we have here?" With that, she gripped my shaft firmly and aimed it at her hairless sex.

Fascinated, I watched her rub the bulbous glans along her dark slit. Then she set the tip at her opening and eased toward me. I watched, enthralled, as her dark vulva spread to accommodate my lighter shaft. When her hips met mine, she glanced up and moistened her lips in anticipation.

We rocked against each other, my cock sliding in and out of her slick recess. Since she was holding herself up on the sides of the tub, her arms eventually got tired. With a guilty smile, she pulled back and my cock bobbed free.

When she stood and turned on the tap, I took the opportunity to tease her pussy from behind, my fingers caressing the slippery pearl of her clit. Then, still facing away from me, she got down on her hands and knees, her round ass aimed at my manhood. Her hand appeared from between her legs and she quickly found my cock. Her velvety pussy surrounded me with heat and moisture as she sat back.

I put my hands on her flanks as she rocked back and forth, impaled on my erection. The soapy water sloshed around us, adding to the sounds of our sex. Each time she backed onto my length, she rocked her hips. The crown of my cock was hitting her G-spot, and she began to mewl with pleasure. Before she reached her climax, however, she pulled off me again and looked over her shoulder.

"Come in my mouth," she said simply.

I stood, splashing water onto the floor in my fervor.

She chuckled, but quickly knelt at my feet. When she captured the tip of my dick, I groaned. Her smooth, strong lips caressed me as her tongue flicked against the underside of my glans. I held her head and began fucking her mouth. She reached between her legs and played with her freshly shaved pussy.

I came before she did, but she wasn't far behind. As I flooded her mouth, she stiffened and her fingers went into overdrive. When my spurts gushed to a stop, she let my dick slip from her lips. Still hard, it rubbed against her cheek as she worked herself toward orgasm.

I watched her face contort in ecstasy until she finally groaned and let out a soft cry. She cried out again as her orgasm assaulted her. Her cries rose in volume until she abruptly went silent, panting from the aftershocks coursing through her body. Then she sagged onto her heels, her hand motionless between her legs.

"God, I miss that," she said softly.

✧ ✧ ✧

"Do you want to order room service?" Gina asked. "I haven't had anything to eat since breakfast, and I'm starving. Besides," she added, reaching into her overnight bag, "I don't want to drink on an empty stomach." She held up a bottle of rum and grinned. "I thought we could get a nice buzz before going to the dance."

I grinned in agreement. "Do you have any Cokes in there too?"

"No, silly, we need to order them from room service."

Thirty minutes later, a waiter delivered a tray of food, along with a six-pack of Cokes.

"You don't mind that we're not at a fancy restaurant?" Gina asked as she lifted the cover from her dinner.

I shook my head and surveyed my own plate. The room service bill alone was enough to wipe out half of my bank account, but I reasoned that Gina didn't have formal dances every week. Besides, Jessica's father was paying for the room itself, so I didn't have that expense to deal with.

"Thank Mr. Roedeffer for me," I said. "For the room, I mean. I'm having to watch my budget."

"With tuition, books, and sorority dues, my parents put me on a budget too."

"*Christmas* cleaned out my bank account," I said. "But it was worth it."

"My earrings and necklace are beautiful," she said by way of thanks. "I picked out a dress to match the emeralds. Oh, Paul, it's so beautiful. And I think I look good in it, if I do say so myself."

I grinned. "I can't wait to see."

"What? You don't like me like this?" she asked, gesturing at her body. Like me, she had slipped out of her bathrobe after the waiter left.

"'Course I like you like that," I said. Then I smiled roguishly. "But if you don't wear your dress, I won't have the pleasure of charming you out of it."

"Ha! You just want to get me liquored up and take advantage of me."

"Actually, I was planning to take advantage of you *before* I got you liquored up."

She arched an eyebrow in challenge.

I play-lunged at her.

She squealed and jumped back, but I easily caught her. When I pinned her to the bed with my body, she wrapped her legs around me. I reacted predictably, my erection bumping her inner thigh. As we kissed, she reached down and guided my shaft to her opening. I eased into her, the warm wetness of her pussy sending a surge of pleasure through my loins.

We made love slowly, our lips locked together and our bodies pressed against one another. It felt so good that I reached the point of no return a lot sooner than I thought I would.

Gina sensed my impending orgasm. “Don’t come inside me,” she whispered. “Come in my mouth.”

I withdrew from her pussy and straddled her chest. She wrapped her fingers around my slick manhood and then sucked the tip.

“Oh, God,” she groaned, “I love the taste of us together.” She groaned again as I flooded her mouth, and continued sucking gently until my orgasm subsided.

I let her suck me for a few more minutes, until I was too soft to continue. After years of experience with her moods, I could sense that she didn’t need to get off, so I rolled to the bed beside her. She snuggled against my side and idly ran a finger over my chest.

“Why didn’t you want me to come inside you?” I asked a minute later.

She answered immediately: “Because I don’t want to wear panties with my dress, and I don’t want your come running down my leg at an inopportune moment. Besides, why let all that tasty semen go to waste?” She raised her head and grinned down at me. “Now, I’d love to snuggle and all, but I’m still hungry. Semen makes a wonderful meal,” she said, grinning in satisfaction, “but it’s not very filling.”

I laughed.

“Unfortunately, I think our dinner’s probably cold by now.”

I grimaced in apology.

“Don’t worry about it,” she said, caressing my face. “You’re more important than food.” Her eyes grew soft and round. “You’re more important than *oxygen*.”

I felt a rush of love and pressed her hand to my cheek. Then I kissed her palm. “So are you,” I said, my voice tight with emotion.

✧ ✧ ✧

Gina and I had years of experience getting ready together, and we did it with practiced ease. After a quick shower, we moved smoothly around each other in front of the bathroom mirror. When I was done, I playfully swatted her bare ass and headed to fetch my tuxedo. She emerged from the bathroom a few minutes later, her raven hair in curlers.

I paused to watch her shimmy into her dress. The halter-style bodice had a teardrop opening between her breasts, exposing their inner curves. The fabric accentuated their shape—lifting without concealing—and the sides ended a few inches from her nipples. The dress was completely backless, and when she saw me watching, she posed for me.

“I could wear panties,” she said, smoothing the dress over her hips, “since the fabric doesn’t show lines, but it’s so much sexier knowing I’m *not* wearing them, isn’t it?”

I nodded enthusiastically.

“You’re such a goof,” she said, rolling her eyes affectionately. “Let me brush out my hair and I’ll be ready. A few minutes, okay?”

I nodded again. “Do you want me to fix us another rum and Coke?”

“That sounds good,” she said as she disappeared into the bathroom.

Ten minutes later, we downed the last of our drinks.

“I guess I’m as ready as I’ll ever be,” I said. When she nodded, I pocketed the room key and we headed out.

On the elevator, I took a deep, calming breath. I wasn’t particularly looking forward to seeing Rod, Neil, or Hayley, but I could control my emotions for one night. Fortunately, I already had a good buzz, so I wasn’t feeling very confrontational.

Downstairs, a large banner hung over the ballroom’s entrance: *An Affair to Remember, Chi Omega & Alpha Tau Omega Winter Formal*. Inside the ballroom itself, colored bunting hung from the ceiling, radiating from the chandeliers to the edges of the room; red and yellow on one side, blue and gold on the other.

“Cardinal and Straw are the Chi O colors,” Gina explained.

Not “red” and “yellow,” I admonished myself wryly, *it’s “cardinal” and “straw.”* Then I silently chuckled at the sorority’s pretentiousness. When Gina pointed to the centerpiece decorations on each of the tables, I schooled my expression and paid attention.

“White carnations are the Chi O flower,” she said, “and the owl is our mascot.”

“For Athena, right?”

“Exactly!” She discreetly pointed to other couples in the room. “The pledges have to wear red dresses, with a white carnation corsage.” A giggle: “They also have to wear these funny Chi O granny-panties.”

“Chi O *panties?*”

She nodded. “They’re actually cute, in a granny-panty sort of way. I’ll show you sometime. I had to wear ’em when I was a pledge.”

“You did? I don’t remember them.”

“You didn’t *see* me that often when I was pledging,” she said without recrimination. “Besides, we only had to wear them for mixers and parties, and you didn’t come to any of those.”

“I guess that’s because I wasn’t in*vited*,” I said, testiness running roughshod over my buzz.

She soothed me with a gesture. “I know. I’m sorry. Most of them were Greek-only anyway. And since I was a pledge, I had to do all sorts of stupid things, so I don’t think you’d’ve had much fun.” She smiled, a little sadly. Then she pasted on a happier smile and indicated several of the girls in the red dresses, pledges. “I just thought you’d think it was funny that all those girls are wearing goofy panties.”

I shrugged.

“I heard that the ATO pledges have to wear their underwear backwards.”

“That sounds uncomfortable.”

She nodded.

“Gina!” a girl called from behind us.

I turned. It was Regan.

And *Rod*.

Gina greeted her friend, who was wearing a clingy gold dress. Rod smirked and made a show of not shaking my proffered hand. Regan frowned at his pettiness.

“Nice tux,” he said, ignoring her. “Where’d you rent it?”

I started to answer, but bit off my reply. He was baiting me—*his* tuxedo definitely wasn't a rental, and the question was his way of rubbing my nose in his wealth.

Regan rolled her eyes and glared at him. After a moment she shook her head in reproof and turned Gina toward a group of other girls.

Rod and I followed.

Neither of us spoke.

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Except for Gina and a few of her sorority sisters—and Rod and Neil, of course—I didn't know a single person at the dance. Unfortunately, Gina spent the first hour with Regan, Margot, and several other girls. The other girls' boyfriends were also Greeks, although they weren't nearly as irritating as Rod and Neil.

"Let's have our picture made," Regan said at last. She was the undisputed ringleader of her little circle of friends, and everyone else nodded. "But first, let's freshen our makeup."

With that, the gaggle of girls headed toward the restroom. Rod and Neil pointedly ignored me, which suited me fine. When the girls returned, Gina flashed her eyes at me and then smiled.

"Are you ready for your close-up, pitter-pat man?" she asked, her body pressed against mine. Then she sniffed and delicately dabbed at her nose. When that didn't work, she sniffed again, harder.

"Are you okay?" I asked, worried that she might be coming down with a cold. (If she felt sick, we could leave the dance early, and I wouldn't have to deal with Rod and Neil.)

"What? *Why?*"

"You sniffled," I said. "You're not coming down with a cold or something, are you?" I tried not to sound hopeful, and felt bad for having to make the effort.

"I'm fine," she said, shaking her head. Then she had to sniff again and her eyes darted side-to-side quickly. "There were some fresh-cut flowers in the ladies' room. It must be those."

Regan tugged us toward the photographer's line, cutting off any further explanation. After standing in line for thirty minutes, we reached the photographer himself. He took a series of pictures: our entire group, the girls by themselves, and then individual couples.

The girls were in high spirits and seemed to be having fun. To my surprise, the next two hours passed quickly. Gina and I had several more drinks, but while I was beginning to feel their effect, she seemed as sober as ever.

"C'mon, Paul," she urged, "I love Hall and Oates. Let's dance some more."

She was so full of energy that I didn't have the heart to decline. I'm not the best dancer in the world, but I didn't make a fool of myself either.

When the DJ played Journey's "Open Arms," I was happy to quit flailing my arms and hopping around like an idiot. I pulled Gina close, and she gazed up at me with That Look in her eye. She'd been playful and horny all night, and I felt my dick stir in response to her smoldering expression.

"I'm looking forward to spending the night with you," she said. "It'll be just like old times."

I pulled her closer still and enjoyed the feeling of her body against mine as I rested my cheek on the top of her head.

Unfortunately, Regan and Margot pulled Gina toward the restroom after the song finished.

"I guess women just have smaller bladders," I said to one of the guys whose date had just left

with Gina and the other girls. He and his date had arrived late, and were recent additions to Regan's coterie. He was a Pike, but he seemed nice enough. "I'm Paul," I said, holding out my hand.

"Rusty," he said, shaking my hand. We exchanged a few pleasantries and then he looked around to make sure no one was paying attention to us. "You're the guy who broke Neil's hand, right?"

I felt my expression harden.

"Hey, take it easy. I don't like Neil either. He's Rod's lapdog, and he's a spineless twit."

My eyes widened in shock. "But you're a Pike…"

"Man, don't lump me in with them just because I wear the same letters." He looked around again, his eyes locking on Rod and Neil, who were twenty feet away.

They might have been on the other side of the room for all their chances of hearing us over the music.

"Rod's a spoiled rich brat," Rusty continued, "and he gives the rest of us a bad name. Him and his trust fund cronies. But that's not what I wanted to tell you. You need to watch your back, man. Rod and some of the other guys are planning something tonight. I don't know what, but if I know Rod, it'll be nasty." He shrugged, almost indifferently, but then continued. "You seem like a nice guy. And after Rod tried to blackball Gina—"

"Rod tried to *what?*"

"Didn't you know?"

I shook my head. Then I automatically suppressed my peevish reaction to the news, since Gina hadn't seen fit to share it with me herself.

Surprisingly, Rusty chuckled. "I don't know who told Regan about it, but since she's a legacy, she has a lot of friends. Not to mention influence, even as a pledge. So she jerked his leash," he said, smiling at the memory. "She told him to keep his nose out of sorority business… unless he wanted to have an operation so he could *join* the sorority."

"Ha!"

Rusty silently agreed, still smiling. "Gina seems like a nice girl, and Rod didn't have any cause to try to blackball her." He looked like he wanted to say something else, but he didn't. "If he's got a problem, it's with you, and you look like you can hold your own. But don't let him catch you alone. Rod *won't* be alone, and I don't think you'll like whatever he's planning to do."

I nodded gravely.

"And if it comes to it, I didn't tell you a thing. I might not like Rod, but he can still make my life a living hell. You got that?"

"Yeah. And thanks."

"Don't mention it." After another look to see who might overhear, he discreetly brushed his nose. "You seem like a cool guy… d'you wanna do a line?"

I might've been a little slow on the uptake, but I *wasn't* an idiot: he was talking about cocaine.

Rusty shrugged when I didn't answer immediately. "Rod may be an asshole, but he's got the best blow around. So… do you want a snort?"

"No thanks," I said, still a bit flabbergasted.

"All right, man. The girls are coming back anyway. Watch out for Rod, and remember what I said—we didn't have this conversation."

I nodded. When he turned to face the returning girls, his demeanor changed completely, and he seemed to distance himself from me.

Gina nearly crashed into me. “Hey!” she exclaimed, smiling and boisterous.

“Hey yourself,” I said, a bit bewildered at her newfound energy. All of a sudden, a thought occurred to me: was Gina—

“Ooh, the Go-Go’s!” she cried. “I love this song. C’mon, Paul, let’s dance. *Please*.”

I scrutinized Gina as she dragged me onto the dance floor. She turned and started dancing, her eyes aglow. I was feeling the effects of all the alcohol I’d drunk, but she seemed fine. I also wondered at her trips to the bathroom with Regan and friends. My mind raced, and I barely listened as we danced to songs from Soft Cell and A Flock of Seagulls.

Several songs later, I convinced myself that Gina had been drinking a lot, but her drinks probably hadn’t been as strong as mine. That explained why she wasn’t drunk, as well as her more-frequent trips to the ladies’ room. And since she and her friends tended to go to the bathroom in groups, she’d probably gone just to keep the others company.

By the time the DJ switched from New Wave to disco, I decided that Gina had too much ambition to screw up her life with drugs. She might have *tried* cocaine—Kendall had, after all—but I had a logical explanation for all of her behavior.

So when the first strains of Chic, “Le Freak,” sizzled over the dance floor, I extinguished my lingering suspicions and decided to take a break. I tried to get Gina to join me, but she simply gave me a kiss and gently propelled me toward the edge of the dance floor. As I looked back, she joined Regan and Margot, who were dancing with a group of their friends.

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“Can I have the room key?” Gina asked a little later.

I automatically fished it out of my pocket. “What’s up?”

“Regan and I are heading upstairs for a few minutes,” she said smoothly, “and I wanted to check my makeup. We’ll be back in a few minutes.”

She blew me a kiss and rejoined Regan. I headed toward the bar, where I decided that I’d already had enough alcohol; I ordered a Coke instead.

I enjoyed a bubble of solitude for a few minutes, until a group of ATO guys clustered around the bar. Their dates were on the dance floor, laughing at their own antics as they did disco dances like the Rollercoaster and the Bump (the DJ was encouraging them by playing the Trammps, “Disco Inferno”).

“Your girlfriend is the Chi O in the green dress?” one of the ATOs said to me.

I nodded.

“She’s not black, is she?” His tone was curious, rather than disapproving.

“She’s half Indian,” I explained.

“Indian? Like Gandhi?”

I nodded.

“No offense, man, but she’s really hot.”

“Um… thanks.”

“You’re not a Pike, are you?” he asked.

“God, no!”

That seemed to break the ice, much to our shared amusement, and we struck up a

conversation. One of the other ATOs even recognized me.

"You're in my English class," he said.

He looked vaguely familiar, but…

"I sit in the back row, dude," he explained.

"Oh, yeah, now I remember!"

After a round of introductions, he began to regale his fraternity brothers with tales of Professor Feller's more outrageous hippy moments. I nodded and played the straight man, interjecting comments when the guys looked to me for confirmation. The stories were a little embellished, but only a *little*, and the other guys were soon in tears with laughter.

When the DJ announced his final song of the evening, I looked up in surprise. Then I glanced at my watch; it was two o'clock and Gina had been gone for more than half an hour.

I took my leave of the ATOs and went looking for her. She was nowhere to be found. Neither were Regan and Margot, or Rod and Neil for that matter. Finally, I spotted Jessica and her boyfriend.

"Hey, Jess," I said, "sorry to interrupt, but have you seen Gina?"

"She an' Regan headed upstairs a while ago," Jessica said, obviously drunk. "Probably t' powder their noses, if you know what I mean."

Jessica's boyfriend, the Beta, frowned.

"Oh, honey, 's not so bad," she chided him. "You should try it sometime. Maybe it'd loosen you up. I know I could *def'nitely* stand some loosening up."

The Beta's frown turned into a scowl.

"I could also stand to get *laid*," Jessica mumbled sullenly.

I took that as my cue and beat a hasty retreat.

I got all the way to our floor before I realized that I'd given the room key to Gina. When I knocked on the door, no one answered. A minute later, I knocked again, harder. Frustrated, I headed down to the lobby.

At the front desk, I asked the night manager for a spare room key. I had to explain why I needed one, but with so many drunk college students staying at the hotel, I probably wasn't the first to make the request. After he checked the computer, he verified my ID and gave me a key.

Upstairs, I paused at the door—I could hear music from within. Ten minutes earlier, it had been silent. I opened the door quietly. Inside, music blared from the TV, and the lights were off. The flashing video on MTV was the room's only illumination, a strobe of images casting eerie patterns on the walls.

For a moment I stood there in confusion, my eyes adjusting. Then I noticed Gina's dress on the floor by the bed. It lay atop *another* dress, and when the music video flashed to a bright scene, I caught a glint of gold fabric.

Regan! "Powder their noses," my ass, I thought. *They probably came up here to fool around.*

As if to confirm my suspicions, I heard one of them moan. When I peeked around the entryway corner, they were on the bed in a sixty-nine, with Regan on top. The two girls were too busy to notice me, and with MTV blaring, they hadn't heard me enter.

The TV lit the room with another bright scene and I noticed a *third* outfit, draped neatly on the dresser. I peered at it for a moment—it looked like a suit coat. I started to take a closer look, but nearly jumped out of my skin when the bathroom door opened behind me.

Rod! I thought venomously. *I'm going to* kill *him. First, he fucks Gina in Vermont, and now he's got the balls to fuck her in my own hotel room?!*

I whirled and collided with an erection. The guy jumped back as quickly as I did. With a surge of adrenaline, I automatically dropped into a wrestler's crouch, ready to spring.

"Oh, I'm sorry, Brother… um…"

The voice didn't sound like Rod. As a matter of fact, it sounded like—

At another bright scene I got my first good look at the person in front of me: it was a girl! *Definitely* a girl—a nude girl—with blonde hair, a slender build… and Regan's strap-on dildo.

"Who're *you?*" I asked brusquely.

"Leslie," she said, her head almost bowed. "Uh… *Pledge* Leslie. I'm sorry," she continued, uncertainly, "I didn't recognize you… uh… Brother…?"

"Paul," I said automatically.

"I'm sorry, Brother Paul," she said.

Brother Paul? What the…?

"I didn't hear you come in," she continued. Then she looked up, as if she suddenly remembered something. Her expression turned pensive. "Am I supposed to… uh… service you?"

I was confused, certainly, but not *that* confused, and I quickly figured out what she meant. Worse, it sounded like a sorority ritual or something. That didn't bode well for Gina's protestations of innocence regarding the Vermont trip.

Instead of correcting Leslie's mistake, I paused, my thoughts frenzied with anger.

I was angry with Gina for abandoning me at the dance. Not surprisingly, I dredged up the memory of the *first* time she and Regan deserted me, after the trip to the sex shop. Then, I had expected to have a threesome with the two girls, only to find Regan demanding that "Pledge Gina" choose between us.

Rusty's earlier offer of cocaine also made me angry. *As if he thought I was a druggie like Hayley!* Worse, the thought of cocaine quickly reminded me of Felicia, which brought back my own guilt. I suppressed it by getting angry—angri*er*—with Gina in particular, and her sorority in general.

Dark thoughts about the Chi Os inevitably led me to Kendall, Hayley, and Big Mistake Night. Big Mistake Guy himself might even have been downstairs in the ballroom, unbeknownst to me.

In the blink of an eye, my thoughts returned to Gina, and my face heated with another wave of anger: I still wasn't convinced that she had told me the truth about Vermont, and my doubts had been festering for weeks.

Finally, my growing fury settled on Rod. If he was planning to do something to me, I silently vowed to do something to him first. That "something" was sex with *his* girlfriend. I even had a momentary vision of her breaking up with him, since I could get her off better than *he* ever did.

"Uh… am I supposed to service you now, Brother Paul?" Leslie asked again, interrupting my vindictive train of thought.

At a sound from behind me, I remembered the two girls on the bed, and my anger redoubled. I thought about the other times Gina had chosen the sorority over me. I thought about the fury I'd felt when Kendall told me about Big Mistake Night. I thought about my simmering rage at Rod's jeers and insults.

I gazed at the nude pledge. Somewhere deep within me, the flame of decency guttered. Leslie looked up at me, her eyes wide with barely suppressed fear. She could see how angry I was, but she was obviously following the sorority rules. I mentally scoffed at any "rules" that would require her to have sex with me (or anyone else, for that matter).

"Brother Paul," she asked timidly, "do you want me to—"

The flame guttered, but didn't snuff out. "No," I said with a headshake. My anger was directed at Gina, and Regan, and Rod. I wouldn't take it out on a helpless pledge who was obviously scared that I'd do just that. *I* wasn't like Rod. "And take off that contraption," I said, pointing to the strap-on.

Leslie breathed a grateful sigh and began unbuckling the straps. When she finished, she held her hands in front of herself, hiding her sex.

I stepped close to her and she flinched. "Relax," I said. "I'm not going to do anything to you. I'm not like *them*."

"*Leslie!*"

We turned at the sound of Regan's voice. Then I frowned in contempt; she hadn't even left the bed. Like a feudal lady, she'd simply shouted for her maidservant. I motioned for Leslie to keep quiet. She looked confused, but obeyed.

"Pledge *Leslie!* Where the hell are you?!"

"Answer her," I whispered. "Tell her you'll be there in a minute."

Leslie did, but then stared at me in alarm as I hastily shed my tuxedo. I soothed her with a gesture. Then I looked down at my half-hard dick. I spared a quick glance at Leslie's nude figure but shut my eyes.

I began stroking myself as I imagined Regan moaning while I fucked her from behind. Her imaginary pussy was loose—from all the Pikes she'd had sex with, no doubt—but I didn't care. She was hot and wet, and I slid into her with ease, each thrust making her cry out in ecstasy. When my real-world dick hardened completely, I opened my eyes.

Leslie was gawking at my erection. She swallowed hard and looked up, her eyes wide with fear.

"Don't worry," I half-whispered, "I'm not going to do anything to you. Regan, on the other hand—"

"Leslie," Regan shouted from the bed, "are you coming?!"

"Yes, Sister Regan," the pledge answered automatically.

"Stay here," I commanded.

With that, I rounded on the main part of the room. Gina lowered her head from Regan's pussy and looked up at me in surprise. I was a looming shadow, backlit by the flashing light from the TV, and I must have been an imposing figure. I certainly wasn't the pledge she'd been expecting.

I strode toward the bed, my erection leading the way. Then I knelt and scooted forward, my hard-on aimed at Regan's pussy. I set my cock at her opening and rubbed it through her folds to coat it with moisture. Then I smoothly buried it inside her. I was bigger than her strap-on, and she groaned at the sudden intrusion.

I gripped her hips but then paused a moment to savor the feeling of her pussy. She was hot and wet, of course, but tight, too, which I hadn't expected. Her inner walls gripped my shaft like a glove. I withdrew from her depths and stopped, poised to re-enter her.

She'll never want to have sex with Rod again, I thought smugly. *Not after she's been fucked by a* real *man. And for the record, Rod, you* buttfucker*, real men don't take it up the ass!*

I grinned savagely and thrust into her. My hips met her ass and then I withdrew for another stroke. I pumped into her several times, her pussy walls gripping my shaft each time I pulled back.

Suddenly, however, she stiffened. Her blonde hair flew out as she whipped her head around. She couldn't make out my face, but I could see the snarl of rage on hers.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?!" she cried. "Get off of me, *asshole!*"

Her reaction wasn't what I expected, and it rekindled my anger. "I'll get off on you," I spat, purposefully misquoting her. "I'll get off all *over* you."

She tried to get away, but I was too strong. I held on to her hips and slammed into her again, jarring her forward. Her head whipped around a second time and she snarled incoherently. In a burst of fury, she turned to claw at me.

At that point, things happened quickly:

I bellowed in pain as Gina bit my inner thigh—

Regan lunged away from me and whirled, shouting obscenities—

Leslie turned on the lights—

Everyone froze.

A moment later, Gina rolled upright. She and Regan spoke at once: "Paul, what're *you* doing here?" "Who the *hell* do you think you are?"

"What am *I* doing here?" I answered, choosing to ignore Regan, my eyes boring into Gina's. "What're *you* doing here?"

"How *dare* you put that thing in me!" Regan fumed.

"Shut the fuck up," I snarled. "Who asked you?"

Her eyes flashed with rage and she tried to lunge at me, but Gina restrained her.

"Paul, what're you doing?" Gina asked.

"What's it look like I'm doing?" I replied sarcastically.

Leslie stood mute and very clearly afraid. I spared her a momentary glance but just as quickly dismissed her. Before I could say anything else, Regan followed my glance.

"How did *he* get in here?" she asked the pledge.

"Brother Paul? He had a key, and—"

"*Brother* Paul?" Regan said, incredulous.

Leslie gave her a blank, shocked look.

"He's not a Pike," Regan continued, her tone full of scorn. "He couldn't even get into Sigma Chi."

My face heated with a flush of anger, since *Gina* had been the reason I didn't get a bid from the fraternity.

Regan vaulted from the bed and stood defiantly, not even bothering to hide her nudity. "Get the hell out of here!"

"It's *my* room," I said, deadly calm. I casually leered at her body but then snorted indifferently. "If you don't want to fuck me, then—"

"Fuck *you?!* I wouldn't fuck you in a million years, not if you were the last man on Earth!"

"Then get out!" I shouted.

"Paul, what're you doing?" Gina demanded.

"What's it look like I'm doing? I came up here to get laid. If she doesn't want to, then she can leave."

"Come on, Gina," Regan said, "let's get out of here."

With that, she began gathering things from the nightstand. My eyes widened in outrage when I realized what she was stuffing into her purse: a small mirror, a silver tube, and a vial of white powder.

"Is that cocaine?" I asked. The question was *anything* but rhetorical.

"Of course it is, you *idiot*," Regan sneered. "What did you *think* it was?"

Suddenly, my suspicions blazed anew and I came to a staggering conclusion: Gina had done coke after all. She still *was*, judging by her expression. I gawked at her in disbelief. Then my eyes slid to Regan, cold fury returning.

She returned my fierce gaze with one of her own. "Come *on*, Gina," she said again. "You too, Leslie. Get dressed. We're getting out of here *right now!*" She silently dared me to stop her.

"Gina's *not* leaving," I said.

"You think she wants to stay here with *you?*" Regan demanded. "She knows you don't love her! You never have, you… *asshole!*"

"And what would *you* know about it?" I asked, disbelief mixed with anger. "Of course I love her."

"How *can* you… when you've got another girlfriend?"

I blinked in shock.

Surprised, Gina turned to her friend. "Regan… no."

"No, I won't stop, Gina," Regan said. "Not this time. I'm tired of him treating you like crap. He doesn't deserve you. If he really loves you, then why's he fucking another girl? Huh?" She rounded on me, furious. "And your 'second girlfriend' is a real great choice, Romeo. She's fucked half the Pikes. Did you know that? Huh? Did you?!"

"Regan, *stop it*," Gina said.

"Get out of here," I shouted at Regan, fresh fury erupting at the thought of Kendall and the Pikes.

"Oh, yeah, that's right," Regan taunted. "I bet she didn't tell you about that, did she? Did she tell you how much she loved it? Did she tell you how she begged them to fuck her in front of an audience?"

Gina reached for her friend. "Regan, please… don't."

"No," Regan said, angrily shrugging off Gina's hand, "he should know what his *other* girlfriend is like." She turned to me again, her face twisted with resentment. "You treat Gina like crap and spend all your time with that trailer trash whore?! You're a lousy asshole!"

"Get out of my room," I said, my voice soft and dangerous. It was all I could do to keep from slapping her across the room. My father's lifelong admonition—*Never hit a lady, son*—was the only thing that saved her. Still, I practically trembled with rage and the desire to backhand her.

Gina knew me better than Regan, and she recognized the signs of my impending explosion. "I'll be fine," she said to her friend. "Just go."

"But he doesn't *love* you," Regan pleaded earnestly.

"Yes, he does," Gina said.

Her calm words eased the tension in the room, but the air still crackled with energy, ready to be unleashed—violently—at the slightest provocation.

"I'll call you tomorrow," Gina said to her friend. "Really, I'll be fine. Paul won't hurt me. Will you, Paul?"

I ignored her and turned to Regan. "Get… the… *fuck*… out of my room."

Undaunted, she returned my furious look with one of her own.

We must have been an amusing sight, wearing nothing but expressions that would've peeled paint. I was anything but amused, however.

"Come with me, Gina," Regan said, making one last plea. "I'll find Rod… he'll protect us. You won't have to deal with this asshole again. You don't need him. You're too *good* for him."

I clenched my fists and leaned forward, as if to take a step.

"If you lay *one finger* on me," Regan threatened, "you're dead. Do you hear me? *Dead!*"

"Yeah, well," I said, "you're a lousy lay anyway."

Her eyes flashed with renewed anger. "I can't *believe* you stuck that… that *thing* in me," she fumed, gesturing contemptuously at my now-flaccid dick. "Rod's gonna kill you when he finds out."

"Why?" I asked as mildly as I could. "He fucked *my* girlfriend, so I returned the favor." I decided to twist the knife. "Although I'm sure he enjoyed it more than I did."

Gina rounded on me, her eyes flashing dangerously.

"Besides," I continued, "I'm not afraid of Rod. I could kick his ass any day of the week and twice on Sunday. And if he thinks I'm scared of his friends, then he'd better think again."

"Let's *go*, Gina," Regan said. "You don't need this asshole."

"She's not going with you," I said to her. "Now *leave*."

"I'll be fine, Regan," Gina said, her reasonable tone marred by suppressed anger. "Paul and I need to discuss a few things." She glanced at me sidelong, her expression hard.

"I don't trust him," Regan said.

"I'll be fine," Gina repeated.

Regan glared at me one more time before warily looking away to find her discarded dress and shoes. "C'mon, Leslie," she said, "let's get out of here."

"Yes, Sister Regan," Leslie said.

"You don't have to call me 'Sister,'" Regan said, almost gently. "Just get your dress and let's go."

Surprisingly, Leslie's dress was hidden within the folds of the suit jacket on the dresser. She donned both garments, looking a little silly in the too-large tuxedo jacket.

"Are you sure you'll be okay?" Regan asked Gina one final time. Then she glared at me.

"Just get the fuck out," I said with impatient derision.

"I'll be fine," Gina assured her. "I'll call you tomorrow."

"I still don't like this," Regan muttered.

Gina ushered them to the door. After a few quiet assurances, she closed it behind them. Then she turned, her eyes hard as agates. Even nude, she was an imposing sight.

"What?" I asked defensively.

Deceptively calm, she asked, "Where would you like to start?"

"Let's start with what you were doing up here in the first place," I said, seizing the initiative.

"Or would you like to start with the cocaine?"

That took her aback.

"I can't believe how blind I've been!" I cursed myself. "Your sudden energy? The horniness? All those mornings when you had a stuffed up nose? What's it called… 'coke nose'? Did you think I wouldn't notice?"

"You didn't notice till now!" she shot back.

"And that's supposed to make *me* look bad? Okay, so I'm a little slow on the uptake, but at least I'm not a drug addict!"

"I'm *not* a drug addict!"

"Then what do you call it?" I asked contemptuously.

"You wouldn't know a *thing* about it." She crossed her arms beneath her breasts and set her jaw, her eyes defiant.

"And another thing," I said, plowing over her answer, "I know you fucked Rod in Vermont."

"I did not, Paul. How many times do I have to tell you before you get it through your thick skull? I… did… not… screw… *Rod!* Do I need to use smaller words? I didn't screw *any* guy on that trip. I was faithful. Unlike *you!*"

"What's that supposed to mean?!"

"Who's Felicia?" she asked in a scathing tone.

It was my turn to stand speechless.

"Hmmmm?" she pressed, almost sweetly.

"She's… um… she's in my English class."

"Sure she is. Then why do you have her phone number… in *Atlanta?*"

"What? How do you—" I shut my mouth with a clomp.

"How do I know that? I saw her phone number on your drawings, that's how! It was right there on top, even. And I'm not an idiot, Paul. I heard how you reacted when I mentioned her. You were scared. Did you screw her? Is that who you were with when my mom had to come to your house, that night?"

"Who told you—?"

"Did you think I wouldn't know?" she asked, her eyes brimming with tears of anger. "Did you think I wouldn't find out?"

"But you and Rod…," I stammered weakly.

"I didn't do *anything* with Rod," she said. "Ask Regan. Ask Jess. Ask *anyone*. But you! You screwed Felicia, didn't you? Never mind, I can see it in your eyes."

I started to deny it, but I was sick of lying. "Fine," I said at last. "So I fucked her. So what?"

"'So what?' Paul, doesn't our relationship mean *anything* to you? I trusted you. I even let Kendall—"

"Don't bring Kendall into this," I snapped. "She's got nothing to do with this."

"She doesn't?" Gina asked, her anger turning to disbelief and regret. "She's got everything to do with this."

"I know what that Pike did to her," I suddenly blurted, anger driving me to change the subject again.

"I know what they did too," Gina said softly, sadly. "And I'm sorry you had to find out about it. Regan promised she wouldn't say anything to you. What they did to Kendall was *wrong*, and

I'm sorry. I'm sorry for Kendall's sake."

"Then why didn't you tell me?"

"If Kendall didn't tell you, then it wasn't *my* place to do it. Besides, I didn't want you to treat her any differently because of it. What happened to her was horrible, but telling you wouldn't've done anything but make you angry."

"That wasn't really your choice to make, now was it," I bit off.

"No, it wasn't. It was *Kendall's*. And if nothing else, I respect her enough to leave it up to her. That's why I made Regan promise never to tell you. She wanted to, you know. To get you to break up with Kendall so you'd spend more time with me. But I wouldn't let her."

I worked my jaw soundlessly. Then I clenched it. I didn't want to feel sympathy for Gina; I was supposed to be *angry* with her. "But what's that have to do with you and cocaine?" I asked, deflecting the conversation yet again.

"Nothing," she said simply. "But you wouldn't understand about *that* either. You're not a part of my life anymore… not really." She sighed. "You don't know what it's like for me. You never did."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

She stood silently for several agonizing moments, her head bowed, her shoulders stooped. "I… I'm sorry, Paul, but…" She paused. "I think you should go."

I blinked in shock.

"I'm sorry."

"But…?"

She shook her head. "Don't make this any harder than it already is. You should go." She looked up at me and wiped her eyes in fierce determination not to shed any more tears.

"I'm not going anywhere," I said, my voice flinty. "We're going to stay right here. And we're going to sleep together."

"Haven't you had enough sex with unwilling women tonight?" she asked, tired and full of disappointment.

I felt my face harden with a flare of rage.

"I guess I hoped we could…," she began, shaking her head in regret. "Oh, never mind. It's too late to save our relationship. Regan said I shouldn't try." She looked up at me, her eyes full of anguish. "But after all the years we've been together, I had to give it one more chance."

"What're you talking about?"

"I'm sorry, Paul, but I can't keep living like this. You should go."

I clenched my fists in fury. "Fine! I'll go. But if I walk out that door, we're through! So think hard—is this *really* the way you want it to end?"

"No, I don't," she said, looking up and losing her battle to hold back tears, "but it's the way it is. I can't be with you anymore, Paul. And if you won't leave, then I'll go stay with Regan."

She began to gather her things.

"No," I spat in a fit of pique, "I'll go. I won't stay where I'm not wanted."

In a silent fury, I got dressed in my street clothes and angrily stuffed my tuxedo—my *rented* tuxedo, fuck you very much, Rod—into its bag. Gina slipped into her robe, but stood mute. I looked at her, ready to give her one last chance to ask me to stay. She returned my look with teary but resolute eyes.

"I'm leaving," I said.

She bit her lip.

"I mean it… if I walk out that door, we're through."

"I'm sorry," she half-whispered, her voice hoarse.

"Okay, fine! Goodbye, Gina. Goodbye forever."

She swallowed hard, but didn't say a word to stop me.

I stormed toward the door and paused to look at her before I opened it.

She wiped her cheeks, her lower lip still tucked between her teeth. She looked small and helpless and afraid. "I'll always love you, Paul," she said, so softly that I almost didn't hear her. "But I can't live like this. Now please… for me… go."

"Fine!" I practically shouted. Then I jerked the door open and stormed out. As I marched down the hall, I kept waiting for her voice behind me, *"Paul, wait!"*

It never came.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

I stomped out of the Hilton's lobby and toward the parking lot. As I approached the Jeep, however, I pulled up short. It was sitting too low, and it looked like someone had…

As I drew closer, I momentarily forgot about Gina. Instead, my blood burned with raw, searing fury. The Jeep's tires had been slashed, and someone had spray painted the body with graffiti. The soft top hung in tatters, slashed in a dozen places. All of the lights were smashed out, and the glass of the windshield was crazed, as if someone had taken a tire iron to it.

Rod!

I dropped my things and stormed back to the hotel, intent on murder. When I burst into one of the ATO party suites, the people there looked up in shock.

I scanned the room with a furious glare. "Where's Rod Fortner?" I finally asked.

They stared at me blankly.

"The Pikes," I ground out.

"How should *we* know? And who the fuck—"

"Try down the hall," one of the guys slurred.

In the next suite, the Pikes looked up at the commotion when I entered. Rod himself stood in the middle of the group, his tuxedo shirt casually undone at the neck, his tie hanging loose. When he saw me, he smirked.

"What's the matter?" he asked, his voice dripping with sarcasm and disdain. "Do you need cab fare back to"—a condescending laugh—"the dorm?"

I wanted to beat him to a bloody pulp. I wanted to make him beg for his life. I wanted to teach him a lesson he wouldn't soon forget. So I lunged at him, but another Pike got in the way. When I surged forward again, two of them tried to hold me back; I overpowered them with sheer fury. My fingertips caught the barest hold of Rod's tuxedo, but he flinched from my grasp, his face a mask of alarm.

Unfortunately, six to one was *not* good odds, especially since I was the one. When someone hit me, I lashed out wildly, but ended up fighting for my life in a chaotic melee of punches, grunts, and crashes.

Finally, someone tackled me and I lurched into an end table. I went down hard and the breath whooshed from my lungs as the other guy landed on me. His friends pulled him up, but my knee collapsed when I tried to stand. I managed to rise to all fours, but—

"Wait, he's mine!"

Rod kicked me in the ribs. Hard. Then he kicked me again. Despite a sudden, searing pain, I tried to rise, and he delivered a third kick to my face. I tasted blood, salty and hot, and dumbly watched it run from my mouth. I couldn't believe it was my own. I even put my hand to my lips and stared in confusion as my fingers came away red.

"Don't *ever* fuck with me!" Rod shrieked. "You miserable faggot!"

I struggled to get up.

He kicked me again, pain exploding in my side.

"What the fuck's going on here?" a new voice asked. I recognized it, but couldn't identify its owner.

Rod reared back for another kick, but someone—the new voice, Rusty!—pulled him off.

It was all over but the shouting, and by the time the police showed up, Rusty's date had a towel full of ice pressed to my swelling eye. My lip and other cuts had stopped bleeding, but my clothes were covered in blood. My ears were ringing, my battered knuckles had already begun to swell, and even my *teeth* hurt. But worst of all, fiery pain lanced through my side with every labored breath.

Through a haze of pain, I told the police officers that I wanted to press charges. Unfortunately, they pointed out that *I* had attacked the Pikes, who could press charges against *me*.

"But I've talked them out of it," said the older policeman, his voice gruff and full of paternal concern. "Self-defense might be pushing it, what with the beating you took, but you *did* start it. So you just keep your mouth shut about pressing charges. Okay? Now c'mon, kid, let's have the paramedics look at you."

The paramedics wanted to take me to the hospital to X-ray my ribs, but I refused to go. I can't really explain why, but it was a point of macho pride, of which I was in short supply. So they put butterfly closures on the cut over my eye and the one on my cheek. They cleaned my split lip and gave me a proper icepack for my swollen eye.

Finally, the older police officer sized me up. "I'm sorry, kid, but the hotel manager says you have to leave the premises. Where's your room? We'll go with you while you get your things."

"I'm no' thaying in th' hotel," I mumbled, my swollen lip and face making my speech almost unintelligible.

"Okay, then," the officer said, "we'll take you to your car."

"They trash'd it," I said, pointing to the Pikes. "Tires slashed. Can't drive."

"You don't say?" the officer asked, leveling an accusing glance at the Pikes.

"I'm sorry, officer, but he's mistaken," Rod said unctuously. "My friends and I haven't been near his car."

"See for y'rself," I slurred. Then I tried to get to my feet, but pain from my ribs made my head spin.

The officer helped me up. "Okay, kid, let's go see about your car. You too," he added to the Pikes, "let's go."

The smug frat guys sauntered after us, but only after a moment, as if they *deigned* to obey the command. As I painfully limped down the hall—my knee would barely hold my weight—the younger policeman leaned close to the older one.

"Ned, that's Bill Fortner's kid," he hissed, indicating Rod with a glance over his shoulder. "We can't arrest him."

"If he messed up this kid's car," the older cop, Ned, said, "then I damn-well *will* arrest him."

"Bill Fortner plays golf with the Butchers"—the powerful bankers behind the World's Fair—"and he eats lunch with the mayor, for Christ's sake. He's not the kind of guy you wanna tangle with."

"I know who he is, and I don't care," Ned said. "If his kid vandalized this kid's car, then he's going to jail."

"Where he'll stay for about an hour," the younger cop said, "until his father's lawyer springs him. And then the chief'll be asking why you arrested Bill Fortner's kid. Ned, it's not worth it. Besides, if you arrest the Fortner kid, he'll press charges against *this* kid," he added, pointing to me. "Assault is a much bigger deal than vandalism. *Think* about it, Ned. Don't be crazy."

The Pikes were still twenty feet behind us, out of earshot. They were laughing amongst themselves, confident that their families' money and influence would protect them. Judging by the conversation between the two cops, it wasn't an unreasonable assumption.

At the elevator Ned scowled and punched the call button. He was silent for the entire trip to my Jeep. When he saw it, he surveyed the damage and whistled.

"We had absolutely nothing to do with this, officer," Rod said, oily and sincere.

"Check their hands, Holden," Ned said to the younger cop. "See if they got any spray paint on 'em."

The Pikes' hands were all clean, of course. Rod smiled smugly and winked at me. I stiffened, but was too injured to do more.

"All right," Ned said in resignation, "you gentlemen can go back to your party."

"Thank you, officer," Rod said. "I'll mention your thoroughness to Chief Lewis."

Ned smiled tightly, without warmth. "Can we give you a ride someplace?" he asked me. "Are you sure you don't want to go to the hospital?"

"The paramedics said my ribs weren't broken," I said stubbornly, wincing at the pain of speaking.

"They said they didn't *think* your ribs were broken," Ned corrected.

"I'll take my chances." I tried to heft my discarded overnight bag and nearly passed out from the pain.

"C'mon, kid," Ned said gently, "you're going to the hospital."

I was too light-headed to argue. The ambulance had already left, so the cops put me in the back of their cruiser.

"Is there someone you want us to call? Your parents? Your girlfriend?" Ned asked on the way to the hospital.

"Girlfriend," I mumbled. Then, painfully, I gave him Kendall's name and number.

"Payton… Payton… that name rings a bell. Is her father a cop?" he asked.

"Yessir," I said. "In Chattanooga."

Holden snapped his fingers as that triggered a memory. "He's that guy who drives his RV up here for all the football games. He's the one with the good-lookin' wife and daughter, you know, the ones with fantastic knockers. Um, sorry, kid," he added to me, "no offense."

I tried to smile, but ended up wincing in pain instead.

"*You* know," Holden continued to his partner, "he hangs out with Leffenbach and the other homicide guys."

"Oh yeah, I know him," Ned said. Over his shoulder: "You're dating his daughter? Why didn't you say so?"

"It hurts to talk," I said, smiling feebly.

Ned and Holden thought that was hilariously funny. *I* didn't think it was so funny, but I was in too much pain to voice my opinion.

At the emergency room, they ushered me straight into one of the examination areas. With two cops for an escort, I got prompt attention. Later, when I returned from getting my chest X-rayed, Kendall was waiting for me. She looked like she wanted to hug me, but the policemen must have warned her about my injuries. I could tell by her expression that I looked like I'd been hit by a bus.

"Three fractured ribs," the doctor was saying to her, "multiple contusions, and multiple facial lacerations. He doesn't have a concussion, but we'd like to keep him overnight for observation."

I shook my head as hard as I dared.

The doctor saw, but ignored me. "We'll give him something for the pain"—the nurse swabbed my right buttock and I felt a quick sting—"and bandage his ribs. Luckily, the facial lacerations won't need stitches." He turned to me. "You really should stay in the hospital tonight."

"I want to go *home*," I said obstinately, irrationally.

"All right," he said with a note of disapproval. Then he turned to Kendall. "We've given him a shot of Demerol, but you need to give him one of these pills every four hours. And encourage him to cough, even though it hurts. We don't want fluid to pool in his lungs, which could cause pneumonia. Keep ice on his eye to keep the swelling down. He's going to have one heck of a shiner, but he shouldn't have any major scarring from the lacerations…"

Kendall was paying attention to him, so I lay back and stared at the ceiling, my thoughts dark and seething.

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In the end, I didn't go home after all: I spent the remainder of the weekend at Kendall's apartment, in bed. She slept on a pallet on the floor beside me, when she slept at all.

She contacted her father's friends at the police department and had my Jeep towed to a body shop. She also called Earl Walker to cancel my flying lesson, and Coach Travis to tell him that I couldn't wrestle.

She insisted on calling my parents, although I persuaded her to tell them I'd suffered a bump on the head in a minor car accident. When I talked to Mom, she said she wanted to fly up immediately, but I convinced her not to. The effort to sound nonchalant left me digging my fingernails into my palms to suppress the pain, and by the time I hung up, I was drenched in sweat.

Kendall even called Gina, who'd heard about the fight, of course. Unfortunately, she'd heard that I was in intensive care (*How do rumors get so blown out of proportion?!*). She'd been calling area hospitals all day, looking for me. When she learned that I was at Kendall's apartment, she rushed over

I had told Kendall a sketchy, edited version of events, and she obviously blamed Gina for what had happened. Gina seemed more worried about me than anything else, and in deference to my condition, the two girls were civil to each other.

Gina also came to sit by my bed for most of Sunday, but the pain pills kept me knocked out, so I only have vague memories of her being there.

Not surprisingly, I didn't go to class on Monday. Kendall wrote notes to each of my professors, giving them the car accident excuse. She told Siobhan that I wouldn't be able to model for at least a week, and Siobhan said to return when I was ready.

While Kendall was in class, her roommates checked on me throughout the day. They clucked over me like mother hens, but I mostly slept. Trip and Abby had a quiet dinner with us, and even T.J. and Glen stopped by.

When they arrived, I managed to prop myself up on the couch in the living room. I tried to act normal, but with a black eye, split lip, and other cuts and bruises, I looked like I'd gone a couple of rounds with Muhammad Ali. To my surprise, T.J. scoffed at my car accident story.

"Bullshit, Loverboy," he said. "You took a beating. I took enough of 'em myself, and I know one when I see it. Who did it, those Pikes? Do you want us to kick their asses?"

For once, Glen didn't try to restrain him.

"Those bastards," T.J. fumed. "They think they can get away with anything! I'll show them…"

Fortunately, I managed to talk T.J. out of doing anything to the Pikes. I definitely *wanted* to get revenge, but I reluctantly admitted that it would only cause further problems. So I decided to let Rod have his victory. It was surprisingly easy to do, especially since the night was so fresh in my mind. But I didn't exactly relish the thought of another fight (and that's what it would be, a no-holds-barred fight to the last man standing).

Maybe it was my fractured ribs. Maybe it was my black eye. Maybe it was my other cuts and bruises. Maybe I told myself I was an *adult*, and should act like it, regardless of what Rod did. Glen didn't say anything, but I could tell that he approved. I don't know why, but that meant almost as much as T.J.'s fearless willingness to take on the Pikes in the first place.

After they left, Kendall put me to bed. Unfortunately, I lay awake for a long time. I'd found a comfortable position, where the pain of my injuries didn't intrude upon my thoughts. So I mentally replayed the entire Night at the Hilton (it had capital letters in my mind). I felt a mixture of guilt and anger about the whole night, and I was especially ashamed of what I'd done to Regan.

Sex wasn't a weapon, but I had used it that way. I wanted to blame the alcohol, but I couldn't. I wanted to blame Gina, or even Regan herself, but I couldn't. I was too honest with myself to blame anyone *but* myself. I had basically raped Regan, no matter how much I wanted to rationalize it otherwise. At the time, I'd been certain that she would *want* to have sex with me. Worse, when she tried to get away, I held her, I *forced* her.

How was I any better than Rod?

I wasn't, and I knew it. With one dark, angry decision, I had sunk to his level. I didn't like the feeling, and I made a silent promise to myself to never act like him again.

When my thoughts dwelled on Rod, though, I began to seethe with fury. My one regret—aside from taking the beating of my life—was that I'd only been able to splash blood on his fancy tuxedo. Unfortunately, it was *my* blood. I hadn't even scuffed his shoes, even when he kicked me while I was down.

There ain't no justice.

After condemning myself for what I'd done to Regan—and deriding myself for not landing a punch on Rod—my thoughts turned to Gina.

Where to begin?

I'd like to say that I was surprised by her cocaine use, but too many clues started adding up. Everything pointed to coke, and I cursed myself for not seeing it sooner.

In part, I blamed it on my inexperience with drugs in general. Sure, I *knew* about cocaine, in the abstract, but until I met Felicia, I hadn't had any *practical* experience with it. In high school, Gina and I had avoided anything harder than alcohol, so I didn't automatically think of drugs whenever she did something unusual.

I also blamed myself. I hadn't paid as much attention to Gina as I should have. Worse, I had overlooked many of the signs, through ignorance, preoccupation, or sheer stupidity. In her own

way, she had asked for help, but I hadn't given it. I'd been too wrapped up in my own life and my own problems, and I hadn't seen what was right in front of me the whole time.

I had to blame Gina as well, though. She'd obviously been lying to me all along. She used euphemisms like "freshen her makeup," or "powder her nose." I laughed at the double meaning of the last phrase—a double meaning I hadn't understood until it slapped me in the face. "Fresh-cut flowers" explained her sniffles. A head cold explained her morning-after stuffiness.

Lies, lies, and more lies.

In the end, though, I blamed Regan and Rod most of all. I was positive that Regan had given Gina the cocaine, and Rod was her ultimate source. For a moment, I thought about calling the police and reporting him for dealing drugs, but I was cynically convinced that his family's money and connections would keep him out of jail.

(As it turned out, I was right. A month after my one-sided fight with the Pikes, Rod was pulled over for speeding. The officer noticed him casting furtive glances at the back of his Porsche. His suspicions aroused, the cop searched the car and discovered nearly two kilos of cocaine. Rod was promptly arrested. Evidence also surfaced that he was one of the main coke suppliers for the Greeks. His high-priced lawyer eventually got all of the charges dropped for "lack of evidence," which was a farce. Shortly after, Rod moved to Miami—fled like a craven cur, more like it—to finish college. I'd like to say that he came to grief due to his drug dealing, or due to his silver-spoon, self-entitled personality, but he actually became a successful investment banker, and lives in Bermuda. There ain't no justice, huh? He is married to wife number *five*, but I digress…)

I thought back through the previous months, analyzing every little detail of my life with Gina. The first time I was sure she had used cocaine was the trip to the sex shop, with Regan. Another was Regan's birthday party at Rod's house. Several other times quickly leapt to mind, once I started putting clues together.

Finally, I thought about how I had broken up with her. She deserved better, and the thought of living without her left a knot in my stomach. But I decided to get back together with her only if she quit doing cocaine. And if she quit the sorority, of course. The cocaine was merely a symptom of the problem; Regan and Rod—and people like them—were the problem itself.

For my own part, I'd have to deal with my guilt about Felicia, but I also felt as if a weight had been lifted from my shoulders. In my mind, I equated Felicia with Rod, and since Gina and I had both strayed, neither of us had the moral high ground.

Despite her denials, I was convinced that she *had* fucked Rod in Vermont. I knew how horny she got when she was on cocaine—from unwitting personal experience—and I couldn't imagine her restraining herself. So if I could forgive her for Rod, she could forgive me for Felicia.

I also vowed to get Kendall and Gina back together. If I wanted my three-way relationship to work, *I* needed to do something about it. Kendall seemed more inflexible than Gina, but her stubbornness was subtler and harder to counter. Regardless, I knew I'd have to deal with it after I got back together with Gina.

I didn't know how the details would work out, but I had a general plan. And with that in mind, I eventually drifted off asleep.

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Reality intruded upon my plans a couple of days later. I had healed to the point where I could

get around on my own, although my ribs still hurt any time I exerted myself. After a bit of convincing, Kendall let me move back to my dorm room.

My suitemates and friends from across the hall held an impromptu homecoming party when I returned. It wasn't much—a Twinkie with a wooden match instead of a candle—but I definitely appreciated it.

Later, I called Gina. She asked how I was doing, and apologized for not spending more time with me. She seemed a bit distant, though.

"I just got the feeling that Kendall didn't want me at her apartment," she said. "And besides, after the other night…"

"Yeah," I said heavily, "that's something we need to talk about. We also need to talk about our relationship."

Silence.

"Hello?"

"I heard you," she said coolly.

"Well?"

"I thought I… I mean, I thought *we*… but… I mean, you said…" She fell silent with a sigh. "Yeah, I guess it's not going to be as simple as I hoped."

"Right. So we need to talk," I said. "Um… do you mind coming over here?"

"Okay. I'll meet you in the lobby in half an hour."

"Half an hour? Why so long?"

"I need to call Regan and—"

"Regan?" I said, my voice hard. "What's *she* got to do with this?"

"I need to call and tell her I won't be able to study with her tonight," Gina replied frostily.

✧ ✧ ✧

When I ushered Gina into my room, Billy gathered his things.

"Hi, Gina," he said. To me: "I'm going to the theater to work on the set. And I'll probably spend the night with Jamie. Is there anything you need before I go?"

"I'm cool, Billy. Thanks."

He smiled and then nodded farewell to Gina.

I gingerly sat on the bed and gestured to the spot next to me in invitation.

After a moment's reluctance, Gina abruptly sat.

I apologized for how I'd acted at the hotel. I explained that I'd been drunk, angry, and shocked by the cocaine. I also apologized for what I'd done to Regan. I didn't come right out and use the word "rape" (I was too scared to admit it to anyone but myself), but I didn't offer an excuse for my actions—I had none.

Then I told Gina how much I loved her, and how I wanted our relationship to work. I'd gone over the speech in my head a dozen times, and I wanted to strike the right balance between self-reproach and optimism.

"But you're going to have to do your part if we want this relationship to work," I said at last. "In the first place, you shouldn't be *doing* cocaine. You know better than that. And you shouldn't be hanging around with people who do it, either. I'm sorry, but if you want to get back together, you're going to have to quit doing cocaine. And that means you need to quit hanging around with Regan. You might even have to quit the sorority too."

I finished with a well-rehearsed note of confidence: “I love you, and I’m willing to do whatever it takes to get us back together and get you off drugs.”

She snorted softly in contempt. “Well, I’m glad you’re willing to *let* me make all those sacrifices,” she murmured.

“I know it won’t be easy,” I said, a little confused, “but we can do it. Together.”

“No,” she said, with flat finality. Then she looked at me, her dark eyes sad. “You just don’t get it, do you?”

I felt my brow crease. “I said we could get back together if—”

“I *know* what you said, Paul. I’m not deaf. And I’m not stupid, either.” She took a deep breath and rubbed her hands along her jeans, as if to calm herself. “You don’t understand. I don’t *want* to get back together.” Then she stood defiantly and moved a few feet away. “And who do you think you are, talking like *you’re* taking *me* back? I asked *you* to leave, Paul, not the other way around.”

“I know,” I said, blissfully ignorant. In retrospect, I wasn’t even listening to her; I still had my speech swirling in my head, including her imagined responses. “But you didn’t mean it like that. I know, I know, I told you that if I walked out, I was never coming back, and I’m sorry I said that. Neither of us meant the things we said. So now—”

To herself: “I should’ve listened to Regan.” She met my eyes. “I thought we could be adults about this. I thought we could just leave things as we’d ended them: I asked you to leave and you said you were never coming back. Why can’t it be that simple?”

“That simple…?”

“How self-centered can you be? You don’t get it, do you?”

“Get what?”

“Paul,” she said softly, “we shouldn’t see each other anymore. I thought I was clear, but…” She looked up gravely and held my eyes. “I’m breaking up with you.”

I whooshed, as if a baseball bat had hit me in the gut.

“I’m sorry.”

“But… but… but I love you,” I said, as if that answered everything.

“And I love you too. But right now, I don’t *like* you very much.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that I can’t keep living like this. I can’t keep waiting for *you* to fix things. Not when I know that you’re *never* going to do anything. And you said you’ll never break up with Kendall, so what am I supposed to do, Paul? Am I supposed to sit by the phone, waiting for your call, hoping that you’ll decide to spend some time with *me*, instead of Kendall?” She shook her head. “I’m not some Stepford Wife.”

I blinked.

“I love you more than I’ve ever loved anyone. But I can’t be with you. I can’t keep waiting—day after day, week after week—hoping that you’ll *do something!* You can’t just keep me on a shelf and take me down when you want to play with me. I’m not some toy.”

“Toy? What’re you talking—”

“And you want *me* to give up Regan and the sorority?” she asked, warming to her invective. Sarcastically: “How noble of you. So, what’re *you* willing to give up to save this relationship? Huh? Wrestling? Flying? Kendall?”

"What's she got to do with this? We got along fine before you—"

"Ha! How can you be so blind? We got along fine when she wasn't around all the time. Now that she is, she's sucked you in—*manipulated* you—and you somehow think *I* need to make all the changes in this relationship? Fat chance, buster!"

I stood up too fast, and my head swam.

Gina didn't relent. "I've been nothing more than a convenient sex toy for you since we came to this stinking little city. And I came here because of *you*, Paul. But you chose Tennessee because of Kendall. Did you ever think about what *I* wanted? Huh? Ever?! No! You just thought about what *you* wanted. You've been taking me for granted since we came here, and I'm sick of it!

"You haven't done a *thing* to fix our relationship," she continued, fulminating. "Not a thing! I tried to be patient. I tried to fix things. I tried to extend an olive branch to Kendall. But for what? For you to tell me that you'll *allow* me to give up my friends and quit the sorority? For you to tell me that you'll take *me* back, when I broke up with you in the first place?

"One of us has to have the balls in this relationship, Paul," she said. "I thought it would be you. I *hoped* it would be you. I desperately gave you every chance—with Regan telling me the entire time that you were just taking advantage of me—and what did you do? *Nothing!*" she half-shrieked. "So now, I finally work up the courage to break up with you, and you tell me—you *deign* to tell me—that *you'll* take *me* back?! Screw you, Paul. Screw you *and* your sanctimonious offer. I hope Kendall's happy with you. You two deserve each other. Goodbye!"

With that, she stormed out.

I stared at the closing door and seethed. I wanted to chase after her, to answer to her tirade, but I couldn't. I could barely move faster than a steady walk, and only then at the cost of shooting pain in my side. She would be long gone by the time I made it to the elevators.

As I repeated her words in my head, I sat down in a daze.

"What the fuck just happened?" I wondered aloud.

✧ ✧ ✧

At first, I couldn't believe that Gina had broken up with me. I stayed up most of the night, going through the conversation in my head, listening to her final words. I kept coming to the conclusion that I'd heard her wrong, that I'd simply misunderstood.

The next morning, I stumbled through breakfast, with Kendall fussing over me and Trip trying to draw me into conversation. Even Professor Joska couldn't get a rise out of me when he publicly lambasted me for sloppy work on my Sunsphere sketches. Christy finally got through to me, while we fixed snacks in her room after lunch.

She put her hand on my arm and turned me to face her. "Paul, what's the matter?"

"I guess I'm still upset about my Jeep," I lied. "I think they're going to total it." It was an evasion, but true enough, since the cost of repairs was more than the Jeep was worth.

For a long moment, Christy gazed at me impassively, her blue eyes searching. "Do you trust me?" she asked all of a sudden.

"Huh?"

She enunciated clearly: "Do you trust me?"

"What's that have to do with the Jeep?" I asked.

"Nothing," she said irritably. "Just like your black eye has nothing to do with the Jeep. And

your fractured ribs have nothing to do with it. Your split lip has nothing to do with it, and your cuts and bruises have nothing to do with it. *None* of this has anything to do with the Jeep. That's not even what you're upset about. Oh, sure, you're probably upset about the Jeep, for real, but that's not what I'm talking about. What I want to know is, do you trust me?"

"Yeah, I guess."

"Then quit lying to me," she said simply. "I'm not a child, and I'm not going to run away if I hear some bad news. I'm an adult, and I'm your *friend*. If you don't trust me enough to tell me the truth, then at least don't lie to me. Or learn to lie *better*, although that's hardly good advice."

I blinked at her.

"Okay," she continued, "you've seen my nervous and blunt side… this is my frustrated and blunt side. I'm frustrated that I obviously care about you, but you won't let me help. I'm frustrated that you treat me like a child—instead of your friend—and you tell me silly stories about car wrecks when you've obviously been in a fight. I grew up with five older brothers, Paul," she said heatedly. "I know what the results of a fistfight look like."

She balled her fists but held them rigidly by her side. "And finally," she said, "I'm frustrated that you obviously had a fight with Gina, and now you're sulking about it, but you haven't mentioned a word about what happened. Trust isn't a thing for half-measures, Paul. You either trust me, or you don't. So," she finished with a challenging glare, "would you like to start this conversation over again?"

I looked at her for a long, uncertain moment, trying to gauge her sincerity.

She returned my look with remarkable sangfroid.

After another moment, the enormity of my situation hit me. I couldn't imagine living without Gina. My bluster collapsed and I hung my head, my shoulders sagging.

Christy gasped softly and stepped close.

I lifted my head and gazed at her, my eyes stinging.

"What happened?" she finally asked, her hands clasped before her.

"Do you mind if I sit down? This is probably gonna be a long story, and my knee still hurts." At that, I laughed bitterly. "My side still hurts, and my face still hurts. But mostly, my heart hurts."

She wiped unshed tears from her eyes and nodded. Then she sat beside me.

In fits and starts, I told her about the Night at the Hilton. She was a good listener, and didn't interrupt. I mostly stared at the floor, my eyes glassy as I recounted events. I didn't elaborate about Regan; instead, I simply told her that I wasn't proud of what I'd done. When I told her about my fight with the Pikes, she gasped and held her hand to her mouth. Finally, I told her about my talk with Gina.

"So I think she might be serious about breaking up with me," I finished. "I still can't believe it, but…" I swallowed hard and blinked several times to clear my eyes.

"I'm so sorry, Paul," Christy said.

The next thing I knew, she was hugging me, her head on my chest as she gingerly circled me with her arms. I automatically wrapped my arm around her and stared straight ahead, lost in self-pity.

"Is there anything I can do?" she asked.

"I… I don't know. I'm still not sure what she meant. I mean, did she *really* mean it? We've

been together since we were fifteen; she can't just walk away from three years, not in the blink of an eye. She just can't!" My disbelief turned to frustration. And anger. "I can't believe she'd do that. I mean… *three years!* And she's willing to throw it all away for some dumb sorority!"

Christy sat up and gazed at me. "Paul, it's not dumb to her," she said reasonably. "You told me she doesn't spend much time with you, and none at all with Kendall. All of her friends are in the sorority. Besides, you've got Kendall too. Gina sees that. You said she's very smart. Do you think she doesn't see a widening gulf between you because of Kendall?"

"No, but that doesn't mean she needs to break up with me."

"You said yourself that you haven't done anything to fix things. She's got a right to be upset, Paul. It may not make sense to you, but think about things from her perspective."

"How am I supposed to do that when I never talk to her?" I asked sullenly.

"Exactly," Christy said, the word full of irony.

"But that doesn't mean she should just break up with me! I'm sure I'm wrong… she didn't break up with me. I must've gotten something mixed up."

"It doesn't sound like it."

"But how do you know?"

"I've broken up with guys before, Paul," she said gently. "That's pretty much what it sounds like."

I snarled. "This is all Regan's fault."

Christy blinked. Then she turned me bodily. "Paul, it's *not* Regan's fault."

It was my turn to blink at her.

"*You* were in this relationship, not Regan," she said, shooting to her feet. "It's not Regan's fault any more than it's *my* fault. Regan might've been the cause of some of the problems, but if you had a better relationship with Gina, then she wouldn't have *needed* Regan's friendship. So this is as much your fault as it is Gina's. And Kendall's," she added heavily.

"I like Kendall," she continued, "but she's partly to blame. So don't try to pin this on Regan, or the sorority, or anyone else. This is *your* responsibility. Yours and Gina's and Kendall's. And if you don't see that, then you're not the man I thought you were. And you're definitely not a man I'd like to call my friend."

For the second time in a week, I felt like someone had hit me in the gut with a baseball bat.

"Now, quit whining about whose fault it is," she said, "or what you should've done differently. It's time for you to *do* something. That 'something' is up to you, but you're not going to accomplish anything by brooding. And another thing—"

I looked up at her, ready for the next blow to my ego.

"—talk to Trip. He's got a remarkable head on his shoulders, and he's a lot more mature than most guys I know… including *you*. He's your best friend, and he obviously cares about you as much as I do. I bet he'd even have some good advice for you. If you asked him, that is… instead of sulking like a wounded animal, too hurt to let anyone help you."

She visibly composed herself, but her eyes still held the fire of conviction. "I'm sorry, Paul," she said, "I probably could've said that better, but… I'm tired of seeing you wallow in self-pity, or blaming everyone but yourself." After a moment she threw herself into her chair and laughed, a little helplessly. "My mother's right: I *shouldn't* talk to people when I'm emotional."

"That's okay," I said, the first words I'd spoken in several minutes. "I probably needed to hear

that."

"Not like *that* you didn't," she said, picking at an invisible piece of lint on her jeans.

"Maybe I did," I said. "I mean, I certainly don't talk to myself like that, and maybe that's the problem." It was my turn to laugh helplessly. "Other people do"—I thought of Susan, and Trip—"but I don't listen very often."

"Regardless," Christy said, "I'm sorry I said that the way I did. I didn't mean to be rude."

"You weren't rude. You said what you were thinking. And just because I don't want to hear it doesn't mean it's not true."

She nodded. Then she dithered with her invisible lint.

"Thanks," I said at last.

"For what?" she asked, half-apologetically.

"For telling me the truth."

"You're welcome."

"And… for being my friend."

"I can't help it," she said with a half-laugh, her eyes bright with tears of shared emotion.

✧ ✧ ✧

The insurance company *did* total my Jeep, and the money they offered was a joke. A *bad* joke, at that—less than seven hundred dollars—and I couldn't afford to buy a motor scooter, much less another Jeep.

Worse, the insurance adjuster listed the cause of damage as "Vandalism," which didn't jibe with my accident story. Rather than wait for my parents to find out and begin asking awkward questions, I called them.

"Have they arrested the guys who vandalized your car?" Dad asked.

"Um… not exactly," I said. "The police didn't find any spray paint on their hands, and there weren't any witnesses, so…"

"I see," he said heavily. "So instead of calling the police in the first place, you went looking for a fight."

"Yes, sir," I said. (I didn't usually call my father "sir," but at the moment it seemed appropriate, not to mention properly contrite.)

"That wasn't the brightest thing you've ever done, son."

"No, it wasn't," Mom added. "But are you okay?"

"I'm fine," I said. "Well, I'm *healing*. The doctor doesn't think I'll have any scars, and my eye isn't black and blue anymore. It's a sickly shade of yellow and purple, but I guess that's better than what it was before."

"Do you want us to fly up?" Mom asked.

Before I could reply, Dad answered: "No. He needs to deal with this on his own, Beth. He doesn't need us running to his rescue."

"All right," Mom said, clearly unconvinced.

"Trust me," Dad said. "Right, son?"

"Yes, sir. I'm fine. The girls…" I swallowed hard. "Um… the girls are taking good care of me, and I've talked to the insurance adjuster about the Jeep. They're going to mail the check to the house, so if you'll just hold it for me, I'll…"

"You'll?" Mom prompted when I didn't continue.

"Or," I said tentatively, "you could use the check to repay the money I owe you from Christmas."

"No," my dad said immediately.

"Why not?" I asked. "I won't have *much* left over, but still…"

"No," he repeated. "But thank you for making the offer. You need to set aside the insurance money to buy a new car."

"But I owe you—"

"Paul," he interrupted, "we want you to pay us the four hundred from your summer job."

"Why?" I asked, a little confused.

"Because you need to *work* for the money you use to repay us. This money from the Jeep was never really yours. We bought the Jeep as a reward, because of your good grades. So if you repay us with money from the insurance company, it won't make a difference to you. It's not money you had to *sweat* for. Money takes on a whole new value when you earn it yourself. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"So keep the money from the insurance company. And we'll talk later about helping you buy a new car."

"Thanks, Dad," I said. "You too, Mom. I'm sorry about the Jeep, and I'm sorry I got into a fight with the Pikes. *Trust me*," I said, unconsciously probing my ribs, "I'm really sorry about that."

"We know you are, son," my dad said. Then, surprisingly, he chuckled. "Sometimes you have to learn lessons the hard way."

"No fucking kidding," I said sourly. When I realized what I'd said, my eyes flew wide.

"No fucking kidding," my dad echoed with a genuine laugh.

"You two," Mom chided, although I could hear the smile in her voice. "Is there anything you need, honey?" she asked after a moment. "Are you sure you don't want me to fly up?"

"Beth," my father said in gentle reproach.

"He might like to see me, David. After all, I *am* his mother."

"He doesn't need his mommy coming to rescue him."

"All right," she finally admitted.

"I'm fine, Mom," I said. "Kendall's taking good care of me. I'll be okay."

"Are you sure?" she asked.

"I'm sure. I love you."

"We love you too, honey."

"Bye."

✧ ✧ ✧

I took Christy's advice and talked to Trip. I told him a bit about the Night at the Hilton, and about my last conversation with Gina. He nodded sagely throughout, never interrupting. I still felt as if I were admitting my shortcomings by asking for advice, but Christy's words—the *truth*, I silently admitted—echoed in my mind.

"So," I asked at last, "what would you do?"

"What would I do?" he asked rhetorically. "Well, first, I'd suppress the urge to say 'I told you so.' But since I've been trying to get you to *do* something for months, I'm going to be childish

and say it anyway."

I waited.

"I *told* you so!" A moment later, he continued: "Okay, now that that's out of the way, let's see if we can fix things."

"Do you really think I can fix things?" I asked, hope lighting my expression.

He laughed. "No way. But you're going to try, no matter what. Hell, *I* did, when Lori broke up with me. So I guess I can't blame you for doing the same thing. And don't feel bad. I made a royal mess of my relationship with Lori, but it took me a long time to figure it out. I'm sure it'll take you a long time too."

"I thought you were going to help," I said, a bit resentfully.

"What do you think I'm doing now? I'm telling you what's gonna happen, and that I'll be here to help put the pieces back together when you figure it out for yourself."

"Some help *that* is," I muttered.

He laughed again, genuine and affable. "I know what you mean. But *you*, my proud, stubborn friend, are going to have to learn this lesson for yourself." Another laugh, this time more of a chuckle. "My grandfather used to say 'don't try to teach a pig to sing; you'll waste your time and annoy the pig.'"

I felt a growing sense of dismay. "Are you saying I'm a pig?"

He clapped his arm around my shoulder. "Yep. But at the end of the day, us pigs have to stick together. So call Gina. I may be wrong—I *hope* I am—but I doubt it."

"I think you're wrong," I said.

Surprisingly, he laughed.

"What?"

"I thought the same thing when Lori broke up with me."

"This isn't the same at all," I said defensively.

He merely arched an eyebrow.

"It's *not*."

✧ ✧ ✧

"May I please speak to Gina?" I said when Faith answered the phone.

"I don't think she wants to talk to you," she said.

"Would you just ask her, Faith? Please?"

"Okay," she said dubiously.

To my surprise, Gina came to the phone. "Hello," she said, her tone guarded.

"Hi. Um… it's date night," I said, only half joking. "Where do you want to go for dinner?"

"That's probably not a good idea," she said, a catch in her voice. "Not right now, at least."

My face fell. "Oh. Okay. Then can we get together somewhere and talk?"

"I don't know if that's such a good idea, either, Paul."

"Gina… *please?*"

After a moment, she agreed. We met in the Presidential courtyard. The night was crisp and cold, and our breath steamed the air before us.

"What's *she* doing here?" I asked, looking over her shoulder to Regan, who stood a discreet distance away.

"I asked her to come," Gina said.

"Why?"

"Because I don't trust myself with you. I need to live my life without you—or *start* to, at least—and I love you too much to simply let you go. So I asked Regan to come with me, in case I don't have the willpower to… to say no to you."

"You don't have to say no," I said. "I can change. I'll spend more time with you. I'll make time for you. I'll do anything you want."

She shook her head. "We can't, Paul. We've already tried that. And I can't keep hoping you'll take care of things. I've got to live my life for *me*. Besides, you've got Kendall, and—"

"I'll break up with her, if that's what you want," I said impulsively, although I immediately regretted it.

She looked up in surprise, but quickly shook her head. "That wouldn't be fair to Kendall. Besides, I know you love her. I wouldn't ask you to do that to her. I used to love her too… once. I guess there's still some part of me that does, as crazy as that sounds. And I can't hurt her just to try and save our relationship. We're past that point, I think. So no, Paul, don't break up with Kendall. That would just make things worse."

"I'll break up with her if we get back together. I swear I will."

She shook her head, firmly. "Paul, we can't get back together. Don't you see that? We've crossed the Rubicon. *Alea iacta est*."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means 'the die is cast'; we can't go back to the way things were."

"But we *can* go back," I urged. "We can always go back. I'll do whatever you want. *Anything*. Please! Just don't break up with me." For the first time, I noticed her hands. "Where's your ring?"

She looked at the finger where she should've worn her silver P-G-K ring. "I didn't see the point in wearing it," she said softly, sadly. "I mean, I haven't seen the point for the past couple of months, but taking it off would've been… symbolic. But now? What's the point? We haven't been P, G, and K for a long time. We've been P and G, and P and K."

"What've you done with it?" I asked, my tone a mixture of distress and regret.

"It's here," she said, fishing a silver chain from the neck of her blouse. The ring dangled from the chain. She turned wistful. "P-G-K was a special time in my life. I don't want to forget that. But as a symbol for our current relationship?" She scoffed softly. "It's a bit ludicrous, don't you think?"

"It's *not* ludicrous, Gina."

She sighed. "Yes, Paul, it is. And I'm sorry. I love you, but… I can't be with you. I hope you understand that. And I hope you'll forgive me… someday."

With that, she lingered a moment, but then turned and walked away. Regan joined her and they headed toward South Carrick together.

I stood in the cold for a long, long time.

✧ ✧ ✧

I spent the next weeks in a daze. I went to class. I did my homework. I lived my life. But I didn't enjoy it. My injuries were healing—a follow-up doctor's appointment showed that my ribs were knitting nicely—but I still couldn't do any strenuous physical activity.

Since my Jeep had been totaled, I couldn't get to the airport for my flying lessons. Trip solved

that problem by buying a 1970 Chevy Impala. He said he bought it so he and Abby could go on dates without having to use her parents' car, but I'm positive that my situation had a lot to do with his timing. Whatever the reason, he got up early every Saturday morning and took me to the airport.

Without my extracurricular activities, I had a lot of free time on my hands. I found solace in my classes. Joska's midterm was a terror, but I earned one of only three As in the class. In American Literature, I turned in a paper on Lost Generation authors and earned an A+. I aced my Calculus midterm, and was doing well in my other classes.

I knew I'd make the Dean's List, but I was empty inside. Gina had been such a part of my life for so long that I simply couldn't let her go that easily. I called her every day, sometimes twice a day. She refused to take my calls, and finally had Faith tell me not to call anymore.

I didn't stop.

Eventually, Gina came to the phone, but our conversation was awkward and depressing. After that, she took my calls about half of the time, but she never called in return.

I thought if I showed her how much I loved her then she'd take me back. When that didn't work, I told myself that I was doing it for her benefit, since I didn't want her to destroy her life with cocaine. Then I convinced myself that I needed to save her from the sorority, and a fate worse than Kendall and Big Mistake Guy.

It was all bullshit. Pure, self-centered bullshit.

I eventually came to a stark realization during all those imagined conversations when Gina wouldn't take my calls: I wanted to win her back to absolve myself of the guilt I felt at losing her—*failing* her—in the first place. And even though I knew what I was doing, I continued to call her. Finally, *Regan* called me.

"Meet me in the courtyard," was all she said.

Outside, the weather was cold, but the sky was clear and cloudless; it was a beautiful winter day. It fit Regan's Nordic features perfectly, right down to how her eyes matched the cerulean sky. She walked up to me and stood with her hands in the pockets of her long fur-trimmed cashmere coat.

"Leave Gina alone," she said bluntly. "You're just making things worse."

I looked at her, my eyes full of suspicion and my own misery.

Her expression softened. "If you love Gina—if you *loved* her—then you need to quit calling her. She cries every time you do. Did you know that? Do you care?"

"Of course I care!"

"Then quit calling! She's not going to get back together with you, and you're only making things worse by calling her all the time." She straightened her shoulders imperiously, but then she sighed and shrugged. "You're only making things worse for both of you. I mean, *look* at yourself. You look like crap: you haven't shaved in days, your cheeks are hollow, and your sweater's inside-out.

"Look, I know we've had our differences," she continued, "but we both care about Gina. And you can't keep torturing her like this. You can't keep torturing yourself like this either. It's not healthy. Let her get on with her life. She still loves you—I can't change that, Lord knows I've tried—but she can't get back together with you. Don't you see that?"

"Yeah, well, what would *you* know about it?"

"Don't be a jerk, Paul," she snapped. "I'm trying to help you here. I'm trying to help your friend. *My* friend, too. If you love Gina, let her go. Besides, you've also got Kendall to think about. I don't know how you made that weird love triangle work, but Gina says you really love Kendall. So don't get hung up on Gina and lose Kendall in the process."

"Yeah, and you really cared about what happened to Kendall before!"

Her expression hardened. "I didn't have anything to do with that. That was Hayley. And… look, I'm sorry I said anything about it. Gina made me promise, but I was angry with you, especially after what you did. Anyway, I'm sorry about what happened to Kendall. Hayley does things sometimes… *mean* things. And that time, she went too far. I don't know if it'll make Kendall feel any better, but they almost kicked Hayley out of the sorority for what happened."

"But they *didn't* kick her out."

"No, but that's really none of your business. It was *sorority* business, and we took care of it. *They* did, I should say, since I didn't have anything to do with it. And the fact that I feel bad about it won't change what happened. But if you really love Kendall, you can't keep pining away for Gina. I don't know Kendall, but I know how *I'd* feel if my boyfriend was hung up on another girl."

I set my jaw and willed myself not to agree with her (without much success, unfortunately).

"Look, I know you love Gina. She loves you too… still. But she's got to learn to live without you, and you need to do the same."

I didn't want to give in so easily, so I fought back the only way I knew how. "Why? So you can have her all to yourself?"

"Paul," she said with sad weariness, "I've had her all to myself since I first met her. And whose fault is that? She tried to spend time with you, but you were always busy with Kendall."

"She could've spent time with us. But she didn't. I guess that's because you got her hooked on drugs."

"That doesn't have anything to do with this," Regan said calmly. "And she's not 'hooked' on anything."

"Oh yeah?"

"What would you know about it?" she asked, with more than a touch of derision.

"I know it's illegal."

She rolled her eyes. "So was alcohol, at one time. Besides, alcoholism destroys more lives than coke ever will."

"And that makes it better?"

"You tell me, you're the expert."

I clenched my jaw, but didn't reply.

"Besides, it's just a party drug."

"It's still illegal," I said stubbornly.

"And it's not what we came here to talk about. We came here to talk about Gina." She paused to let her words sink in. "If you love her, you can't keep calling her all the time. You've got to let her go."

I took a deep breath and gritted my teeth. I didn't *want* to agree with Regan, but she was right. Deep in my heart I knew that my relationship with Gina was over. But knowledge and admission are two very different things, and I was reluctant to face the truth.

"Look, I'm sorry about everything that's happened," Regan said, almost gently. "I'm sorry about what Rod did to your Jeep… and then to you. If it makes you feel any better, I broke up with him because of that. But I can't change what happened. And I'm sorry things didn't work out with you and Gina. I don't know what she saw in you, but she must've seen something, or she wouldn't've held on so long. So don't spoil what you had by making her miserable."

Reluctantly, I nodded.

Regan seemed to sag, as if a great weight had been lifted from her shoulders. "Thank you," she said softly.

Before she turned to go, I stopped her. "I… I'm sorry," I said.

"Just move on with your life, and let Gina move on with hers."

"That's not what I meant. It'll take me a long time to get over Gina, and one conversation with you isn't going to make it happen any faster."

She looked at me warily.

"What I meant was, I'm sorry about what I did… to *you*… at the hotel."

Her eyes narrowed.

"I shouldn't've done what I did. I know it was wrong, and I'm sorry. I hope you can forgive me. I'll understand if you don't… but I wanted you to know how sorry I am."

She clenched her jaw and nodded. Then she blinked her eyes several times and swallowed hard. Finally, she nodded again, jerkily.

I watched her as she walked away, tall and poised and coldly elegant. I didn't want to like her—I probably never would—but I was glad she was Gina's friend.

✧ ✧ ✧

I thought about calling Susan, but decided against it. I even thought about calling Mom, but decided against that, too. I wanted to deal with my own problems without running to either of them for help. I guess I wanted to act like an adult for a change.

I spent a lot of time with Kendall, but I didn't talk to her about how I felt, either. A mixture of anger and guilt kept me from confiding in her. It hurt her feelings, but she could read my moods well enough to know not to press the issue.

I was angry that she had deliberately manipulated the situation to her advantage. As I looked back, I realized how she'd dug in her heels when Gina tried to talk to her. Or worse, how she'd actively sabotaged Gina, as she'd done after the intramural football game with the Pikes.

I wasn't trying to shift the blame—my own guilt was far, far greater—but I finally admitted to myself that Kendall had her own plans for our future together, and Gina wasn't part of them.

In a way, I couldn't blame her. Susan had once told me that a person can only have a committed relationship with *one* other person. Maybe Kendall was trying to get me to realize that, but I doubted it. Instead, I think pure selfishness played a major role in her actions.

I also felt guilty, especially for my offer to break up with her if Gina would take me back. It was gutless, rash, and self-serving, and I knew it. I was actually glad Gina hadn't accepted. I loved Kendall (even though I wasn't happy with her at the moment), and I never would have forgiven myself if I'd broken up with her simply to tilt at the windmill of my relationship with Gina.

So, for various reasons, I didn't want to share my inner thoughts with Susan, Mom, or Kendall. Instead, I talked with someone else. *Two* someones, actually.

Not surprisingly, Trip was the first, since we already spent a lot of time together. Not only did he take me to my flying lessons, but he flew with me on my cross-country trips. We also worked on our architecture projects together, of course, and I gave him tips to improve his drawings. I even helped him with his wrestling, albeit from the sidelines.

And I told him the *whole* story about the Night at the Hilton. He was surprised and a little amused by Leslie and the strap-on, but shocked about what I'd done to Regan. He realized that my own remorse was far greater than anything he could've inspired, so he didn't lecture me.

In addition, he truly understood what I was going through with Gina. More and more, I came to appreciate his insight, hard-earned through personal experience. So we talked about what I was feeling, from rage and frustration to despair and remorse.

When we weren't talking about Gina, he kept my attention on other things: Kendall, music, life in general, music, architecture, and music. Since music was an integral part of his life, we listened to all sorts of bands I'd never heard of before: R.E.M., Duran Duran, the Cure, Talking Heads, and more. We also listened to his favorites, like the Beach Boys and the Beatles.

I listened to a *lot* of music during those dark days, especially when Trip started making "mix tapes" for my little stereo. I also realized that he was influencing my moods with his music selection; it was hard to be melancholy when I listened to "Good Vibrations" or "Here Comes the Sun."

When I got angry—with Gina, with myself, or with life in general—Trip quoted an appropriate song, which usually turned into a discussion about the band's influences and history. When I was sullen, he asked me about famous buildings. When I turned melancholy, he made me quiz him for architecture (he still didn't have a good grasp of the Human Sciences, much to my amusement and consternation).

I also spent a lot of time with Christy. Wren seemed to understand that I was going through a tough time, so she was friendly instead of flirty. We still posed together for Siobhan's class, but she no longer tried to get a rise out of me. I don't know how much of that was Christy's doing and how much was common sense on Wren's part, but I didn't look a gift horse in the mouth.

Christy and I didn't talk as much as Trip and I did, but we didn't really need to. We mostly hung out together and drew. While I sketched buildings from Europe and the great American cities, she drew pictures of people. She drew a lot of pictures of me, or Wren, but she also drew other people: Mariko, from Japan; Vanessa, her best friend from San Diego; her brothers; and her nieces and nephews—all *nine* of them. ("My family's Catholic, Paul. We like sex and we don't believe in birth control!" she said with a laugh. I think she was kidding about the birth control part. But maybe not.)

She also drew pictures of Simon, and I learned quite a bit about him. His undergraduate degree was in History, and he was studying at Oxford on a Rhodes Scholarship. He eventually wanted to get his Ph.D. and teach college somewhere. In part, she had been drawn to him because of his encyclopedic knowledge of ancient history, including its art and culture.

Her father didn't like him because he wasn't a military man. Admiral Carmichael had some firm ideas about whom his only daughter should marry. Christy's mother kept him firmly in check, though, and insisted that their daughter could marry whomever she *chose* to, "regardless of what a stuffy old Admiral thought."

The "stuffy old Admiral" in question had a few choice comments, such as "but I'm her

father!" According to Christy, her mother countered him with a polite-but-resolved "that's nice, dear" at every objection.

"Oh, Paul," Christy said, reminiscing with a laugh, "you should've seen his face. Don't tell *him*, but my mother has always run the house. He may be the Admiral when he's at work, but at home, he's just 'Harold.' When Simon asked him if he could marry me, I think he wanted to growl and say no. But one look at my mom and he just smiled and said, 'Welcome to the family, son.'"

She turned pensive. "I wish Daddy knew Simon like I do. He might not be in the military, but he's *not* a pacifist or anything. And gosh, Paul, he's so brilliant! History is *alive* for Simon. He sees it in his head. It lives and breathes for him. He reads Greek and Latin, too. And he's sensitive and intelligent and… I love him.

"My father will come around sooner or later," she said, almost imperiously. "I love Simon, and I'm going to marry him. That's all there is to it." With that, she crossed her arms and issued a petite harrumph.

I chuckled at her girlish resolve. "Does your mom actually like him?"

"Oh, gosh yes," she said, her eyes bright. "My mom's never met anyone she *doesn't* like. And she sees how much I love Simon; she just wants us to be happy. We talked about it a lot after Simon asked me to marry him. My mom and I have always been close—we were the only two women in a house *full* of men. That's a lot of testosterone!"

I laughed.

"But Mom has always supported me. James and Danny like Simon too, although Danny hasn't actually met him yet. Danny's like my mom, though; he likes everyone."

"What about Harry?"

"Harry's too much like my father," she said. "But Diane, his wife, is an eminently sensible woman, and she told him—quietly, of course—to keep his mouth shut." She frowned. "I just wish Rich liked him. My mom will bring Daddy around, but I don't know what to do about Rich." A sigh. "Rich doesn't have a wife to tell him 'that's nice, dear.'"

"Why doesn't Rich like Simon?" I asked. "I mean, has he met him?"

She shook her head. "Rich was deployed with his team when Simon was in San Diego. No," she added with a sigh, "Rich doesn't like the *idea* of me marrying anybody, much less a civilian. He's always been very protective of me. *Over*protective, you might say. Laurence was always telling him to lighten up, but Rich is one of those people who's suspicious of everyone. Laurence used to say—"

When she didn't continue, I looked up.

Her eyes were somewhere else.

"Is Laurence your other brother?" I asked gently.

She looked at me, as if seeing me for the first time. Then she blinked back tears. "How did you know?"

"Lots of little things. I didn't know for sure, but I suspected."

She wiped her eyes and then swallowed hard.

"You've got a picture on your desk," I said, filling the silence. "I've seen it a hundred times, but I didn't figure out what it meant until a little while ago. It's a picture of Laurence, isn't it, the one with the helicopter and his crew?"

She nodded.

"And that's him you're pinning the wings on, right?"

Another nod.

"Well," I said, "I got to thinking… Harry flies jets. James flies helicopters, but in the *Navy*. Danny's in the Marines, but he flies jets. And Rich is a Navy diver. So who's in the Marines *and* flies helicopters?"

"Oh."

"And you've said things over time… I mean, you once told me that you were the youngest of *six* kids. And another time, you said that you grew up with *five* older brothers." I made a show of counting on my fingers: "Harry, James, Danny, Rich, and… who? I haven't exactly figured out what happened, but I can guess."

"He was killed," she said softly. Then she blinked back more tears and tried to smile.

I set my sketchpad aside and she rushed into my arms. Body-wracking sobs shook her. I rubbed her back and simply held her. When her tears eventually subsided, she sat up and tried to compose herself.

"Do you want to talk about it?" I asked gently.

She nodded. Then, hesitantly, she wiped her cheeks, as if gathering her courage. "He's— I mean, he *was* six years older than me." She paused for a moment and then smiled. "He always wanted to be a Marine. Danny sort of… fell… into the Marine Corps, I guess you could say, but Laurence always knew what he wanted to do.

"I remember going with him to my father's office when I was a little girl, five or six. Daddy worked at the Pentagon, and Laurence was always fascinated by the Marine guards and their uniforms. We'd come home and he'd tell me all about what he wanted to do when he grew up.

"My father loves all of my brothers," she said as an aside, "but Laurence was his favorite; I could tell. My dad wanted him to join the Navy, but Laurence had his heart set on the Marines. He wanted to fly, too, but not jets. He said he wanted to be 'down with the grunts,' where he could make a difference. I think Danny understood, even if my father never really did.

"Danny's been through Parris Island, and he knows what it's like on the ground. Rich does too, but what he does is *so* different from the others. Anyway, Laurence went NROTC at Notre Dame. When he graduated, he chose the Marine option, of course, and was selected for flight school. You saw the picture from when I pinned his wings on his chest.

"Oh, Paul, I was so proud of him that day. He and I have always been closer than any of my other brothers," she said. "I think it's 'cause the others are so much older. I mean, Harry's fourteen years older than me, and I barely remember him living at home when I was a little girl." She shrugged. "The same with James; he went to college when I was nine. I spent more time with Danny and Rich—they're only fifteen months apart—but even then, I was just a kid to them.

"But Laurence… he and I spent lots of time together, especially in Japan. I think that was one of the happiest times of my life. We explored everything together. He didn't even mind having his little sister around. We found Nobu's monastery together. Did you know that?"

I shook my head, but she wasn't paying attention to me.

"But last year, he was flying a training mission at Camp Pendleton when something went wrong. A linkage in his tail rotor came loose and one of the blades flew off. The whole rotor sort

of… disintegrated. The helicopter went down. No one survived."

"I… I'm so sorry, Christy," I said, my chest tight with shared emotion.

She looked up, tears filling her blue eyes, dulling them with pain. She tried to look brave, but gave up after a moment. "Oh, Paul," she wailed softly, "I miss him so much."

Once again, I held her as she cried herself out. She clung to me for a long time afterward, neither of us willing to let the other go.

✧ ✧ ✧

For Kendall's birthday, I thought about buying a replacement for her P-G-K ring, which she had quietly stopped wearing. Unlike Gina, though, she had put it in her jewelry box and never mentioned it again. So her finger was conspicuously bare, and I refused to buy her something else. I'm ashamed to admit it, but I wanted her to see her empty finger and think about what we'd lost.

(I kept wearing my own ring for a while after that, but I could tell that it bothered Kendall, so I stopped being childish and took it off. I thought about wearing it on the chain around my neck, but decided against that too. So I quietly put it in my desk drawer, where I could keep it close without actually wearing it. Call me sentimental.)

Instead, I scraped together enough money to take her to dinner and a hotel. The Hilton had too many bad memories, so I made reservations at the Radisson. I borrowed Trip's car and took her to a nice restaurant for dinner. I wasn't my usual happy self, but she seemed to understand.

After dinner, we went to the hotel. My injuries from the fight with the Pikes hadn't healed to the point where I was up for any sexual acrobatics, so we simply relaxed and enjoyed each other's company.

Whatever other faults Kendall might have had, she loved me. And she knew enough psychology to understand what I was going through. She even explained it, as we lay together in bed and talked after turning out the light.

"It's the five stages of grief," she said. "Denial—"

I certainly went through that stage, I thought ruefully.

"—Anger—"

Check. In spades.

"—Bargaining—"

So I was supposed *to make spineless, self-serving offers in order to win Gina back?* I snorted in derision.

"—Depression—"

Ah, well, it's nice to know that I've at least gotten to stage four, I thought sardonically.

"—and Acceptance," she finished.

"I don't know if I'm to that point yet," I said softly.

She nodded, her hair soft against my shoulder. Then she put her hand on my chest, her mere presence reassuring.

"I still think about Gina all the time," I said softly. "But at least I've stopped calling her."

"That's good… I think."

"It is," I said. "I might not like agreeing with Regan, but calling Gina all the time wasn't doing anyone any good. Especially not you and me." I laughed ruefully at that.

"What's so funny?"

"Would you believe that *Regan* pointed that out to me? I still don't like her—or her entire sorority, for that matter—but at least I know that she's Gina's friend." I snorted. "She's a better friend than *I* ever was."

"That's *not* true, Paul," Kendall said, sitting up. "You were a very good friend to Gina, and for a lot longer than Regan has been. You've been through a lot with Gina, and you don't have anything to be ashamed of."

Except neglecting Gina, having sex with her best friend (against her will, even worse), shamefully offering to break up with Kendall, lashing out at anyone around me, brooding, whining, and generally—

"Stop it, Paul," Kendall said firmly.

I looked at her in surprise. Then I remembered who she was, and her uncanny ability to read people.

She caressed my face and smiled gently. "Stop condemning yourself. No, you're not perfect. You made mistakes. You're human, just like Gina… just like me… just like everyone else. But you're also kind, generous, thoughtful, intelligent, and sensitive. You're everything I ever wanted in a boyfriend. And I've read a *lot* of trashy romance novels with idealized heroes, so you had a lot to live up to."

I smiled, albeit a bit wistfully.

"I know how much you loved Gina, and how much you miss her. But we'll get through this. We'll do it together. I know you've been a bit put out with me," she said, "but I want you to know that I'll *always* love you, no matter what."

"Thanks," I said softly.

She nodded. "I even loved Gina, and I'm sorry to see her go. But we have to move on with our lives, the *two* of us."

I nodded. After several quiet moments, I smiled reflectively. "Are you sure you're only twenty?"

She nodded.

"Hey!" I said, with a bit of artificial humor. "I just thought of something."

"What?"

"I'm not dating a teenager anymore."

She smiled.

Seeing the love in her eyes, I tried to shrug off my dark mood. "Does that mean we can't have sex?" I asked. "I mean, isn't that statutory rape or something?"

"I'll show you 'statutory rape,'" she threatened playfully.

I smiled, for real. "I was hoping you would."

With that, I directed her hand to my growing manhood. A few minutes later, she straddled my hips and groaned in pleasure as she eased herself onto my erection. As she looked down at me, her dark hair hung down and framed her face. She looked beautiful. When I eventually tore my eyes away from her face, I cupped her heavy breasts, simply hefting them and teasing her nipples with my thumbs.

"I love you," I said at last.

"I love you too."

"I'm sorry I've been in my own little world for the past couple of weeks."

She smiled in understanding.

"And thanks. Thanks for being you, for being there for me, for understanding, for everything."

To my surprise, she laughed softly.

"What?"

"I've always been amazed by how you can *talk* while we're having sex. Not just talk, either; you have *conversations*, and while you're inside me, even. What?" she asked facetiously. "Doesn't my pussy hold your attention?"

"Oh, it holds my attention. It holds a lot more than that," I said. "But I think about all sorts of things when we're together, and I— Oh, my God!"

She grinned down at me. "I've been doing my Kegel exercises."

"I can tell— Oh, God!"

"So… they're working?"

"Oh, yeah, they're—"

Clench.

After a pause: "Are you gonna let me—"

Clench.

I pursed my lips.

"Well," she said in satisfaction, "if I'd known *that* was the way to shut you up, I'd've— Oh, no *fair!*"

I stopped teasing her clit. "Now, would you like to let me speak?"

She shook her head. A moment later she relented with a self-satisfied grin. "My muscles are strong enough that I can squeeze the vibrator out of my pussy."

My eyebrows shot up.

"I've been using it a lot, lately," she admitted.

"Yeah, I'm sorry about that. I guess I haven't really been in the mood. And with my ribs…"

She shushed me with a finger over my lips. "We'll have plenty of time. We've got the rest of our lives."

With that, I put my hands on her hips and she bent over me. Her breasts crushed against my chest as her lips sought my own. My ribs still ached, so I couldn't easily thrust into her from below, but with a combination of her internal muscles and the small movements I *could* make, I soon reached the point of no return.

When Kendall felt my dick swell with the first twinges of orgasm, she sat up and arched her back. I cupped her breasts and then clamped my eyes shut as she began squeezing my cock with her pussy.

She didn't have as much control (or strength) as Felicia, but I certainly wasn't going to complain. I erupted within her, pleasure radiating from my loins in a white-hot wave. When I came to my senses, she grinned down at me.

"What?" I asked, a little confused by her eager look.

"Do you want to watch me masturbate?"

My eyes widened in excitement. My cock had begun to soften, but it immediately swelled anew.

She felt it and grinned. Then she licked her fingertips and slowly—ever so slowly—trailed them down her body. Out of my peripheral vision, I could see her watching as my eyes followed

her hand. It moved down the valley between her breasts, over her trim stomach, and finally, to her hairless sex.

Her labia were spread around my shaft, and the protective hood of her clit winked at me from the top of her slit. When her fingers found the hidden bead, she moaned softly. Then she began moving her fingertips in small circles. As she moaned again, semi-theatrically, I grinned up at her. She was obviously exaggerating her reactions for my benefit, but only a *little* bit.

Enraptured, I watched as she played with her clit, bringing herself closer and closer to orgasm. My cock, still buried in her pussy, added to her pleasure. Her stomach fluttered with the first signs of climax, and I felt the twinges in her pussy. She breathed deeply and began rocking back and forth.

When she came, she grew quiet. Her internal muscles gripped me, squeezing my cock with their new strength. I squeezed back, clenching my buttocks and making my manhood swell within her. She grimaced in pleasure but never made a sound.

After several moments she drew a quiet, shuddering breath. I gently pulled her toward me, and she collapsed against my chest. My ribs protested with a dull throb of pain, but I ignored it.

Then I began rocking my hips, my erection moving within her. She groaned softly as another wave of pleasure washed over her. She was too far gone with orgasmic bliss to control her inner muscles, but I didn't care. I simply rocked my hips and worked us both toward another orgasm.

Hers was first, but it lasted a long time. When I bathed her inner walls with my seed, she shuddered and clutched me tightly. After several blissful moments, my hips sagged to the bed, and she began shedding tears of joy.

"I love you *so* much," she whispered between spasms.

"I love you too."

I stroked her back and thought about my life. I was lucky to have Kendall—lucky to *still* have her. As much as I missed Gina, Kendall was still a part of my life, and I needed to act like it.

It was a hard thing to admit, but I needed to grow up. And that meant paying attention to someone other than myself. It meant paying attention to the girl in my arms, to my friends, to the people I loved and trusted.

When did my life get so complicated? I asked myself.

Who cares? I answered. *Just deal with it.*

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

I eventually accepted that I was never going to get back together with Gina. The dull ache of loss didn't fade with the realization, though; it simply reminded me of my own shortcomings. If only I'd paid more attention to her. If only I'd listened to Trip's advice. If only I'd *done* something.

If only, if only, if only.

Physically, though, I was fine. My ribs had mended to the point where I could start working out again, and my bruises and cuts had healed (except for a small scar through my left eyebrow, a constant reminder of the consequences of my actions).

Since I was getting my life in order, I decided to give up some of my extracurricular activities—give them up for good, that is. Kendall and I were getting along well and I was doing well in school, so I didn't want to screw things up by taking on too much.

Consequently, I gave up the Ski Club and the Wrestling Club. Coach Travis wasn't very happy, but he couldn't change my mind. The season was winding down anyway, so it was time for him to begin focusing on his football players and spring training.

I also gave up basketball. My decision was more of a formality, though, since another guy from our floor had taken over my spot on the team when I couldn't play. The guys did pretty well without me—better than they had *with* me—but they didn't even make the quarterfinals.

"Aw, hell, Loverboy," T.J. said. "I didn't think we'd get to the finals anyway. Especially since you had to go and get yourself beat half to death… just when you were starting to get good, too!"

T.J. still grated on my nerves at times, but I reluctantly admitted that he had his good qualities. For one, he was fiercely loyal. For another, he was absolutely fearless. And once I looked past his bluster and obnoxious nicknames, I realized that he made wisecracks instead of showing his emotions. I knew we'd never be bosom buddies, but at least I didn't snap at him when he was just trying to be friendly.

I did keep up with the Flying Club, though. I enjoyed my lessons with Earl, and I especially enjoyed my cross-country trips. They were relaxing, since I had to pay so much attention to flying that I didn't have time to brood about losing Gina.

Felicia called me sporadically after the fateful Night at the Hilton, but I was usually preoccupied, surly, or both. I know it wasn't fair, but I blamed her—at least in part—for my break-up with Gina. If only she hadn't been so starved for attention. If only I hadn't given her my phone number. If only she hadn't called when Gina was there to answer.

"If only," I cursed silently. *If only I hadn't had sex with her in the first place! Self-discipline? Ha!*

I don't remember when it happened, but her phone calls stopped abruptly. Maybe her boyfriend caught her. Maybe she got tired of me being a jerk. Maybe she simply moved on. When it finally dawned on me that I hadn't heard from her in a while, I berated myself for not noticing sooner.

I cared about Felicia, and she deserved better. After a bit of soul-searching, I located her phone number and called her, but the number had been disconnected. I called the store where she worked, but the manager said she had quit unexpectedly.

I felt bad for her, but I didn't know what else I could do, since *I* wasn't the answer to her

problems. In my imagination she dumped her boyfriend, quit doing drugs, and found a guy who would love her and take care of her.

Not likely, I thought grimly. *And that's another thing I'll eventually have to atone for.*

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About a month after our break-up, Gina called. For a moment, my spirits soared, thinking she wanted to get back together. But at the sound of her voice—so full of determination—my hopes died silently.

"How are you, Paul?" she asked.

I mentally shrugged. "I'm fine, I guess. How're you?"

For a few minutes, we had a surreal conversation, which made a mockery of the warmth from times past. I could hear the heartache in her voice, but it was locked away behind a thick wall.

She asked about my classes, and told me about hers. I told her about my flying lessons, and she told me about volunteering at the hospital. We talked like normal people, like *acquaintances*. We definitely didn't talk like former lovers, or even best friends.

"Have you told your parents about us?" she finally asked.

"No," I said simply. "You?"

"I… couldn't. Besides," she added, with forced humor, "I didn't want Leah to start pestering you right away."

I laughed, but it was strained.

"We're going to have to tell them, though. Sooner or later."

"Yeah," I said heavily.

"Have you talked to Susan?"

"No. I…" I fell silent with the verbal equivalent of a shrug.

"I know," she said simply.

"Have *you* talked to her?"

"I wanted to talk to you first," she said. "Besides, I didn't want her to try to…"

"Get us back together?" I finished rhetorically.

"I'm sorry, Paul."

"Yeah, me too," I said, trying not to sound surly. She sniffled, and in my mind's eye, I could see her wiping her cheeks, her dark eyes full of tears. I continued, my emotions tightly controlled: "I guess we'd better tell everyone, though."

"Yeah."

"Do you want to do it together?" I asked hopefully.

Silence.

"Okay, bad idea."

"I'm sorry, Paul," she said. "I *want* to see you, but…"

"I understand." It was *my* turn to wipe my eyes. "Okay, so what do you want to tell them?"

"The truth."

"*All* of it?" I asked, a little shocked.

"No, not all of it. Let's just tell them that we drifted apart. That's more or less true. Let's tell them we had a talk, and decided not to see each other any more."

"No, *you* decided not to see *me* anymore," I half-snapped. "There wasn't any '*we*' about it."

"Paul, what did you expect me to do, wait for you to fix things? You see how well *that*

worked!" Suddenly, she paused and drew a deep breath. "I'm sorry," she said at last. "I don't want to get into it again. We're *both* to blame. I know you didn't decide to break up; *I* did, and I'll have to live with that the rest of my life. But I want to *have* a life, Paul, and I need to do what's best for me."

"You could've had a life with me," I muttered.

"Yes, I could've had a life with you. But not with you and *Kendall*. I tried, Paul. I really did. But…"

"Yeah, I know," I said at last, silently admitting that she was right. I bore the majority of the responsibility, but Kendall wasn't without her share of blame as well.

"I'm sorry, Paul," Gina said quietly. "I really don't want to get into this again. I know it's hard… it's hard for me too." After a mutual silence, she sniffled. "Promise me one thing, though?"

I could hear the hope in her voice. "Anything," I said.

"Promise we'll always be friends."

For a moment, I thought about saying something spiteful. But I couldn't do it. I couldn't bring myself to hurt someone I loved, *still*. "I promise," I said at last.

"Thank you."

Once again, we were silent for several long, emotion-filled moments.

"I *will* always love you, you know," she said at last. "You'll always be my pitter-pat man, even if…"

"I know," I said, fighting to keep my voice from breaking.

"I'm so sorry, Paul." After another long silence, she composed herself. When she spoke again, her voice was stronger, less anguished. "Let's just tell our parents that we're adults, and we decided to break up. We decided to be just… friends." She laughed, with teary, artificial humor. "You're going to have to fight off Leah, you know."

"I'll survive. I *like* Leah, but I don't think I could be with her without thinking of you… and that'd be pretty hard. You're… you're one of a kind, Gina Coulter. And you'll always be my first true love."

At that, she did begin crying, in earnest.

I couldn't fault her; I had to blink back tears of my own.

"I'll always love you, Paul," she said at last. "*Always*."

We talked for a little while longer, about the specifics of what to tell our families. It was a sad conversation, as if we were announcing a death in the family. By the time I hung up, I wasn't feeling any happier, but at least I didn't feel like I'd lost Gina forever.

A little while later, after I composed myself and took a shower, T.J. knocked on my open door.

"What's going on?" he said.

"Just finishing up some homework," I said. "What's going on with you?"

He shrugged. Then he studied his shoelaces for a moment. "Were you talking to Gina earlier?"

The wall between the rooms was metal, not cinder block, and muffled sounds came through. Actual conversation wasn't clear, but the general tone certainly was. "Yeah," I said. "Why?"

He fidgeted. "I guess I just wanted to say…" Another fidget. "You know…"

I waited.

"I guess I just wanted to say… um… you know…"

I smiled, albeit sadly. "Yeah, I think I know."

"Okay," he said, the relief in his voice almost comical. Then he looked up and flashed me a lopsided grin. "Me and Glen are gonna go out drinkin' tonight. D'you and Super Jock wanna go?"

"I don't know…"

"C'mon, Loverboy," he whooped, "let's go raise some hell!"

I forced a chuckle at his enthusiasm. "Okay," I said after a moment.

He grinned, ear-to-ear and a little goofy. Then, just as suddenly, he sobered. He started to return to his room, but paused instead. "Hey, Paul?"

"Yeah?"

"I… I'm really sorry about you and Gina."

"Thanks, T.J.," I said. "That means a lot."

To my surprise, he simply looked me in the eye and nodded.

Not bosom buddies, I thought, *but maybe he's not so bad after all.*

✧ ✧ ✧

I called my parents the following day. Gina and I had decided to coordinate our calls, so I imagined her dialing the phone as I did the same. With a dark chuckle, I wondered if she looked as morose as I did.

Erin answered.

"Hi," I said. "How's it going?"

She immediately sensed my mood. "What's the matter?"

"Gina and I broke up." *So simple,* I thought. *My heart ripped out and I can explain it in five little words.*

"Oh, Paul," Erin said. "I'm so sorry. What happened?"

I told her the story Gina and I had worked out: that we'd grown apart since coming to college, and decided to take a break from dating each other. It was the truth, but it left out a lot of unpleasant details.

The main thing we'd agreed upon was that we didn't want our families trying to fix things. Our mothers had worked behind the scenes for years—sometimes quietly, sometimes not—and we didn't want our emotional wounds reopened by a round of "get the kids back together."

Erin asked me a bunch of questions, and I answered them, but I don't remember what they were, or even what my answers were. I'm sure I made sense, but I wasn't really paying attention. Instead, I was thinking about Gina, and about how badly I had screwed up our relationship.

When I talked to my mom, the conversation was much the same, although I kept waiting for her to prod me to reconcile with Gina. She never did, and I was so shocked that I actually asked her about it.

"You've been drifting apart for a couple of months, dear," she said.

"Then why didn't you *do* anything?"

"Why didn't *you?*"

Ouch.

She paused a moment to let the silence draw out. "Elizabeth and I thought this was coming,

but…"

"Then why didn't you *say* something?"

"I *did*. Remember?"

"I guess," I said sullenly.

"Oh, Paul," she said, her voice soft, "I wish I could put a Band-Aid on it and make the hurt go away, but I can't." She paused. "This is the hardest part about being a parent."

"What?"

"Seeing your child fall and then having the willpower to wait for him to pick himself up on his own."

I laughed, without humor.

"You'll understand… someday."

"So you're saying that this is hard on you too?" I asked, almost sarcastically. I immediately regretted my tone, but I couldn't take it back.

"In a way, yes. But it's not nearly as hard on me as it is on you. I understand that, Paul. I wasn't always a mother. I was a girl once, too, and I had my share of heartbreaks."

"Does it ever get better?" I asked, trying not to sound as miserable as I felt.

To my surprise, she laughed, low and sweet. "Believe it or not, it does. It might not seem like it now, but it does get better."

"When?"

Once again, she laughed, but without scorn. "I think it took me a whole year to get over *my* first heartbreak."

"That long?"

"Yes," she answered quietly. "But I was young—younger than you are now—and I think I was being a bit melodramatic." She mimicked a maiden in distress: "Oh, the world is coming to an end. What will I do? What *will* I do?" Then she laughed. "I survived. Ginny helped… a lot, as a matter of fact. You don't have a big sister, but you've got Kendall."

"Oh, yeah," I said with a harder edge than I intended, "I've got Kendall. And even though she hides it well, she couldn't be happier about how things worked out. This is what she's wanted all along. Well, since I came to UT, at least."

"Do you think she really loves you," Mom asked shrewdly, "or does she love the *idea* of loving you?"

I considered for a moment. "I think she really loves me," I said at last. "I mean, I *know* she does, but…"

"But?"

"I guess I've seen a side of Kendall that I didn't know before." I laughed, a little bitterly. "I guess she's human after all." At her hesitation, I explained. "Manfred and I always called her 'The Goddess Kendall.' To us, she *was* a goddess, on a pedestal."

"No one can survive on a pedestal for long."

"I know," I said. "And when they come down to earth, you realize they're only human."

"Mmm hmm."

"So Kendall's only human. But she *does* love me. I can see it in her eyes when she looks at me. And… I know this is gonna sound crazy, but when she touches me—not like sex or anything, just a touch, you know?—it's… comfortable. I can't explain it any better than that."

"I think I understand."

"So yeah, she loves me. And I love her. I wasn't real *happy* with her for a while, but…"

"That's what relationships are about, Paul," Mom said gently, "making things work, even when you're not happy with the other person."

"Does it get any easier?"

"No, not really," she said with a frank laugh.

"You're not helping, Mom."

"Oh, Paul," she said, her voice trailing off in a wistful, amused sigh. "Welcome to the world of grown-ups."

"When did life get so complicated?"

"I believe it was June 6th, 1963."

That was the day I was born, and I grimaced at her gentle jibe.

"Things'll get better, honey," she said with genuine warmth. "I know it hurts right now, but it *does* get better."

"Thanks, Mom."

"You're welcome."

"Do you mind telling Dad for me?" I asked after a moment. "I really don't have the energy to go through all this again."

"He's got a layover in Phoenix, but I'll tell him when he calls. Do you want me to ask him to give you a call?"

I started to say no, but then surprised myself. "Um… yeah. If you don't mind."

"What is it you pilots say?" she teased. "Roger wilco?"

"Thanks, Mom."

"Oh, Paul, you're not my little boy anymore."

"Evidently not."

"But I'm proud of you," she said. "I'm proud of the man you've become."

You wouldn't be if you knew about some of the things I've done. Maturity? Ha! Aloud: "Thanks, Mom."

"I love you, honey."

"I love you too. Bye."

✧ ✧ ✧

I called Susan next, but the line was busy. When I tried again fifteen minutes later, she answered on the first ring.

She didn't even say hello: "Trust me, you're going to survive."

"Huh?"

"Oh, Paul, it's you!"

"Who'd you think it was?" I asked. "Oh, never mind. Gina, right?"

"Yes. She called back a couple of times, so I thought it was her again."

"Oh. How is she?"

"She's upset," she said. "But she'll survive."

"She's upset?"

"Yes, of course she is," Susan said, with gentle reproach. "A chapter of her life just ended."

"No kidding," I said, my voice thick with irony.

She neatly changed the subject: “How’re you?”

“I’m fine, I guess. I mean, I’m not exactly the happiest guy in the world right now, but I’ll survive.”

“That’s good to hear,” she said, a teasing note in her voice. Then she sobered. “I *am* sorry to hear about you and Gina. She loves you very much, you know.”

“Yeah, I know,” I said. Then I repeated Gina’s own words: “But she can’t be with me, right?”

“No, she can’t. Do you understand why?”

“No,” I said sourly.

Silence.

“All right, yes. So I screwed things up. Bad. I should’ve done something sooner. I should’ve said something. I should’ve… *aaargh!*” I half-howled in impotence. “I should’ve paid attention, or… something.”

To my utter surprise, Susan laughed. She composed herself quickly, though. “I’m sorry. I sometimes forget how young you are.”

I grumbled something about older women laughing at me.

“Back to what you were saying,” she said easily, ignoring my grumpy remarks. “Yes, you probably should’ve done something, but it’s not easy maintaining harmony in a three-way relationship, especially when two of the members don’t want to share the third. I’m not saying you didn’t screw up, like you said, but you *did* have a difficult job.”

“*Finally!* Someone sees things my way.”

“Paul,” she said deliberately, “I’ve always seen things your way. We’re more alike than you might realize. But I’m also a woman, and I can empathize with Gina and Kendall. Do you remember the conversation we had about committed relationships?”

I laughed ruefully. “Yeah, I was thinking about that the other day.”

“You can’t have a committed relationship with more than one person. I know *I* certainly haven’t met anyone who’s managed to sustain a multiple-partner relationship. Not a long-term relationship, at least.”

“You haven’t? Then why did you let me get into one in the first place?” I asked, with more than a trace of exasperation.

“I didn’t ‘let’ you do anything, Paul. I’ve always treated you like an adult and let you make your own decisions.”

“Then why didn’t you stop me?”

“Would it have done any good?” she asked reasonably.

“Yes!” Unfortunately, I knew my answer for the lie it was. When she let the silence draw out, I admitted it, “Okay, *no*.”

“I thought you’d see it my way.”

“I always see things your way,” I muttered.

“That’s because you have wisdom beyond your years.”

I couldn’t decide if she was mocking me or not.

“I’m teasing you, Paul,” she said, as if reading my mind. “Although not entirely. You *do* have wisdom beyond your years, but you’re still only eighteen.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means,” she said calmly, “that you don’t have all the answers; you don’t know how to deal

with every situation. Take comfort in that. Right now you can blame your mistakes on youth and inexperience. Imagine what happens when you're *my* age."

"What?"

"You can't use immaturity as an excuse!" she said with a laugh. "When you're my age, you have to blame your mistakes on ignorance, or arrogance, or simple stupidity. That's not very good for your ego."

"I guess."

"*Everyone* makes mistakes, Paul, but the important thing is that you *learn* from them. My father always taught me to forgive any mistake—the first time—no matter how big. If someone *repeats* a mistake, however, you've got a problem. You made a lot of mistakes with Gina. But are you likely to do the same thing again?"

"Not hardly," I said, with surprising conviction.

She chuckled. "Good. So take this experience and learn from it."

"Easier said than done."

"True. But I have faith in you. I don't think you'll let things go so far if you and Kendall ever drift apart."

"No way."

"Then you're learning already."

"I *hope*."

"You'll do fine," she said.

We talked for a few more minutes about communication and trust, things I had failed at miserably with Gina. I thought I had good grounds not to trust her, but the communication breakdown was mostly my fault. Time and again Gina had tried to get me to fix things, but I hadn't done a thing.

As our conversation wore on, I wanted to ask Susan's advice about Gina's cocaine use, but I couldn't bring myself to do it. I guess I didn't want to be a snitch. I'm ashamed to admit that I also didn't want to ruin my chances of keeping Gina as a friend.

I knew cocaine wasn't good for her, but in her own way, Gina *was* a strong person, and I had to trust her to take care of herself. If I meddled in her life, it would just drive her away completely. I was selfish enough to want to avoid that.

In the end, I decided that Gina was an adult; I couldn't live her life for her. So I didn't say a word about cocaine, or anything else Gina had done.

Susan and I talked for a little while longer, mostly about school and my plans for the summer. She had a way of listening that made me feel like I was the most important person in the world. By the time we finally said goodbye and hung up, I felt immensely better.

✧ ✧ ✧

My dad called later that night. Surprisingly, we spent most of the conversation talking about planes and flying. I think he understood that I didn't really want to rehash the situation with Gina. So we talked man to man, rather than father and son. I don't know why, but it was tremendously important that he see me as an adult, rather than a child who needed comforting.

"Well, Paul," he said, winding up our conversation, "is there anything you need? Money? Food? Books?"

"Spending money wouldn't hurt," I said, echoing the request of college students throughout

history.

He laughed. “I’ll see what I can do.”

“Thanks, Dad.”

“It sounds like you’re gonna be all right, son,” he said after a moment.

“Thanks, Dad. I hope so.”

✧ ✧ ✧

Eventually, I began to believe my father’s words. The sun still rose and set. The stars still wheeled through the skies. The world around me continued its cycle, and so did my life.

In the middle of March, we had to go through advising and registration for the upcoming quarter. Once again, Trip and I planned our schedules together, along with the rest of our design team.

I also made sure my schedule worked with Kendall’s, Wren and Christy’s, and Siobhan’s modeling schedule. I regretted not having to worry about Gina’s schedule, but I told myself that she was probably happier without having to deal with me and my schedule either.

Getting all of my required classes at the right times took a bit of work, but I eventually managed to get all of the pieces to fit together. My one fear was that I’d encounter a myopic halfwit in the advising center.

Fortunately, I didn’t. *Un*fortunately, Professor Joska was the reason why. He was actually in the advising center, and when he saw me walk through the door, he said a quiet word to the clerk handling advisor assignments. My stomach sank when I saw him do it, and I wasn’t surprised when she directed me to him.

“Well, Mr. Hughes,” he said as he took a seat behind one of the ubiquitous desks, “let’s see what you have planned for next quarter.”

“You don’t have to bother with this, Professor Joska,” I said, even though I knew it was useless. “A regular advisor would be fine.”

He gestured at the other desks with graduate advisors; they were all busy with students. “And since I run the advising center”—he suppressed a smile at my startled look—“I thought it best to help with the overflow.”

I sat down with a resigned sigh.

For ten solid minutes, he questioned my class choices. Since our design team had selected one of his sections, he couldn’t object to that. Trip and I had chosen Professor Ledbetter for our Drawing class, so he couldn’t object to *that* either. But I had to keep my temper firmly in check as I patiently—*respectfully*, even—explained the reasons behind each class selection. In the end, he didn’t change a thing.

“Professor Ledbetter tells me you’re a figure model for an art class,” he said at last.

“Two, actually.”

“Don’t you think your time could be better spent in the design lab?” he asked, his gaze unwavering.

I answered without hesitation: “No, sir.”

“And why not, Mr. Hughes?”

“Because I enjoy modeling.”

“And why is that?”

“It’s relaxing.”

"So you think becoming an architect is about relaxation?"

"No, sir. It's about hard work," I said. *And lots of it, you cold-hearted slave driver.* "But it's also about emotion and creativity and beauty."

He nodded for me to continue.

"If I don't have *some* time to relax, I don't have any of those things. So I model for art classes. It gives me time to think, to dream. And if I can't do that, then I don't want to be an architect in the first place."

"You're not an architect yet, Mr. Hughes."

As his words registered, my eyes widened.

"What's so astonishing, Mr. Hughes?" he asked, deliberately laconic.

"Yet," I thought exultantly. *He said I'm not an architect "yet."* I could see the realization in his eyes. A surge of adrenaline prickled my skin as I thought about calling him on it. He'd shrug it off as a simple misstatement, and I'd say, "With all due respect, sir, you don't make mistakes. You said so yourself." He'd be forced to admit the truth or bluster. *Either* would be a victory, as far as I was concerned.

The entire scenario ran through my mind in the blink of an eye, and I held his steely gaze as I gathered my courage. Then…

I didn't do a thing.

I didn't open my mouth. I didn't blink. I didn't even draw a breath. I simply gazed at Laszlo Joska and understood him with a clarity born of hard-earned experience.

I've got what it takes to be an architect, my imaginary voice said.

Yes, Mr. Hughes, he replied, *I believe you do.*

To the outside world, we were silent, a student and a professor contemplating each other across a well-worn desk.

I schooled my expression. "Nothing, sir," I said at last. It took a moment to convince myself that I'd actually spoken aloud.

After a long pause, he turned businesslike again. "Well, your schedule appears to be in order. I'll sign it without any changes."

"Thank you, sir," I said, standing up with the signed card in hand. I didn't even smile. I still didn't like the man, but I'd just gained a small measure of respect for him, and I wouldn't cheapen it with a smirk.

If he understood, he didn't show it. "Good day, Mr. Hughes."

"You too, sir," I said.

In the end, though, I couldn't help myself: I think I actually *whistled* as I left the advising center.

✧ ✧ ✧

As the end of winter quarter drew near, we finished projects, polished term papers, and studied for final exams. I had a major design analysis due in Professor Joska's class, and I knew it had to be perfect; he'd accept nothing less. So I pored over my research, adding footnotes and illustrations where I needed to support my assertions.

I also had a portfolio review in Professor Ledbetter's class, and from the hints he'd been dropping, Professor Joska wanted to see my drawings as well. I knew that Joska was in charge of the overall design curriculum, but I didn't know how I felt about him presiding over *every* aspect

of my education.

The man was an infernal taskmaster, and nothing I did was ever good enough. Any time he gave me a compliment, he followed it with "but you'll have to do better than this." I wanted to pull my hair out in frustration and scream, "I've redone it a dozen times! How much better can it be?!" I never did, though. I simply took whatever he returned and either redrew it, reanalyzed my research, or reexamined my conclusions.

He also questioned everything I did. His questions usually highlighted my errors, but I actually defended my work a couple of times, stridently even. The first time, he patiently listened to my points before he shook his head, returned my drawing, and said, "Try again."

The second time, however, he questioned a simple design of a building façade. The assignment had been to take the outline of the façade and complete it using a required list of architectural elements. I had *added* several elements not on the required list, because they pulled my design together and gave it balance.

Professor Joska had called me to the blackboard to defend my work. By that time, I was sick and tired of being grilled in front of the class. I knew what he was going to do—make an example of me—and I snapped; I decided that I wasn't going to roll over for him.

His tone was urbanely irritating as he asked me to sketch my drawing on the blackboard. With practiced ease, I recreated my design in macro scale.

"No one else added elements to the assignment," he said. "Why did you?"

"Because my design needs them."

"I didn't say you could add elements."

"You didn't say we *couldn't*," I countered.

He quickly rallied. "Why did you include the large transom piece and pilasters around the doorway?"

"To draw the eye to the focal point of the building," I said decisively. Then I drew a neat line from the corner of the pediment to the corresponding corner of the center-set doorway; the line neatly intersected the corner of my transom and pilasters.

"And why did you do that?"

"To give it regularity and symmetry. I also needed something to break up the monolithic expanse of the façade."

"Why not use a Palladian accent window above the doorway?"

"Because a curved element wouldn't work with this design," I said, standing my ground. "The geometric shapes and proportions lead the viewer's eye to the doorway, which is the focal point of the whole façade. The transom is part of that, along with the classical lines of the pediment."

"Classical lines, Mr. Hughes?"

I nodded. "This is a Golden Section design, sir." Several blank faces looked back at me from the class, so I ticked off points on my design and drew lines between them. I didn't add ratios, but I saw a number of people nodding in recognition.

"But why not add a smaller pediment-like feature above the doorway?" Joska asked.

"Because…," I said, leaving the word hanging as I connected the other side of my pediment to the upper corner of the door. Then I pointed to the inverted triangle formed by the entablature and the two connecting lines.

"The subliminal triangle mirrors the pediment above, and adds symmetry," I continued. "The

casual observer might not notice it *consciously*, but it's there, and they get an *un*conscious sense of… rightness… about the design. After all, that's the whole point of the Golden Section in the first place. I know the transom and pilasters weren't on the list, sir," I concluded, "but to my mind—to my *eye*—they need to be there."

"And what are the circular elements on the doors themselves?" he asked with thinly veiled amusement.

I actually hesitated, my cheeks warming. "Christmas wreaths," I said at last.

The class tittered.

"A rather unusual addition, wouldn't you say?" he said.

I stiffened defensively. "They *also* draw the viewer's eye to the focal point of the façade. And they…" I squared my shoulders and continued in a stronger voice: "They make the building seem inviting."

A couple of people snickered, but others looked thoughtful. Gracie Fisher even nodded in admiration.

Joska gazed at me for a long moment. Before he could say anything, the bell to end class rang. Then he looked at my design again, studying the proportions I'd illustrated. He didn't look thoughtful so much as contented, as if he'd known all along why I'd added the transom. I suddenly realized that grilling me hadn't been for *my* benefit at all; it had been for the *other students*.

When I realized that I'd been used as an unwitting pawn, I started to bristle. But then I stopped suddenly, my mind racing. Why had Joska chosen *my* design? Was I the only one who'd made the leap from the basic box to the Golden Section? Was I the only one who'd seen the need for symmetry, especially with the oversized entry doors? Was I…?

"An acceptable design, Mr. Hughes," Professor Joska said quietly, his voice almost lost in the clamor of students leaving the room. "I thought the wreaths were a nice touch."

I looked at him in surprise.

"But you'll have to do better than this."

I could've *sworn* he was hiding a grin. "Yes, sir," I said.

He handed over the paper version of my drawing. He had circled several points where I'd made minor mistakes, but overall, he'd given me a 94, a solid A.

Trip clapped my shoulder as we walked out of class together. I was numb with amazement at Joska's remarks.

"You're going to hate me for saying this," Trip said, chuckling, "but I told you so, my proud, stubborn friend"

✧ ✧ ✧

Compared to my architecture classes, the others were easy. Even though I still couldn't understand Professor Vajpayee, I didn't really need to; the book contained everything I needed to know, and it was in *English*. Professor Feller was Professor Feller, so I was confident of an A in her class. And Dr. Bertrand was a lively, energetic teacher, who made art history fun.

I saw Gina every once in a while, and she would wave to me, but nothing more. Even Regan had a grudging wave whenever we encountered each other in the Carrick breezeway. Since Rod's arrest—which was *huge* news on campus—she and Gina had probably been on their best behavior, lest the baleful eye of The Law fall upon them. That suited me fine, since it meant that

Gina was staying out of trouble.

I had also settled into a post-Gina routine with Kendall, who was happier than ever. She was doing well in her classes (including Organic Chemistry and French), and she was back on track to make the Dean's List.

All in all, life without Gina wasn't great, but it *was* getting better.

✧ ✧ ✧

"Did you have plans tonight?" Kendall asked one evening after dinner.

"I need to go to the A&A building," I said. "I've got to finish my Gateway Arch drawings for Professor Ledbetter." With a sour look, I mocked myself: "'It'll be simple,' I said, 'just pick the St. Louis Arch for your final drawing. How tough can it be?' I swear, Kendall, Eero Saarinen has risen from the grave to torture me."

She laughed. "It can't be *that* bad, can it? It's just an arch."

"It's a *catenary curve arch*," I corrected absently. "And it's a *bitch* to draw in perspective. But since I know Joska's going to be looking over my portfolio, it's got to be perfect. I think I've about worn out my French curve trying to get the damned thing right. I'm sure Joska'll take out a ruler and start measuring it, though. He probably has the design specs committed to memory. Just an arch, my *ass*," I finished grumpily.

She smiled good-naturedly. "Well, I think I've got some good news for you."

"Oh?"

"I talked to my dad this afternoon…"

"And?"

"He thinks he's found a car for you."

Kendall and I had told her family that my car had been vandalized, but we hadn't elaborated on the circumstances. Neither of us really wanted her father looking into things, since it would force her family to confront my—*our*—relationship with Gina.

(Kendall's mother definitely knew about it, and her father *probably* knew, but bringing it out in the open would've forced them to admit that their daughter was bisexual. And since they weren't prepared to do that…)

"What kind of car?" I asked.

"One of the guys in his off-road club has a Toyota for sale."

"A Toyota? A *Japanese* car? Off-road? Are you sure you got it right?"

"Talk to my father," she said with deliberate patience. "He said 'Toyota.'"

So, later that evening, after slaving over my rendition of Saarinen's masterpiece of engineering, I went to Kendall's apartment and we called her father.

"After Kendall told me your Jeep was totaled," he said, "I started looking around to see if I could find you another one. And for cheap, since she also told me what the insurance company paid you."

"It was a joke," I muttered.

He laughed in commiseration. "Most of the guys I hang around with have International Scouts—it's kind of a club—but a bunch of guys have Jeeps or Land Rovers. A couple of 'em even have Toyotas, and lemme tell ya, those little FJ-40s are tough. They're basically a Jeep knock-off, but— Anyway, that's neither here nor there. I didn't have any luck finding anyone who wanted to part with their Jeep, but I did find a guy with a Toyota."

"Um… thanks," I said, at a bit of a loss. I didn't even know he'd been *looking*.

"But it's not an FJ-40."

"We're not talking about a little Corolla here, are we?" I asked, a bit skeptical.

"Heck no, son, we're talking about a Land Cruiser. A '72 Land Cruiser FJ-55, to be exact."

"A Land Cruiser?"

"It's kinda like a Jeep Wagoneer."

"Oh, okay."

"It's in good mechanical shape, too," he said. "I've looked at it. The body's a little beat up, but no rust. And the best part is, the price is right: a thousand dollars."

"Really?! The money from the insurance company will almost cover *that*."

"Uh-huh. As a favor to me, the guy is selling it for what he's got in it. And it's a nice truck, Paul. It's a bit bigger than you're used to, but I know you and Kendall had a tough time getting all your stuff in the Jeep. So I'm sure you won't mind a little more cargo space."

"Not at all."

"And it drives good; I took it out for a spin. I gave the man a hundred-dollar deposit, and if you want it, I'll buy it and drive it up there. You can pay me back as soon as you have the money."

"Um… *thanks!*"

Kendall had been watching my face as she listened to my side of the conversation, and she smiled at my sudden enthusiasm.

"I'll have to talk to my parents," I continued, "since they'll have to help me out with the rest of the money. But they said they would, so lemme call them and I'll call you back."

"I think you're going to like this truck, Paul. It ain't pretty, but it's solid and in good shape. And the price is right."

"No kidding."

"So call me back, and I'll call my friend. If you want it, I could get it up there this weekend."

"That's *great*, Adam," I practically gushed. "Okay, lemme call my parents."

Mom and Dad were an easy sell. I promised to repay them from my summer job, and they agreed to loan me the money to make up the difference between my insurance check and the price of the Toyota. Kendall beamed as I called her father back.

"They said they'd do it," I said as soon as he answered.

"Congratulations, Paul," Adam said, "you're the proud new owner of a Land Cruiser."

True to his word, he and Drew arrived on Saturday. My parents had wired the money from my insurance check, along with some additional money, and I wrote Adam a check for a thousand dollars.

The Land Cruiser was slab-sided and boxy, with an ugly blue and white paint job (which was original!), but it was *mine*.

"Start 'er up, son," Adam said.

The engine smoothly roared to life. I popped the hood and joined Adam and Drew as they looked at it. The engine wasn't pretty either, but someone had given it a lot of attention, and it purred happily at idle.

I had owned the truck barely five minutes and I was already growing attached to it, ugly or not. And as I looked at it some more, I decided it wasn't ugly after all. Well, it wasn't *painfully*

ugly. (Knowing I wouldn't have to bum rides from Trip made it even more appealing, though.)

"Thank you very much, Adam," I said.

"Don't mention it," he said, clapping his arm around my shoulders. Then he looked at me askance and grinned. "You should probably think about getting a winch for it, though."

He burst into laughter at my expression. Kendall merely rolled her eyes and smiled fondly, none the wiser.

✧ ✧ ✧

"Christy said you got a new car," Wren said as we left our Art History exam.

"Yep!" As we walked, I described the Land Cruiser.

The girls merely shared an occasional grin as I did.

"So I was wondering," Wren said as I wound down, "could I get a ride to Atlanta for Spring Break?"

"Yeah, sure."

"Sorry," Christy interrupted, "I've got to go meet Siobhan to talk about my portfolio. I'll see you guys later?"

"Sure," Wren and I said in unison.

As soon as Christy was out of earshot, Wren turned serious.

"Christy said she told you about Laurence," she said.

I nodded.

"March 24th was his birthday."

I checked my watch and then looked up in alarm. "That's two days from now."

Wren nodded. "I don't want to make a big deal about it, but do you think you could plan to do something? With us, I mean?"

"Yeah, sure, anything."

"Good. I was thinking we could have a party or something. Not a birthday party, but… you know…"

I flashed her a hesitant look. "Um… a party?"

"Okay, maybe that's not such a great idea. But I want to do *something* to keep her mind occupied."

I snapped my fingers. "I know just the person to ask."

"Who?"

"Trip."

"Trip?"

I nodded. "Trust me."

"Why him?"

"I can't tell you," I said, thinking about Trip's mother. "Just trust me. I'll call you later, okay?"

✧ ✧ ✧

"Can I talk to you for a minute?" I asked Trip when I saw him later.

"Sure. What's up?"

"I need to tell you something, but you've got to keep it strictly confidential. Okay?"

"Sure," he said, turning serious. "You know I will."

"Christy's brother died."

"Oh, my God. How'd it happen."

I realized my mistake. "Oh, no! He died nearly a *year* ago."

He frowned in puzzlement. "And she's just now finding out about it?"

"No, no, no," I said, a little exasperated with myself. "Wednesday would have been his birthday… the first since he died, and…"

"Ah, I get it. Sorry."

"It was my fault," I said. "Anyway, Wren wanted to do something to keep Christy occupied. She suggested we throw a party, but I didn't think that was such a good idea. So I thought I'd ask you, 'cause of… you know…"

To my surprise, he chuckled. "You're not going to hurt my feelings; you can say 'because your mom died.' It happened almost nine years ago. Sure, I get a little sad around October—and around her birthday, Wren's right—but I'm okay with it the rest of the time." His lips quirked up in a wry grin and he pointed a finger heavenward. "My mom's okay with it too."

I chuckled at his disarming aplomb.

"Believe it or not," he said, "a party isn't such a bad idea after all, but not the kind you're thinking. Something casual and friendly. You know, where you can celebrate her brother's memory." He shrugged. "That's what I'd like, if someone was doing it for me."

"Should we make snacks? Light hors d'oeuvres? Dinner? What?"

He chuckled at my uncertainty. "I think I've got an idea."

"What?"

"Luke," he said simply.

"Luke? I don't think a band and two kegs is what Wren had in mind."

"Dude, trust me," he said. "Luke's been wanting to cook for us since he got back from Christmas break. You know how he's always talking about the bland food here, and saying we don't know how to season things? Well, let him cook. We can use Abby and Kendall's apartment, and Luke can make… I dunno… something Cajun. He'd love the chance to cook for us. Let's ask the girls at dinner."

✧ ✧ ✧

Wren told Christy she had a paper to write at the library, but joined us for dinner at the apartment instead. Over the course of the meal, Trip gave a cursory explanation about Christy's brother and then outlined his idea for the party.

"So," he finished, "what do you think?"

"Why didn't you *tell* me?" Kendall asked me, accusation in her eyes.

Wren put her hand out to forestall my answer. "Christy doesn't like people to know about it," she said. "Paul figured it out, and she told him what happened. She doesn't want people to treat her differently."

Trip nodded in agreement. "I'm the same way. It just makes it worse when people make a big deal about it."

Kendall's eyes slid from me to Trip and back again. Her expression clearly asked, "And what happened to *Trip* that I didn't know about?"

"Um… his mother died when he was ten," I said, a little uncertainly.

Abby didn't look surprised at all.

"Shame on you, Paul," Kendall said. "You don't tell me *anything*."

"I asked him not to," Trip said simply. "Not specifically you; just in general." He shrugged. "It's not something I talk about very often."

"But you could've told *me*," Kendall said, a bit wounded.

"I'm sorry," Trip said. "I know I could've… but it never came up. And, like I said, I don't talk about it much. Back to the party, though," he said, smoothly changing the subject. "I think it'd be a good idea just to have a small get-together, ten to fifteen people. We can call it an end-of-the-quarter party, so Christy doesn't feel self-conscious. As a matter of fact, she doesn't even have to know it's for her benefit. We can just tell her that Luke wanted to cook."

"She'll figure it out," Wren and I said at the same time.

"Well, as long as we don't make a big deal about *why* we chose the date, she should be fine with it," Trip said.

Kendall immediately nodded in agreement.

"So we can use your apartment?" Trip asked semi-rhetorically.

"Absolutely," she and Abby said simultaneously.

"I'll talk to Luke and make the arrangements," Trip said.

"I'll help," Wren said.

"Me too," I added.

"Okay then," Trip said, "here's what we need to do…"

✧ ✧ ✧

The day of the party, Luke and I went shopping (in my new Land Cruiser!). Trip had announced that he was going to pay for the entire party, and turned a deaf ear to all objections. So Luke had a pocketful of cash and orders to spend it.

At the grocery store we bought all sorts of things: rice, sausage, bell peppers, onions, celery, garlic, spices, and more.

"I just wish we could get some fresh shrimp," Luke complained. "Those frozen things they call 'shrimp' ain't worth feedin' *un chien*."

At our next stop we bought enough rum to souse a small army.

"*Mais*," Luke explained when I asked him about it, "you think you can eat jambalaya without a hurricane?"

"A hurricane?"

He gave me a long-suffering look. "A hurricane, *mon ami*. Orange juice, pineapple juice, grenadine syrup, light rum, and dark rum? You know, a hurricane." He mumbled sotto voce: "*Couillon* think we go an' eat jambalaya without no hurricane."

"Whatever," I said, throwing up my hands with a confounded laugh. "I'm just the driver."

"Then drive on!" he commanded with a mock-imperious look. "We still need to pick up a ton of ice and a cooler. And does Kendall have a big pot? And I mean a *big* pot."

"I have no idea."

"*Mais*, then we'd better find out, *bra*."

"What did you just call me?" I asked, throwing the truck into gear.

"'*Bra*'? Ain't you ever been called '*bra*' before?" he asked, his patois deliberately thick. He rolled his eyes good-naturedly. "*Je parle anglais!* '*Bra*' as in 'brother'? Now, get this *char* moving, we ain't got no time to make the *veiller!*"

With that, we roared off, Luke boasting happily—in an odd mixture of Cajun and English—about the taste of heaven he was going to serve up, and how we'd fall down and worship him for introducing us to "proper seasoning."

✧ ✧ ✧

The party came off without a hitch. Luke had spent the afternoon cheerfully chopping vegetables and cooking, while his new girlfriend, a pretty brunette named Cecile, helped. When people started arriving, she began mixing drinks under Luke's careful supervision.

Wren and Christy arrived first, along with Ash, Zoë, and her boyfriend. Vivian and her boyfriend were there, but Phoebe had already left campus (she only had two exams). When Jeff and Meredith arrived, Luke started serving bowls of spicy jambalaya.

"Now, this ain't hot-hot," he announced in his exaggerated dialect, "'cause I don't wanna kill none o' you nice folk. But *oo-wee*, this here's a little taste o' heaven. *Bon appétit!*"

The jambalaya was absolutely fabulous. The fruity hurricanes packed a punch, but they also put out the fire of the food. Much to my amusement, Christy picked the sausage out of the jambalaya, but ate the rest. She even had two good-sized helpings, and I found myself envying her metabolism.

Luke, of course, was the life of the party (as Trip intended, I'm sure). He told Boudreaux and Thibodeaux jokes, stories from the bayou, and held forth on Cajun life in general.

The timing of our party wasn't lost on Christy, though, and she quietly cornered Wren. I watched them from the kitchen. Wren initially shook her head, but after a moment of friendly interrogation, she implicated me with a glance. Christy's blue eyes locked with mine. With a smile, I headed toward her.

"You two did this, didn't you?" she said.

"Did what?" I asked disingenuously.

Christy merely rolled her eyes. Then they misted over and she smiled a little sadly.

"Of *course* we did it," Wren said, wrapping her arm around her friend's shoulder.

"We had lots of help, though," I said.

"You didn't have to do all this," Christy said.

Wren hugged her. "But we love you."

I nodded and put my arm over Wren's.

"Thank you *so* much," Christy whispered, teary-eyed. "You're the best friends in the world."

✧ ✧ ✧

By the time March drew to a close, I'd actually begun to feel a bit better about my life. I wasn't exactly thrilled by the direction it had taken, but I'd come to accept it. After all, I'd survived a break-up, a beating, Professor Joska, and everything else life had thrown my way. I hadn't always done it with grace, maturity, or aplomb, but I *had* survived.

I'd also begun to feel better about my future. Kendall would never fill the void left by Gina, but she wanted me to love her for who *she* was, not as a replacement for Gina. I was happy to do just that. After all, she was smart, sexy, and fun. In other words, she was everything I wanted in a girlfriend.

So I was in a reasonably good mood as the quarter ended. I knew I'd done well on my exams, even Joska's, and I was looking forward to Spring Break.

"You're happy this afternoon," Kendall said as I loaded the Cruiser with our things.

I shrugged. "I guess maybe Trip's music finally got through to me." At that, I laughed. "Believe it or not, I'm starting to really like the Beach Boys."

"That's not why you're so happy," she said.

"Maybe it's because I've got a girlfriend who loves me, and I should be happy for that."

"As much as I'd like to take credit, I don't think that's it either."

I shrugged again, but then turned introspective. "Maybe I just decided not to be so miserable," I said, without a trace of glibness. "Yeah, sure, I miss Gina, but I've got to move on with my life. I *do* have a girlfriend who loves me, and I've got a great group of friends. I just did well on my exams, and I've already got a summer job lined up." I laughed ironically. "If I didn't know better, I'd say I'm a pretty lucky guy."

"You *are* pretty lucky," Kendall said, stepping close.

I pulled her into my arms and we gazed into each other's eyes. "Yeah, I'm lucky. And I guess maybe I'm happy because I decided to start *acting* like it."

She smiled.

After a quiet moment, we separated. I finished loading our things and we headed toward Morrill to pick up Wren. After we brought her things downstairs, she surveyed the Cruiser.

"Wow, this *is* bigger," she said.

"You'll actually have the entire back seat to yourself," I said. "What luxury, huh?"

A few minutes later, we roared onto the interstate. To my surprise, the drive to Chattanooga wasn't a repeat of the one before Christmas, since the girls didn't tease me at all. Kendall was happy that I was in a good mood, and I think Wren was still on her best behavior. So we talked about Spring Break instead.

Trip and I had plans to go house hunting in Franklin. We needed to find at least two houses to renovate, and I think he was actually hoping to find a third. His uncle, the contractor, had several prospects in mind, but we still needed to look at a lot of houses in a few short days.

Kendall planned to spend the time at home, reading for her spring classes. Organic Chemistry was a lot of rote memorization, and she didn't want to let her grades fall because she started coasting.

Wren and a couple of her friends from high school were going to her family's condo in Florida. They planned to "do girl stuff… you know, talk about guys, paint our toenails, work on our tans… that kind of stuff."

At the thought of Wren's lack of tan lines, my dick stirred, but I quickly suppressed the image. By the time we made it to Kendall's house, the conversation had safely moved on to more mundane topics. I unloaded her things and promised to call her when I got home. We spent some time making small talk with her family and then Wren and I headed toward Atlanta.

✧ ✧ ✧

"Oh, shit," Wren hissed as we pulled into her driveway.

"What?"

"I just remembered… I never broke up with you."

"Huh?"

"I never broke up with you," she repeated cryptically.

"Wren, what the—"

"I told my mom that you and I were dating… you know… to keep her from bothering me about it. It seemed like a simple thing at the time."

I chuckled.

"And I planned to 'date' you for a month or so and then break up with you. Remember? You told me to tell her that," she half-accused.

"I remember," I said, smiling at her fluster.

"Okay," she said, "here's what we're going to do…"

By the time she was done, I could hardly contain myself.

"Oh, quit grinning," she said, piqued. "I just want you to *act* like my boyfriend. But I don't *need* one—"

"I know," I said, cutting her off mid-rant. "We've been through this before. Remember?"

Chagrined, she fell silent. "Will you do it?" she asked after a moment.

"I'll 'do it' with you any time, Wren." I almost managed to say it with a straight face, too.

She nodded thankfully, but disbelief flitted across her expression when she caught my double entendre. "Impossible," she cried. "You are simply im*possible*."

"I know," I said smugly. "Isn't it cool?"

She rolled her eyes and got out of the truck with an exaggerated huff.

A moment later, her mother emerged from the house. She hugged us both in turn.

"Oh, it's so good to have you here, Paul," she gushed. "Can you stay for dinner? I told Arnold you were coming, but he's at one of the restaurants. I don't remember which one; I never can keep up with his schedule."

Wren frowned.

"He wanted to be here to meet you, though," Helen continued. "Anyway, I've got a tenderloin roast in the oven…" She chattered happily as we unloaded Wren's things. Then she insisted that I stay for dinner.

Wren flashed me a pleading look, so I agreed. I called my parents to let them know I was going to be later than expected. Mom seemed a little disappointed, but she said she'd see me when I got home. After I hung up, I rejoined Wren in the living room.

"I can't stay much past dinner," I said quietly. "I think I screwed up… I was supposed to have dinner with my family."

"You don't have to stay," Wren said. "I really appreciate you doing this, but if you need to go…"

I shook my head. "I can always make time for my 'girlfriend.'"

She made a moue.

"I know, I'm impossible." Then I did a passable imitation of her huffing and stomping her foot. "Im*possible*."

She rolled her eyes. "Thanks for doing this. I'd never hear the end of it if you just left."

I simply smiled in reply as Helen appeared in the dining room doorway to semi-formally announce dinner. She was a good cook, but I tried not to eat too much, since I still wanted to watch my weight. After dinner, she made a show of giving Wren and me some privacy. We sat on the living room couch, and Wren chuckled as soon as her mother was out of earshot.

"What?" I asked.

"She's just *dying* to talk to you," she said. "But she wants me to spend time alone with you."

She shook her head in bemusement. “I love my mother, but she drives me *nuts* sometimes.”

I laughed softly.

“Anyway, thanks again for playing my boyfriend. I’ll break up with you in a month or so, and you won’t have to worry about it.”

“You don’t have to break up with me, you know,” I said. “I mean, your mother’ll never know the difference.”

“But *I’ll* know,” Wren said. “I don’t really like lying to her in the first place.” She chuckled ruefully. “It started with an innocent little white lie and kinda snowballed from there.”

“I know what you mean.”

“Now,” she said with a repentant laugh, “we’ve been ‘dating’ for two months and I’m supposed to be happy as can be.”

“I’m glad I make you happy,” I said with a grin, “even if it’s only in your imagination.” With that, I put my arm around her, to complete the illusion for her mother’s benefit. At least, that’s what I *told* myself I was doing.

Wren looked at me funny for a moment, but didn’t move away. Then she sighed heavily.

“What?”

“You know,” she said, “I actually *miss* this.” With that, she leaned against my side and tucked her feet underneath her. “You don’t mind, do you?”

After a momentary hesitation, we settled together.

A little while later, Wren turned slightly and I could feel her gathering her thoughts. “Christy told me about what happened with Gina.”

I swallowed hard. “She did?”

“Well, she told me enough that I figured out the rest. I knew you were upset, of course, and I wanted to flirt with you to lift your spirits,” she said. “You know, to kind of stroke your ego.”

I nodded, waiting for the other shoe to drop.

“But she told me not to. I kind of dragged the story out of her. She made me promise not to tell you. Don’t worry, though, Christy’s very good at keeping secrets. I just know her too well.”

“That’s okay,” I said.

After a long silence, Wren sat up and turned to face me. “Did you really have two girlfriends?”

I hesitated, but then nodded.

“Wow,” she said, the word loaded with unasked questions. She composed herself quickly, her eyes filled with compassion. “I’m sorry about what happened.” After a moment: “And I know you didn’t have a car accident, either. Christy told me about the fight with those frat guys.” She laughed darkly. “I wanted to find them and kill them when I saw what they’d done to you.”

“You’re not the only one.”

“But I’m really sorry about you and your girlfriend. Your *other* girlfriend, I guess I should say, ’cause I thought Kendall was your girlfriend… your *only* girlfriend, I mean.”

“It was a complicated relationship.”

She nodded quietly. Then she drew a deep breath and gathered her courage. “Since I know a secret about you,” she began tentatively, “can I tell you a secret about me?”

“You don’t have to—”

“I *want* to. I think you’ll understand.” She laughed, a bit bitterly. “You’re one of the *few* guys

who'll understand."

I nodded silently, letting her work up to what she wanted to say.

"I… I like…" In a rush: "I like girls." Tense and nervous, she waited for my reaction.

I think I surprised her when I chuckled.

She reeled, a betrayed look on her face.

"I'm sorry," I said quickly. "I didn't mean to laugh."

"Then why *did* you?"

I held her eyes. "Because I'd already figured that out."

She swallowed hard. "I *thought* you'd understand," she half-wailed.

I caught her before she could flee. "Wren, *stop!* Look at me."

She did.

"I *do* understand. I've understood all along. Why do you think I told you I thought it was sexy?"

"I thought you were just picking on me…"

"For *that?* Are you kidding? I *do* think it's sexy. I think it's sexy as hell."

"You do?" she asked in genuine amazement.

I nodded.

At my gesture, she settled on the couch again, a bit cautiously at first, but with growing confidence when I didn't mock her.

"There's nothing wrong with it," I said softly.

She turned diffident. "Did Kendall and Gina…? I mean, did they do it with each other?"

"Yes."

She blinked. "Kendall did? You mean she really *does* like girls?"

I nodded and tried not to look bemused.

"Lots of girls will tease each other about it," she said with a frown, "but not many of them actually *do* it. I mean, guys *never* joke about liking other guys—"

My I'm Not A Fag reflex reared its ugly head, and I emphatically agreed.

"—but girls… some will joke about it, but they're not serious."

"Kendall's pretty serious," I said. "And so was Gina. *Is*, I guess, just not with Kendall and me."

"I thought Kendall was just flirting with me to get *you* in the mood."

I shook my head. "She honestly thinks you're sexy."

"She does?"

"I do too," I said. Then I paused to consider what I was doing. Did I really want to follow that statement to its logical conclusion? I did, but I didn't. I wanted to have sex with Wren—with Wren *and Kendall*—but I didn't want to replace Gina, not with Wren, not with *anyone*. At the moment, I wasn't in danger of having anything more than a *conversation* about sex, though. So when Wren sighed in exasperation, I returned my attention to her.

"Of course *you* think I'm sexy. You're supposed to," she said. With that, she took a deep breath, which emphasized her breasts. "See? You're *supposed* to notice my tits."

I tried to ease my conscience with a chuckle. "Believe me, I do."

"But Kendall thinks I'm sexy too?"

"Yep."

"Does she really shave her pubic hair?" she asked all of a sudden.

At that, my chuckle was genuine. Wren seemed more curious than bent on seduction. Curious was good; it wouldn't lead me into temptation. So I resolved to let the conversation develop naturally.

A flicker of irritation crossed Wren's face. "Will you quit doing that?"

"What?"

"Chuckling. I'm serious here."

"Okay," I said, composing myself. "I'll be serious. But I think you're being too serious in the first place."

She arched an eyebrow.

"Yeah, okay, sure, it's not something you talk about with just anyone, but still… Sex is supposed to be *fun*, not something you're furtive about. Private, maybe, but not anything you're ashamed of. If you like girls, that's cool."

"I like guys too," she said quickly.

"Then you're bisexual."

She immediately shook her head.

"Yes," I said deliberately, "you are. And there's nothing wrong with that. Not for girls, at least. For guys… well, that's a different story. I mean, I guess there's nothing *wrong* with it, but it's not for me."

She shivered in distaste. "Me either. The thought of two guys? Ugh! *Girls* are supposed to suck dicks, not guys."

I laughed.

"Well, they *are*. I actually sort of like it."

"That's good," I said, still laughing softly.

"But I like going down on a girl too."

"That makes two of us," I said. "Three, if you count Kendall."

"Kendall's not the *only* one," Wren muttered with a secret smile.

It was my turn to arch an eyebrow at her.

"Never mind," she said.

I might be slow on the uptake, but I wasn't an idiot. I raced through the implications of what she'd said. She couldn't mean—

"What?" she asked, anxious.

"You said something once, and I didn't think anything of it at the time…"

"*What?*"

"I said Christy eats like a rabbit, and you said, 'that's not *all* she does like a rabbit.'"

"I didn't say that!"

"You did too. I'm weird about remembering stuff like that. Christy blushed when you said it, too. I didn't think anything of it at the time, but…"

"It doesn't mean anything," Wren said, almost desperately.

"Christy likes girls too, doesn't she?"

"No, of course not."

I snapped my fingers. "Of course! It all makes sense now."

"What does? You don't know what you're talking about. You don't—"

"I always wondered why you didn't have a boyfriend," I said, cutting her off. "You obviously like sex—you like *talking* about it, at least. But I never could figure out why you didn't have a boyfriend. Yeah, sure, I understood about your last boyfriend. And you have your vibrator—every modern girl needs one—but… You and Christy *are* close." Once again, I snapped my fingers. "The jerk on the swim team… he broke up with you last spring."

She nodded, hesitant and a little worried.

"Christy would've been there to comfort you."

"So?"

I rolled my eyes. "And then after her brother died… you'd've been there to comfort *her*."

"So? Besides, she was gone for nearly a month after it happened. And girls' dorm rooms aren't like some dirty magazine, you know."

"No, they're not," I agreed. *But I seem to find the ones that are,* I thought with a silent laugh.

"There," she said defensively. "Christy and I never—"

I silenced her with a doubtful look. "For most girls, sex is all about emotion," I said slowly. "For guys, it's more about getting off… you know, the physical side of things. But it's different for girls. Sure, you like getting off just as much as we do, but the *reasons* you have sex are more emotional."

"So? What's that have to do with—"

"You were probably pretty upset after the jerk on the swim team."

"Yeah. So?"

"And who was there to comfort you? Christy. I've seen you together—you're like sisters. So Christy was there for you after you broke up with the asshole. You were pretty emotional, right?"

Reluctantly, she nodded.

"That kind of shared emotion is powerful—almost overwhelming—isn't it?"

"How do you *know* all this?" she rasped.

"I know it 'cause I pay attention to girls," I said. *Although I failed* miserably *with Gina.* "And I had a good teacher."

She arched an eyebrow.

"I'll tell you about her sometime. The older woman…?"

Her eyes widened in understanding.

"But back to you and Christy," I said. "Too much about this makes sense. You like girls, and you *obviously* like sex. Christy's fiancé is in England, and she doesn't seem like a prude either. You make comments like 'that's not all Christy does like a rabbit' and 'Kendall's not the *only* one.' Did you think I wouldn't figure it out? '*Fucking* like a rabbit'?" I asked rhetorically. "Wren, c'mon, I'm not stupid."

For a moment, she stared at me in horrified silence. Finally: "Please don't tell her I said anything."

I laughed, good-natured and soft.

"Please, you've got to *promise* me."

"Wren, stop. First of all, I promise. I won't tell her you said anything. But second, don't *worry* about it. I don't think you're some freak or something, just because you and Christy like girls."

"You don't?"

I shook my head. "I may be horny as hell," I said, chuckling, "but I definitely *don't* think

you're a freak."

"You really don't?"

"No, absolutely not."

She laughed, bitter and harsh.

"What?"

"You know the jerk on the swim team?"

I nodded.

"That's one of the reasons he broke up with me. Stupid me, I trusted him… I told him I wanted another girl to join us." She laughed again, cynically. "I thought he'd *like* it, but he called me every name in the book."

"What an asshole."

"Exactly," she agreed.

On impulse, I caressed her cheek with the backs of my fingers. I knew I shouldn't have done it, but it seemed like the most natural thing to do. "Look," I said softly, "you're a wonderful girl. You're beautiful, you're smart, and you're sexy. Any guy who doesn't like you just the way you are is an idiot, an absolute *idiot*."

Her eyes went soft and round, and the next thing I knew, she was kissing me. It was tender and sweet at first, but built quickly, turning deep and longing. When she finally pulled back, her lips were shiny, and she was breathing harder.

I took a deep breath myself. The conversation had suddenly taken a turn I hadn't expected, and my mind was still racing to catch up. Unfortunately, the little head knew *exactly* what was going on.

"God," Wren said softly, "I've been wanting to do that all night. Except when I thought you were picking on me, that is."

"I wasn't picking on you."

"I know." She turned pensive. "And you promise you won't tell Christy? Right? You promise?"

"I promise," I repeated.

"Good, then kiss me again."

Uh-oh.

When we finally broke the kiss, nearly a minute later, she pulled back with a sigh. "Mmmmm, you're a good kisser. One more time…" With that, her lips met mine.

The little head warred with the big head, and in the confusion, I grew bold and cupped her breast. She arched her back and groaned into my mouth. My fingers found her nipple and tweaked it gently. She squirmed against me, her crotch seeking my hip.

"We can't do this," she said at last, panting.

The big head agreed. The little head had other ideas, however. Wren didn't resist when I pulled her to me and kissed her again. She tasted sweet and insistent and full of promise.

After a minute, she put her hands on my shoulders and pushed away.

With an almost palpable wave of relief, I let her go.

"I can't sleep with you," she said, panting. "I *want* to," she continued, her nipples erect, "but I can't."

"We don't have to go all the way. Besides, that's against the rules—*my* rules, that is. We can

fool around, though. After I talk to Kendall, the three of us can—"

She cut me off with a headshake. "I want to, but I can't. And I can't fool around with you tonight, even if Kendall wouldn't mind."

"She won't, as long as we don't go all the way." I wasn't *sure* about that, but the little head was doing the thinking. "And she definitely wants to have a threesome with you."

Once again, Wren shook her head. I could see the desire in her eyes, but she fought it down and mastered her emotions. "No," she said at last. "I want to, but I can't. I *won't*. If we did anything tonight, it'd be purely physical."

The little head was screaming things like "*So? Physical is good!*" but the big head was fighting through the fog of lust.

"I want more than that," Wren continued. "Yeah, sure, I really wanna sleep with you—and I mean *really*—but I can't. I guess you're right," she said slowly, "it *is* all about emotions. And… it's not right."

I started to disagree, but stopped myself.

"*God* how I wanna sleep with you. You have no idea how hot I am right now, but if we do, it'll change our relationship. I… I don't want that."

Some part of my brain agreed, but I still felt my brow crease with doubt.

"Look," she said, "you're the first guy who's ever been able to resist me. Believe it or not, I like that. I enjoyed getting to know you, instead of just flirting with you. That 'high school prick-tease shit,' I think you called it? I'm not in high school anymore."

"Neither am I," I said, the little head still hoping to win her over. The big head was gaining ground, however. "But I understand."

She nodded. "Besides, I'd never do that to Kendall."

"You could join us," I said. "I *know* Kendall would—"

"No. I don't want to become your 'other' girlfriend."

I didn't want that either.

"And right now," Wren continued, "I'm just not ready for a relationship with a guy. Yeah, I think you're sexy, and you're a great friend, but let's keep it that way."

"Okay," I said at last. I wanted to have sex with her—I *really* wanted to have sex with her—but I also respected her decision. Eventually, I'd respect her reasoning too (as well as my own), but at the moment, I was too horny to think straight. Fortunately, I *knew* I was too horny to think straight.

"Do you understand?" she asked. "You're not angry?"

"If I were the kind of guy to get angry at being told no, would you still like me?"

She shook her head, her eyes shining with a smile.

"So, what're we gonna do now?"

"After you leave, I'm going to draw a hot bath and play with myself till I get off," she said with a frank laugh. "Then I'm going to regret not sleeping with you. At that point, I'll probably imagine what could've happened—especially with Kendall—which'll lead to another round of playing with myself."

"It's a vicious cycle," I quipped, thankful that the mood had shifted.

"It'll stop when I'm too sore to continue." She sighed longingly. "You've got a *great* body, you know. And Kendall? God, she's the stuff of fantasies."

I smiled and simply nodded.

Wren's eyes sparkled. "After the third or fourth time I get myself off, I'll probably collapse from exhaustion. So," she asked, sing-song innocent, "what're *you* going to do when you get home?"

"Pretty much the same," I said with a laugh. "Maybe not the hot bath, but I'm definitely gonna jerk off."

"Are you going to think of me?"

I shook my head. At her faux-injured look, I grinned. "I'm gonna think of you… and *Kendall*."

She sighed and looked like she regretted her decision. Then she composed herself and smiled. "She's very lucky."

I turned flippant. "You could've been too."

"Maybe someday," she said, soft and wistful. "Maybe someday."

At that, I sobered. "Any guy would be lucky to have you, Wren."

"Thank you." After a moment's silence, she hugged me. "You're a great friend."

"Are you sure you don't wanna be more than friends?" I asked, the little head making a last ditch plea.

"No, I'm *not* sure," she said with a slightly bemused expression. "But… I can't."

I nodded. "Okay. I just thought I'd ask one more time."

To my surprise, she laughed ruefully.

"What?"

"I just realized something," she said. "You're the best boyfriend I've ever had. And you're only pretend."

I caressed her cheek and she shut her eyes, enjoying the contact. "One more time," I said softly.

She knew what I meant, and her lips met mine. Our kiss was tender, without the promise of more, but still passionate.

"Now," I said at last, "we've *got* to quit breaking the rules."

"No kidding."

"You're a great girl, Wren," I said softly.

Suddenly, she hugged me tight.

I kissed her cheek and she hugged me tighter still.

"Now," she said, "you'd better go, before I change my mind. And I believe I've got a date with the bath."

I grinned.

"Hey! You said you were gonna do the same thing."

"I am. A couple of times."

Her eyebrows shot up. "A couple of times?"

"Sorry," I said with an impish grin, "you had your chance."

She rolled her eyes, but then smiled.

With that, we said our goodbyes and I headed out to the Cruiser. I thought about her all the way home. I can't say I was exactly *happy* that we didn't fool around, but I was somehow proud of myself.

Then I smiled at the memory of her body pressed against mine. I smiled wider still at the girl herself. "Lorelei Wren Hilliard," I said to the night, "you're gonna make someone a great wife someday. I just hope I'm there to congratulate the lucky bastard."

✧ ✧ ✧

Trip and I spent the first days of Spring Break looking for houses. On the third day—his birthday, coincidentally—we got lucky: we drove by two houses for sale, side by side. They were identical Craftsman style bungalows, kind of run down, but in a neighborhood undergoing a renaissance.

The houses had been built in the 1920s, and were solidly constructed. They'd been owned by elderly spinster sisters who had died within weeks of each other. Their only relative, a nephew, was selling both houses. Trip negotiated with the nephew himself, and we left with a handshake deal for both.

"That was a stroke of very, very good luck," Trip said as we drove to the next house on our list. "The houses are picture-perfect, and the neighborhood has lots of young families moving in. Even better, though, we'll be able to use smaller crews than if the houses were farther apart."

"Why?"

"Because we can stagger the renovations, but still have the specialized crews close at hand," he said. "That's the thing about a renovation—something unexpected *always* happens. I plan for it in my budget and schedule, but I still get surprised sometimes. With the two houses next to each other, all we have to do if we need to bring back a crew is to walk next door."

"Ah, that makes sense."

"So I think we can go ahead and look for a third house. It'll add to our expenses, but we'll increase our profit margin."

"Hold on… if we have two houses and we add a third, won't our profit margin be the same? I mean, we're adding more profit, but we're also adding more expense?"

He shook his head. "Economies of scale," he said simply.

I looked a question at him.

"Because we've got three houses, we can guarantee more work for the crews, which means they'll give us a better rate. And since we'll buy more materials, we'll get a lower price on them too. Our expenses go up, but not at the same rate as our profit, so our profit margin is higher. Make sense?"

I nodded enthusiastically.

✧ ✧ ✧

The next day we found a third house. It was about a mile from the first two. It was a two-story Colonial Revival with a detached garage. Trip negotiated with the realtor, and finally agreed on a price.

Altogether, we had contracts—*contingent upon financing*, a point Trip was careful to include in the agreements—on more than eighty thousand dollars of property.

I was nervous, excited, bewildered, and scared witless. I thought buying the Cruiser for a thousand dollars was a big deal, but Trip had negotiated eighty *times* that in two days.

"Now we just have to convince the bank to see things our way," he said with a grin. Then he held out his hand. When I shook it, his grin widened. "Welcome to the company, partner. I guess

we'll have to come up with a new name."

I gave him a blank look.

"Well, Whitman Remodeling won't work," he said. Then he tapped his chin, musing. "Whitman & Hughes Remodeling? W & H Remodeling? T & P Remodeling? Nah, too unprofessional. What do you think?"

"I think you're crazy," I said. "You just bought eighty thousand dollars of real estate and you're wondering what to call the company?"

"*We* just bought eighty thousand dollars of real estate," he said. "We're partners, remember?"

"No fucking kidding."

He laughed at my shell-shocked expression.

As we drove back to his parents' house, he suggested names for the company. We eventually settled on "Whitman Hughes Homes." We thought it made us sound more important, as if we were homebuilders too, a business Trip was keen to get into "in a summer or two."

We called my parents after dinner, to tell them the news.

"So I'm going to co-sign for forty thousand dollars?" my father said.

I tried not to sound nervous when I agreed.

"That's a lot of money, Paul."

"Trip's done this before," I said. I had told my parents what we planned to do, but only in general terms. So I took my dad's unspoken cue and went into detail. I told him about the houses themselves. I told him about the neighborhoods, the schools, and the "comps" (comparable sale prices for nearby houses). I told him about the economies of scale, and about Trip's experience. By the time I finished, I could almost hear him nodding at the right times.

"Okay, son," he said at last. "It sounds like you and Trip know what you're doing."

I flashed a thumbs-up to Trip and his father.

"If you don't mind, though, I'd like to speak to Mr. Whitman."

"Um… sure. Hold on a second." I held the phone away from my ear. "He'd like to speak to you, Frank."

The two men went through the obligatory pleasantries of meeting each other for the first time. Then Frank assured my dad that Trip had extensive experience in home renovation. They spoke for ten or fifteen minutes, and I could hear the pride in Frank's voice as he talked about his son. Finally, he handed the phone back to me.

"Okay, Paul," my dad said, "you're in business."

"Thanks, Dad!"

"How much are you going to need for renovation expenses?"

"I'll need to get a budget from Trip," I said, "before we know how much we're going to need. He also wants to keep some cash in reserve, for emergencies—"

"Good idea."

"—but my half shouldn't be more than twenty thousand dollars." *Did I just say "shouldn't be more than* twenty thousand dollars*"?!*

"We should be able to swing that," Dad said.

For a moment, I was overwhelmed by the enormity of what I was getting into. "We're talking about sixty thousand dollars, Dad," I said, almost protesting. "Can you and Mom really afford that? It's a lot of money."

"No, it's a lot of *debt*, Paul. There's a difference. It's a slight difference, but it's important. Besides, it'll be secured by real estate—the houses and property itself. Your part of the renovation expenses will be secured debt too; we're going to get a second mortgage on the house."

I fought not to croak. "Our house?"

"Uh-huh. Your mom and I talked about it, and we think it's a good investment. We're investing in your future. You'll be a co-signer on the loan, and you'll be responsible for making the payments. Besides, it'll help establish your credit. Okay?"

"Yes, *sir!*"

"Now, Paul, you realize this is serious. It's not a four-hundred-dollar charge card bill."

"I know, Dad."

"Okay, son." After a pause, he laughed.

My mouth went dry. "What?"

"I knew you were gonna grow up someday, son," he said, "but I didn't realize it'd be sixty thousand dollars at a time!"

I tried to laugh with him, but I couldn't seem to make my diaphragm work.

✧ ✧ ✧

Trip and I went to the bank with his father to start the paperwork. It would take nearly three weeks to process, and then we'd have to set a closing date for each of the houses.

"You see why I want to get this done so early?" Trip said as we left the loan officer's office. "We'll be lucky if we close by the first of May. But as long as we take possession by June, we'll be fine. Do you remember what the last day of exams is?"

"Um… June 25th, I think. Why?"

"'Cause we'll need to hit the ground running. That only gives us two months—July and August—to supervise all the work. We can get the demolition started as soon as we take possession, but I want to be there to oversee the work after that."

Trip and I stayed up late that night. As he outlined his plans, I was astounded by his self-assurance, but I guess I shouldn't have been. After all, he'd done the same thing for five summers. But he completely surprised me when he turned over the primary design to me.

"You're the better designer," he said matter-of-factly. "We'll have to get a licensed architect to review the plans, but I want you to do the majority of the work."

"But Trip, I've never designed a house before. I've never designed *anything* before."

"You'll do fine," he said, with more confidence than I felt. "Don't go crazy with any Phillip Johnson or Frank Lloyd Wright designs, but do something creative."

"Phillip Johnson? Are you kidding?" I said. "That's totally inappropriate for a suburban house. I mean, we're talking about Craftsman bungalows and a Colonial Revival here; a simple design'll be fine. Besides, this is a *renovation*, not new construction, so I've got load-bearing walls and existing fixtures to deal with. And since we want young families to buy these houses, I can't do Frank Lloyd Wright inside. Yeah, he's a great architect, but have you seen his furniture? Stylish, but totally uncomfortable. Uh-uh, no way. I've gotta design something that'll…"

I barely noticed Trip's grin as I reached for my sketchpad and began drawing floor plans from memory.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Spring quarter began like the previous two: I stood in line and paid a lot of money for the privilege. I still hadn't mastered the ho-hum attitude of the upperclassmen, but I definitely wasn't as nervous as I'd been before, either.

On the first day of classes, a group of us got together for breakfast, and when seven forty-five rolled around, we grumbled good-naturedly but said our goodbyes and headed out. Wren, Christy, and I walked toward the A&A building, bound for Dr. Bertrand's Art History class.

"So, what did *you* do on Spring Break?" I asked Christy, who had returned to campus with chapped lips and the beginnings of a golden tan.

She smiled girlishly. "Danny was in town and we went surfing. He was on a det in Yuma and managed to get a few days leave at the end of it."

"I bet it doesn't hurt that his father's an admiral," I said, chuckling.

"Oh, my dad didn't have anything to do with it. He's still on cruise with the Connie. He won't be back till May. But you're probably right; Danny's CO knows who his father is."

"I'm sorry to interrupt," Wren said, "but what's a 'det'?"

Christy glanced at me. When she saw that I knew what the phrase meant, she waited for me to answer.

"It means his squadron—or part of it, at least—was on *detachment*," I said. "They just call it 'a det' for short. Yuma's got a big bombing and gunnery range, and squadrons send pilots there to practice." I smiled at a sudden memory. "My dad actually got his callsign there."

Christy looked a question at me.

I explained for Wren's benefit. "Military pilots have callsigns—nicknames, really."

"*All* of them?" Wren asked.

"All the ones I know, at least," I said.

Christy nodded in confirmation.

"Anyway," I said, continuing my story, "my dad got his callsign at Yuma. He normally doesn't talk about his time in the Navy, but sometimes, especially if he's had a little too much to drink, he'll tell stories."

"So what's his callsign?" Christy asked, warming to my tale.

"Zuniac," I said with a chuckle. "His friends just called him 'Zuni' for short, though."

"What kind of nickname is *that?*" Wren asked.

"My dad was training at Yuma right after he joined his first squadron. He screwed up a firing run with rockets—*Zuni* rockets—and ended up launching a bunch of them at once… all over the place." I laughed at the imagined look on my father's face when he realized what he'd done. "So the guys in his squadron gave him a new callsign: Zuniac."

"I don't get it," Wren said.

"'Zuni' and 'maniac'?" I prompted.

Wren understood, but obviously didn't appreciate the humor of my father's mistake.

Judging by Christy's grin, she did. "Military pilots tease each other a lot," she said. "My dad's callsign is Clara."

Wren shook her head in bafflement.

Christy glanced at me, but I didn't understand the callsign any more than Wren did.

"It has to do with landing on a carrier," Christy said, more to Wren than me (to cushion the blow to my ego, no doubt). "The pilots use this set of lights to line up their landing, and if they don't see them, they call 'clara' over the radio. One time, on my dad's first cruise, he couldn't see them. *He* says they were broken, but the landing signal officer started calling him Clara, and the name stuck."

Wren merely shook her head in bemusement. "Pilots are nuts."

"Yeah, I guess," I said, proud of my father despite her pronouncement.

"No, they're not nuts," Christy said, a little more vehemently than I think she intended. "They just live in a different world. They might get *killed*, even if they do everything right—"

Wren and I exchanged alarmed looks.

"—so they have a different sense of humor," Christy continued defensively. "They laugh at the things that might kill them. What's wrong with that?"

"Nothing's wrong with it," Wren said hastily. "I just think it's odd, that's all."

I decided to aim for the heart of Christy's distress, on the theory that talking about it would lessen its impact. "What was Laurence's callsign?"

Wren's eyes widened in shock, but I silenced her with a headshake.

To our surprise, Christy laughed. "Happy," she said, smiling at the memory.

"'Happy'?"

"Happy," she repeated. "He *hated* it too, but I think that's why the other guys picked it."

"Why Happy?" I asked.

"Because he was always happy," she said simply. "Nothing ever got Laurence down. He wanted to be a 'rough and ready leatherneck.' Ha! He used to tell me how he wanted a callsign like 'Cool Hand' or 'Slick' or something like that. But he was always Happy."

"What about Harry?" I asked immediately, shifting the conversation while she was smiling with nostalgia.

"Hmm? Oh. Harry's callsign is Tergon."

"This one's gonna take another explanation," Wren said with a faux-sour grin.

"After class," I said as we reached Dr. Bertrand's classroom.

Christy smiled up at me, and I thought I detected a hint of gratitude in her eyes.

✧ ✧ ✧

"So how *did* Harry get his callsign?" I asked after class.

"I'd *love* to hear this," Wren said with only a trace of sarcasm, "but I don't understand you Navy kids in the first place. Besides, I've got to head to Humanities."

We exchanged goodbyes and then Christy turned to me. "Where're you headed?"

"I've got an hour before my Design class. You?"

"I've got an hour before Art of Japan. Convenient, huh?"

"Do you want to—?"

"I'd love to."

We went to our usual spot, a bench at the end of one of the balconies.

"Okay, so how did Harry get his callsign?" I asked.

"Kinda like your dad did."

I looked a question at her.

"There's this thing called a TER. I don't remember exactly how it works, but it carries bombs,

I think."

"A Triple Ejection Rack?"

"Yeah, that's it! When Harry was in training, he accidentally dropped his TERs when he should've just dropped his bombs. So the instructors started calling him 'TER Gone.'"

"And that got shortened to Tergon," I finished with a laugh. "Sounds like he and my dad have a lot in common."

She smiled.

"How about James?" I asked.

"Dobie."

"Like Dobie Gillis?"

"Mmm hmm. The guys in his squadron thought he looked like the actor from the TV show."

"Ha! How about Danny."

"Surfer," she said. "Danny loves to surf, and he looks the part. He and I are the only blondes in the family—besides our mom, I mean—and he tans like I do. One afternoon in the sun and we're golden brown."

"My mother and sister are like that," I grumbled good-naturedly. At that, I suddenly realized that Christy *looked* like Mom and Erin. She was smaller than either of them—quite a bit smaller through the chest—but she had the same blonde hair and blue eyes, and many of the same expressions. And if she tanned like they did… I imagined her at camp, nude and bronze and bejeweled with water from the lake, her nipples hard from the cold—

"What're you thinking?" she asked with a sly smile, intruding upon my fantasy.

"Huh? What?"

"Just now… what were you thinking?"

My face must've been scarlet. "Um… nothing," I said, flustered. "So, what's Rich's callsign?"

She smiled, her eyes sparkling in amusement. "Rich doesn't *have* a callsign," she said patiently.

"Oh? Why not?"

"Um… remember? He's not a pilot…"

Chagrined, I'm sure I turned a darker shade, if that were possible.

Christy laughed, musical and bright.

"I forgot," I said, trying to salvage my dignity.

She merely nodded, her eyes still glinting with the remnants of a smile.

"So," I said, grasping for anything to divert her attention, "what'd you do on Spring Break?"

"Well, since Danny was in town," she began, with barely a hint of a smirk, "we went to La Jolla. There's an incredible shore break at Windansea Beach, and…"

With a palpable wave of relief, I suppressed my treacherous imagination and simply listened.

But I could've sworn she was smiling at me when I wasn't looking.

✧ ✧ ✧

After the chaos of the first days of the quarter, my life settled into a routine. A group of us ate breakfast together every morning before heading to our various classes. Christy and I met for lunch and hung out afterward, drawing or just talking. After the day's classes, a group of us (anywhere from four to a dozen people) met for dinner. We usually ate at one of the campus

dining halls, but sometimes we cooked at Kendall's apartment or went out for pizza.

I still tried to watch my weight, but Christy was steadily changing my diet with a combination of non-lecture lectures and healthy afternoon snacks. Kendall was more than happy to let her, too, since she was convinced that I didn't eat enough in the first place.

My classes themselves were mostly an extension of the previous quarter, especially since I had four of the same professors: Joska, Ledbetter, Feller, and Bertrand. The new professors were Ken Liang and Maninder Patel, an Indian, whose English was only *slightly* better than Professor Vajpayee's.

The assignments were more or less what I was used to as well. Professor Ledbetter handed me a suspiciously Joska-inspired list of extra credit, while Professor Joska outlined a slew of projects and design reviews involving the World's Fair, which was due to open in May. Unlike the previous semesters' Introduction to Architecture classes, though, Professor Liang's Visual Design Theory covered entirely new material, and I quickly realized that half of my classes would take up the majority of my time.

Professor Feller's class would be interesting, though, since our reading list was drawn from the latter half of the Twentieth Century. Dr. Bertrand's syllabus looked enjoyable as well; it was full of Dutch masters, French Impressionists, and more. And Calculus was Calculus, so I ignored Professor Patel's not-quite-English lectures and immersed myself in the textbook.

I kept up my flying lessons with Earl Walker, but without wrestling and snow skiing, I had a lot more time to devote to architecture. Trip and I still worked out together, using the time to talk about everything from our Design projects to whatever new band he was excited about.

Trip wanted to form an intramural softball team, but Jeff lobbied hard for soccer. Since he rarely made requests, we decided to oblige him. Luke signed up for the team, of course, along with T.J. and Glen. Through enthusiasm and persistence alone, Jeff managed to recruit four other guys from our floor, as well as his roommate, Hector.

Aside from Jeff, Hector, and one other guy, none of us had ever played soccer before, but we were all willing to give it a shot. Jeff's previous attempts at intramural sports had been just shy of embarrassing, though. He'd been lightning fast on the football field, but prone to fumbles. On the basketball court, his shots often missed even the backboard. Consequently, none of us really expected more from him when it came to soccer.

"Holy shit!" T.J. exclaimed at our first practice. "Look at Four-eyes!"

"T.J.…," Trip started to warn. Then he turned to look at Jeff, and the rebuke died unspoken.

Jeff was bouncing one of the soccer balls in the air. He bounced it off his feet. He bounced it off his thighs. He bounced it off his chest. He even bounced it off his head. With almost casual ease, he kept it airborne for several minutes. The rest of us stood awestruck. Finally, he kicked the ball into the air, higher than before. It didn't even hit the ground before he sent it flying toward the goal. When it hit the net, we erupted with wild cheers.

"How'd you *do* that?!" T.J. asked after the din died down.

"Do what?" Jeff wondered, a bit embarrassed.

"That… that *thing* you were doing," T.J. tried to explain. "Bouncing the ball."

"You mean juggling?"

"Yeah, that!"

Jeff shrugged, his cheeks turning pinker still.

"Looks like *you're* gonna be taking lessons from *Jeff* this time," Trip said to T.J. with a grin.

"No shit," T.J. agreed without rancor. "And you need a new nickname, Four-eyes."

Trip stiffened but didn't say anything.

"How about White Pelé?" T.J. mused.

Jeff's blush merely deepened. "I'm not *that* good."

"You coulda fooled me," T.J. said. "Now, show me how to do that thing with the ball."

A little tentatively at first, but with growing confidence, Jeff taught us the basics of soccer. We practiced for more than an hour, Jeff's awkwardness at football and basketball all but forgotten.

"How come you couldn't do that on the football field?" T.J. asked him as we left the practice field.

Jeff merely shrugged and pushed up his glasses.

"Or on the basketball court?" T.J. continued. "I mean, you tossed more bricks than anyone I ever saw. But damn, Pelé, you can *play* soccer."

"I guess I don't have to use my hands," Jeff said diffidently. "I'm not real coordinated—"

"No shit," T.J. said. Then he darted a glance at Trip. "Um… just kidding."

"Besides, I've been playing soccer since I was six," Jeff added. He shrugged again. "I guess I've just got a knack for it."

"Well, I'm stickin' with my man Pelé," T.J. said to the group at large. Then he slapped Jeff on the back. "With you on our team, we'll win every game."

Trip and I hung back from the rest of the guys as we walked toward the dorm.

Luke noticed, and joined us. "Who knew Jeff could play soccer?" he asked no one in particular.

"You didn't know?" Trip asked, genuinely surprised.

"*Alors pas.* I mean, after the hard time we gave him about football and basketball…? If y'all had given me that much shit, I'd've passed a slap and said 'wait till we play soccer, *then* you'll see.' But he just kept his mouth shut and kept coming back for more."

Trip chuckled.

"*Mais*, I had no idea," Luke said, shaking his head. Then he grinned at us. "The guy *had* to be good at something. Who knew it was soccer?" With a wider grin, he ran to catch up with the rest of the group. "Hey, Jeff! Wait up, man!"

"There's a lesson here," Trip said to me, quietly.

I looked a question at him.

"*Everyone* has a talent. The trick is finding it."

I nodded.

"I should've known better," he said, more to himself than to me. "I didn't give Jeff a hard time, not like T.J. did, but in my head…" He trailed off meaningfully. Then he braced himself. "There's another lesson here."

"Which is?"

"Always treat a guy with respect, 'cause you might not know what his talent is until you need it."

"Words to live by," I said, teasing him a little gravely.

"I'm serious," he said. "I should've known better." After several moments, he chuckled

ironically. “Well, I won’t make *that* mistake again.”

✧ ✧ ✧

Kendall and I tried to find some time alone together, but we were in a quandary. Her roommates’ classes were diabolically contrived to keep the apartment occupied. We decided to use my dorm room instead, even though we’d have to deal with Carrick’s visitation rules. I didn’t want to come right out and ask Billy to let us have the room to ourselves once in a while, but he was a lot shrewder than I gave him credit for.

“We’re doing a musical this quarter, *1776*,” he said one afternoon. “Jamie got the part of John Adams. I actually got a part too. It’s not a big one, but it’s my first on-stage role.”

“Congratulations,” I said absently, my nose buried in a book.

“So I’ll have to go to rehearsals now too. I’m still doing the set and costumes, though.”

“Ah.”

“I’ll be at rehearsal Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday afternoons, from two till four. And I’ll spend the weekends working on the set, of course.”

“Cool.”

“If anyone needs me,” he emphasized, “they can find me at the theater on *Wednesday*, *Thursday*, and *Friday*, from *two* till *four* o’clock.”

His words finally registered, and I looked up.

“Two till four,” he said deliberately. “Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday,” he repeated. “And I’ll probably hang around afterward to go to supper with the cast. You know… in case you need to know where I am.” He gave me a meaningful look.

“Okay,” I said, trying not to sound exasperated. A moment later, I Got It, and my mood changed dramatically. “Oh! Thanks for letting me know, Billy.”

He shrugged. “I just thought… in case… you know… um…”

“Thanks. I appreciate it,” I said, relieving him of the burden of telling me that he’d overheard Kendall and me talking about where to find some privacy.

He sighed gratefully.

“And you know,” I mused, “we’ll probably come see your play. I mean, I haven’t been to a single one, and since you’re *acting* in this one…”

His expression lit with a smile.

“When’s opening night?” I asked.

“You mean you’ll come?!”

“Sure.”

He gave me the dates of the play’s run, and I wrote them down.

“Will you really come?” he asked excitedly.

“Sure, Billy, I wouldn’t miss it for the world.”

He flashed me a shy smile, his cheeks flushed.

“But I’d better get back to *Invisible Man*,” I said genially, nodding at my book. “Thanks for letting me know about your rehearsal schedule, though.”

✧ ✧ ✧

A couple of weeks into the quarter, Kendall and I made plans to go to South Carolina for Susan’s birthday. I wanted to fly—it was a two-hour trip by air—but I knew Kendall would balk,

so I didn't even bring it up. Instead, I resigned myself to driving more than six hours, *each way*.

A couple of days before we left, the phone rang.

"Hey, Paul," T.J. tentatively called into my room, "it's Gina."

"Gina?" I wondered aloud, pushing back from my desk.

He nodded and held out the phone.

"Hello?"

"Hi, Paul. It's Gina."

As if I wouldn't recognize her voice!

"How are you?"

We talked for a couple of minutes, but the conversation was awkward. Finally, *thankfully*, she got to the purpose of her call.

"Are you going to Susan's birthday party?" she asked.

"Yeah, of course. Are you?" I cursed myself for sounding so boyishly hopeful.

"I can't. I've got to work at the hospital, and besides…" Her pause lengthened, meaningful and final.

"Yeah, I understand." She couldn't go because of *me*, and I silently admitted that she was probably right.

"I'm sorry, Paul," she said softly. "I'm just not ready."

"That's okay. I understand. You're probably right."

"Thank you."

I nodded, and I knew she'd understand my silence for the acceptance it was.

"But you could do me a favor," she said, brightening.

"Sure."

"Would you mind taking my present with you when you fly over?"

"We're not flying," I said, a little more resentfully than I intended. "Let's leave it at that."

"That's— Sorry, never mind." She paused. "Do you have a few minutes? I could meet you now."

"Yeah, I guess."

She paused guiltily. "I… I'm sorry, Paul. I *want* to go, but…"

"I understand."

"I've already called Susan, and she understands. I talked to my mom too."

"We're going to have to get over this sooner or later," I said, sounding more determined than petulant. "I mean, our families are still friends."

"I know," she said. "But there's no reason to torture ourselves for their sake. They understand." She laughed, bitter and short. "Well, maybe not Leah."

"Leah? What about her?"

"I guess she's more of a Gina partisan than I thought."

"Huh?"

In a rush: "She's only heard things from *my* side, and she doesn't understand that it takes *two*—"

"You mean she's pissed off at *me?*"

"A little," Gina said, obviously chagrined. "I tried to tell her that we're adults, and we're both to blame, but…" I could almost hear her shrug.

I laughed, the sound full of irony. “Well, I guess I won’t have to worry about fighting her off.”

“You might,” Gina said with an ironic laugh of her own. “I think she mentioned wanting to slap some sense into you. Don’t worry about her, though. My mom’s got the situation under control. Leah might *talk* big, but she’s not going to actually do anything. So you’re right, you don’t have to worry about fighting her off.”

“Well, that’ll make Kendall happy.”

“So, do you want to meet me in the courtyard?” Gina asked abruptly.

“Sure. When?”

“Five minutes?”

“Okay,” I said. “I’ll see you in a few.”

Gina met me downstairs, and she was alone for a change. “Give Susan a hug for me,” she said, handing over a small present. “And tell her I love her.”

“Will do,” I said.

As the silence drew out, her dark eyes turned soulful and lingering. She looked like she wanted to say something else, but she didn’t. Instead, she smiled sadly, nodded to herself, and turned to go.

✧ ✧ ✧

On Friday, Kendall and I packed up and headed toward South Carolina. With pit stops and traffic, the trip took almost *seven* hours, and we arrived a little before midnight.

Instead of driving straight to Susan’s house, we stopped at the lighted clubhouse first. Gunny Kershaw met us at the door. After a warm greeting he told us that Doug and Olivia had arrived earlier in the day, and that Kirk had called unexpectedly to say he’d arrive on Saturday.

“Since Susan will have a full house, we thought you might like to stay in one of the cabins,” he finished. “I made one up for you. I hope you don’t mind.”

“Thank you very much, Gunny,” I said.

With that, we climbed into the Cruiser and headed back up the hill. During the short drive, Gunny told us that Susan had already gone to bed, but that she wanted us to come down for breakfast. Then he directed us to the cabin next to the one where my family usually stayed. I pulled to a stop beside the little building and turned off the engine.

“I’ve had the water heater on for a couple of hours,” Gunny said as he opened the cabin door, “so the water should be hot. And I put sheets on the bed and towels in the bathroom. They’re nothing fancy, but they’ll do.”

“Thanks, Gunny,” I said.

“Can I get you anything else?” he asked deferentially.

I shook my head and glanced at Kendall.

She turned to him and smiled warmly. “Thank you for all you’ve done.”

“My pleasure, Miss Kendall,” he said, his cheeks coloring. After a diffident pause: “Well, since everything’s squared away here, I think I’ll head home and turn in.”

“I’ll give you a ride,” I offered.

When I returned to the cabin, the porch light glowed warmly. Spring had come to South Carolina, but the night air still held a chill, and I was looking forward to a soft, warm bed after the long day on the road.

"I'm sorry I made you drive," Kendall said as I shut the cabin door behind me.

I shrugged.

"I just don't want to fly. I… I can't explain it, but… it scares me."

"That's all right. I understand." I *didn't*, but I didn't want to dwell on it and make her uncomfortable.

"Can I make it up to you?" she asked softly.

"Maybe later. Right now, I just wanna go to bed."

When we crawled into bed and pulled the covers over us, she gently stroked my chest. Her hand drifted suggestively lower, but I touched her wrist lightly and shook my head.

"Maybe in the morning," I said. "I'm exhausted."

"Oh… okay."

With that, I pulled her close and my eyes drooped shut. I knew her well enough to realize that she was disappointed, but after a full day of classes, followed by a seven-hour drive, I simply didn't have the energy.

✧ ✧ ✧

The next morning, we showered together until the water turned cold. Much to my amusement, I found that I actually *missed* the dorm, especially the endless supply of hot water.

After we dried off, we fooled around in the comfort of the steamy bathroom. I wanted to make up for the night before, so I kissed my way from her earlobes to her neck and then continued down to her chest. My lips trailed between her breasts and over her soft stomach until I nuzzled her pussy. She gasped when I pressed my chin to her thighs and darted my tongue between her smooth labia. Then she relaxed, and didn't resist when I spread her legs further.

I gently licked and sucked her pussy, building her up. She gasped when I held her hips in place and my tongue went into overdrive. I swirled it around her clit, teasing the little bead on each pass. Then I began wagging my tongue through her folds and sucking her inner lips.

Finally, I drove her over the edge and she gripped my hair to hold herself steady. I continued licking as her orgasm washed over her. She held rigidly still, and when she grew too sensitive, I pulled back before she had to push me away.

With a smile, I gazed up her body and kissed her smooth mons. She rewarded me with a deep sigh in response. I began kissing up her stomach to her breasts, and sucked her nipples for several moments. When I straightened, my erection brushed her thigh.

She gripped my shaft with a sultry smile. She held my eyes for a moment and then sank to her knees. Her supple lips caressed my shaft, quickly working me to the point of no return. She sensed it and began pumping the base of my cock as she teased my balls with the other hand. A moment later I rewarded her efforts, filling her mouth with spurt after spurt.

She smiled up at me as my dick slowly softened. With an answering smile, I helped her to her feet and pulled her close. After a few moments of silent intimacy, we finished getting ready. When we were done, she dithered over whether or not to wear bikini bottoms. Since we didn't know how Doug or Olivia would react, she decided to play it safe.

Outside, the morning sunlight filtered through the pine trees, but the shade was decidedly chilly. The sunny road through camp was pleasantly warm, though, and by the time we reached Susan's house, the exertion of walking down the hill had done wonders.

Doug opened the kitchen door when we knocked. With a smile, he invited us into the house

and introduced us to his girlfriend, Olivia. She was an attractive brunette with full breasts and a friendly smile. She reminded me of a young Susan. When Kendall glanced at me, I realized that she was thinking the same thing. She also had to suppress a grin, since Olivia was wearing bikini bottoms.

Before I could do more than raise my eyebrows, Susan entered the kitchen, drawn by the sound of our voices. She gave Kendall a hug and then turned to me. I was mildly surprised that she *wasn't* wearing her bottoms, but I guess I shouldn't have been. I pulled her close and returned her hug. When we separated, she neatly stepped to my side, her arm still around my waist.

"Why the modesty, ladies?" she asked. "I don't think anyone here is going to be offended by a bare beaver."

"Well, I didn't know if Paul and Kendall…," Olivia ventured uncertainly.

"And I didn't know if…," Kendall echoed. Then she shrugged.

"Aw, heck," Olivia said, glancing at Kendall, "I will if you will."

Kendall nodded, and with that, the girls removed their bottoms.

"So," Susan asked, defusing the momentary tension as Doug and I tried not to ogle each other's girlfriend, "what do we want for breakfast? Bacon and eggs? Pancakes and sausage? Waffles?"

"Oh, no, Susan," Olivia said, glad for the distraction, "Kendall and I can cook. You just relax. After all, it's your birthday."

"If you think I'm going to argue, you're wrong," Susan said with a grin.

The two girls shared a laugh and donned aprons as they surveyed the contents of the refrigerator.

"So, Paul," Doug said as we sat at the kitchen table, "how do you like the architecture program at Tennessee?"

"A lot. *UT* has a fantastic design program—"

He grinned good-naturedly at my deliberate emphasis.

"—and I've got a couple of really good professors." For a moment, I stopped, shocked at what I'd just said. *Do I* really *think Joska's a good professor?* I wondered. *Holy shit! I* do*!* With that, I laughed, a bit self-consciously. But for the next few minutes, I was amazed by the words coming from my mouth; words like "unrelenting perfectionist" and "good judge of design."

Even Kendall turned from the stove, surprised to hear me describe Joska that way.

"So you have a different professor than your first quarter?" Susan asked.

Chagrined, I felt my face heating. "No, it's the same guy."

She laughed, genuine and teasing at the same time.

"Okay, so maybe he's not as bad as I first thought," I grudgingly admitted. "He's still an absolute slave driver, and he's *never* satisfied with my work, but yeah, maybe there's a method to his madness."

Susan and Kendall shared a grin.

"Oh, quit smirking," I said, without heat.

Even Doug laughed. "I have an integrated circuits professor like that at UT."

"You mean Texas," I said absently.

"Right, at UT," he repeated, grinning. "But as I was saying, I have an integrated circuits

professor like that, and he's *always*…"

✧ ✧ ✧

A little before lunch, Susan drove to the airport to pick up Chris and Elizabeth (and Erin and Leah), who'd flown over in our families' Cessna. Since my father was on a trip to New Jersey, he and my mom planned to rent a plane and fly over when he returned to Atlanta, the next day.

Leah gave me a hard-eyed glare when she saw me, and refused to even say hello. After a sharp look from her mother, however, she greeted me mechanically. Not surprisingly, Kendall got the same cool treatment. Erin merely rolled her eyes at her friend's sullen hostility, and gave each of us a hug. Chris and Elizabeth greeted us warmly as well (it was the first time we'd seen each other since the break-up).

"I'm sorry things didn't work out with you and Gina," Elizabeth said quietly, when we found ourselves alone. "She loves you very much, though."

I nodded. "I love her too, but…" I shrugged. "I guess I pretty much screwed things up."

"It takes two to make a relationship work," Elizabeth said, her British accent gentle and full of experience. "But at least you're both being mature about it."

I shrugged again. I didn't know if I could really call my actions *mature*, but…

"And Leah should forgive you when she realizes you're not Shiva."

I looked a question at her.

She laughed, low and sweet. "You need to take some comparative religion courses."

Before I could answer, Chris practically tugged me away.

"Sorry, dear," he said to his wife, "Susan's got a new grill, and we need to give it an inspection."

Elizabeth merely shook her head and chuckled, gesturing for us to go.

Not surprisingly, Chris offered to cook lunch on the grill. As we lingered over the remains of the meal, the phone rang. It was Kirk, calling from Columbia to tell Susan that he and his girlfriend were driving up in a rental car.

"Girlfriend?" Doug asked when Susan relayed the news. "He didn't mention anything about a girlfriend before. Did he say anything to you, Mom?"

Susan shook her head.

"And he's bringing her *here?*" Doug wondered. "Wow, that's a big step."

"Oh," Olivia assured him, "the prospect of being a nudist isn't as daunting as you might think." She shared a grin with Kendall. "Especially if the guys are studs."

"What time did he say he'd be here?" Doug asked, trying to cover his blush.

Susan glanced at her watch. "Not for a couple of hours. Why?"

"I kinda want to see him before…" He reached for Olivia's hand and then turned back to his mother. "I want to take Livvy to the quarry, so I thought we'd hike up there this afternoon. Do you still have my camping gear?"

"It's in the garage," Susan said. "Why?"

"Well… I thought we might spend the night up there."

"It'll get awfully cold," she said.

Doug and Olivia simply grinned at each other.

"Which I don't think will be a problem," Susan continued smoothly. "I'll show you and Paul where it is."

After I helped Doug retrieve his old camping gear, we hung everything on the clothesline to air out. Then we decided to head down to the lake to enjoy the afternoon sun. The water was still far, *far* colder than I was willing to brave—my testicles silently thanked me—but the sunshine felt good on my bare skin. Kendall and I had brought reading for class, and we quickly settled onto lounge chairs next to each other, our noses buried in our books.

Kirk and his girlfriend arrived later in the afternoon. Susan, Doug, and Olivia went up the hill to meet them, and the five of them came down a little later. Beside me, Kendall stiffened momentarily when she saw Kirk. She tried to hide her reaction, but I knew her too well. From somewhere deep in the recesses of my memory, I recalled that she'd had a girlhood crush on him. Evidently, she hadn't completely outgrown it.

With a silent chuckle, I shook his hand and then tried to hide a smirk as Kendall's breathing quickened when she greeted him. Then I turned to Kirk's girlfriend, who was *nothing* like I expected. She was blonde, lithe, and pretty, but nearly flat-chested. She had a bubbly personality, though, and I easily understood Kirk's attraction.

"Hi," she said immediately, "I'm Dawn."

After introductions all around, she and Kirk pulled over two lounge chairs and spread their towels. While Susan and her sons talked, I turned back to *The Catcher in the Rye*. Next to me, Kendall surreptitiously glanced at Kirk again. Then she deliberately focused on her Organic Chemistry book.

Out of the corner of my eye, I watched her fight a losing battle to keep her eyes from drifting to Kirk. It didn't bother me, though, since I knew who she was going to bed with at the end of the day—me. Besides, if I could look at other girls, I could hardly begrudge her the same opportunity with other guys. In the end, my biggest problem was trying not to chuckle.

✧ ✧ ✧

Around five o'clock, Doug and Olivia packed their gear and food. We gathered to see them off, and after waves all around, they headed across the dam. Kendall slipped her hand into mine as we watched them go.

"I like Olivia," she said quietly.

"She and Doug seem like a happy couple." I grinned mischievously. "But Olivia's not the only one you like."

Kendall looked at me in alarm.

"I saw how you were looking at Kirk." Her eyes widened and she started to deny it, but I cut her off with a gesture and a chuckle. "It doesn't bother me."

"It doesn't?"

"I know you used to have a crush on him… still *do*, if only a little—"

Her guilty blush was answer enough.

"—and that's okay. I mean, I look at other girls, but that doesn't mean I'm going to have sex with them. So I can't really object if you look at guys, can I?"

"No, you can't," she said, regaining a bit of her composure. Then she turned sheepish. "Was I that obvious?"

"Sort of, but not really. I just know you. Besides, you took thirty minutes to read two pages."

She laughed ruefully. "I'm going to have to reread the whole section."

I squeezed her hand.

"You really don't mind if I look at other guys?" she asked. "Not that I need to ask your permission…"

I chuckled and shook my head, part answer, part amusement.

✧ ✧ ✧

Susan asked Chris to grill steaks for dinner ("Great, *huge* hunks of dead cow!" Elizabeth teased), and Gunny and Lenore joined us with a cooler full of beer. While the women fixed side dishes in the kitchen, the men clustered around the grill, beers in hand. In reality, the night had turned nippy, and the warmth pouring from the grill felt good.

Dinner was thoroughly enjoyable, with several bottles of wine and good conversation. By suspicious coincidence, Kendall and I ended up sitting next to Kirk and Dawn. I glanced at Kendall sidelong, but she affected innocence, so I smiled to myself and turned my attention back to the conversation.

Kirk had recently finished advanced flight training, and had just been assigned to a Fleet Readiness Squadron to learn to fly a new plane, the A-7 Corsair II. When I asked, he described the differences between the A-4 and the A-7, but then Dawn unobtrusively put her hand on his.

He took the cue and changed the subject—to *me*. Susan had told him all about my dreams of becoming an architect, and he seemed genuinely interested in my summer plans. When I grew self-consciously silent, Dawn smoothly turned the conversation to Kendall, who talked about becoming a psychiatrist.

"And what do you do?" Kendall asked Dawn a few minutes later.

"I'm a financial advisor," she said. "That's how Kirk and I met."

"Oh?"

"Mmm hmm," Dawn said. "One of my partners manages his assets." She leaned forward, in an aside. "It nearly killed me when I realized what kind of portfolio he had."

"Is that what Kirk calls it?" Kendall quipped.

Dawn laughed brightly. "No, he doesn't have a name for his equipment." She smiled at him. "Do you honey?"

Kirk grimaced affably.

"But I thought I'd never get to see his equipment in the first place," Dawn said with feigned petulance.

"Oh?" Kendall said.

"He never asked me out," Dawn said. "I've got a strict 'no dating the clients' policy, but since he wasn't *my* client…" She shrugged. "So I took matters into my own hands."

"What did you do?" I asked.

"I did what any woman would."

"You were underhanded and sneaky," Kirk said.

"It *worked*, didn't it?" Dawn shot back with a grin.

"She had her secretary call me to set up a meeting with Tom, my advisor," Kirk said. "When I got to the office, he'd already left for the day." He turned lightheartedly rueful. "I should've been suspicious about a five thirty meeting."

Dawn grinned devilishly.

"Dawn was conveniently working late, though," Kirk said.

"So I offered to buy him a drink," she finished smugly.

I felt my eyebrows shoot up involuntarily. “You mean *you* asked *Kirk* out?”

“And why shouldn’t she?” Kendall said, her tone a cross between indignant and teasing.

I held up my hands in surrender.

Kirk merely grinned at my predicament.

“We’re living in the Eighties,” Kendall continued, “not the Fifties.”

“More wine, sweetheart?” I offered by way of apology.

She relented with a smile (especially since I’d called her “sweetheart”).

After I filled her glass, I topped off Kirk’s and Dawn’s as well.

“How did you become a financial advisor?” I asked Dawn.

“Not the easy way, that’s for sure,” she said. “It’s still a business with a good ol’ boy network, but word got around that I was actually making money for my clients. Good money, too. And with the stagnation in the market, that was no mean feat. Fortunately, things are looking better.” She leaned forward confidentially. “Between you and me, I wouldn’t be surprised if we see a bull market by July, August at the latest. I see signs of…”

Dawn was energetic, smart, and very ambitious, and the four of us talked until well after the dishes had been cleared and everyone else had adjourned to the living room.

“I’m sorry to interrupt,” Susan said from the doorway, “but I thought I’d go for a walk with Chris and Elizabeth.” She looked at her watch.

I looked at mine as well, and received a shock: we’d been talking for more than *two hours*.

“We should be back in an hour or so,” Susan continued. “Erin and Leah have gone up to the Coulters’ cabin, and Jeremiah and Lenore are headed home as well, so you’ll have the house to yourselves for a while.”

“Thanks for letting us know, Mom,” Kirk said.

“I’m sorry we monopolized Kirk and Dawn,” Kendall said.

Susan waved a dismissive hand. “Don’t worry about it. We’ll have lots of time. In the meantime, the hot tub is warm, if you want to use it.”

“Thank you very much, Susan,” Dawn said.

Susan smiled graciously and turned to Kirk. “There are plastic wine glasses in the cupboard. Please use them if you take a bottle out to the tub. And you know where the wine is, if I recall.”

He grinned guiltily and nodded.

With that, Susan joined Chris and Elizabeth in the kitchen, where they donned jackets and shoes to ward off the spring chill in the air. Then they lingered as Gunny and Lenore came to say goodnight. After hugs and handshakes (and an affectionate salute for Kirk), the grizzled Marine extended his arm to Lenore and they headed out, with Susan and the Coulters close behind.

“‘You know where the wine is’?” Dawn said to Kirk.

He laughed.

“Do tell.”

“When I was sixteen,” he said at last, “I had a party with a couple of… um… ‘friends.’”

“Girls?” Dawn asked archly. Then she grinned sidelong at Kendall.

“Anyway,” Kirk pressed on, “we raided the wine for our little party.”

“Oh, really?” Dawn said, her eyes twinkling with laughter.

“But I’m an officer and a gentleman,” Kirk said, “so I won’t go into further details.”

“Fascinating,” Dawn teased. “I’d love to cadge the rest of the story out of you, but let’s grab

some more wine—I believe you know where it is—and head to the hot tub."

A minute later we settled into the bubbling water. Kirk opened the bottle and poured four glasses. I was beginning to feel the effects from all I'd drunk during dinner, so I decided to switch to Coke once I finished my current glass.

"Do you all mind if I get drunk?" Dawn suddenly asked.

Kendall and I blinked. "No, not at all," I said at last.

"I'm not a sloppy drunk or anything," Dawn added, "but I don't get the chance very often, so…"

"I think I'll join you," Kendall said. Then she glanced at me with a half-sheepish expression.

"Fine by me," I said. "I won't take advantage of you… *much*."

Dawn giggled, but Kendall merely flashed her eyes at me and smiled a secret little smile.

For the next half-hour, the conversation was brisk and wide-ranging, with all of us drinking and enjoying ourselves. When I finished my wine, I decided to abide by my decision to switch to Coke.

"I'm going to cool off for a minute and get something else to drink," I said. "Does anyone want anything while I'm up?"

"Get me a Coke, if you don't mind," Kirk said, his thoughts obviously running parallel to mine. Then he emptied the remaining wine into the girls' glasses.

I nodded at the empty bottle. "Another?"

He glanced at Dawn and Kendall, who quickly nodded.

I returned a few minutes later with two Cokes and a bottle of wine. Kirk opened it and poured while I slipped into the water.

"Thanks for letting me get drunk," Kendall whispered in my ear, her speech deliberate. "I'll make it up to you. Just don't let me get *too* drunk. I have plans…"

I merely arched an eyebrow in challenge.

"*Big* plans," she said, her fingers seeking my flaccid manhood. "And getting bigger by the minute," she added as I began to swell.

"No whispering!" Dawn called across the tub, obviously tipsy. "Share with the group."

"I just thanked him for letting me get drunk," Kendall said. "And then I told him I'd make it up to him. I've got plans for him… *big* plans."

Dawn cooed, her interest piqued.

"And getting bigger by the minute," Kendall repeated boldly.

My jaw dropped.

"What an excellent idea," Dawn gushed.

I chuckled as Kirk's eyes widened. She must have grabbed his dick, and her smirk confirmed my suspicions.

"That's the problem with dating liberated women," Kirk said wryly. "They know what they want and they're not afraid to go for it."

"I'll show you 'go for it,'" Dawn said, drunkenly playful. After trying to tickle Kirk and being defeated, she settled down. Then she turned mischievous, and her glance slid to Kendall. "I hope you don't mind me saying so, but you've got the most amazing tits."

Kendall blushed.

"I mean it," Dawn continued. "They're fantastic." She looked down at her own nearly

nonexistent breasts. “I wish mine were bigger… ’stead of just mosquito bites.”

Kirk and Kendall spoke at once: “I like ’em.” “They’re bigger than *that*.”

“Seriously,” Kirk repeated, “I think they’re fine.”

“Yeah, well, you’re not interested in my tits in the first place,” Dawn said to him. Then she took a sip of wine and looked at Kendall. “I’ve got a magic pussy,” she said matter-of-factly.

We all laughed.

“I *do*,” Dawn said. “Just ask Kirk.”

Kirk chuckled, but nodded.

“And speaking of magic pussies,” Dawn continued, her eyes fixed on Kendall, “what’s up with the lack of pubic hair around here? I mean, I haven’t seen so many hairless pussies since I was at Girl Scout camp.”

“Paul likes me to shave,” Kendall said.

“Yeah, but what about Olivia?” Dawn asked.

“I guess Doug likes the bald look too,” Kirk said.

“And your mother?” Dawn said.

Kirk shrugged. “She’s been like that as long as I can remember.” With that, he laughed.

“What?” Dawn asked, looking suspicious.

“I remember when I started paying attention to women—”

“Prob’ly when you were ten,” she interjected.

“Close,” Kirk said. “But for a while, I thought they looked weird with pubic hair.”

“Then how come you don’t want me to shave?” Dawn asked.

“’Cause you’ve got a ‘magic pussy,’” he demurred.

That seemed to satisfy Dawn, who suddenly wrapped herself around him and kissed him. She turned and grinned over her shoulder at us. “Sorry,” she said, “I didn’t mean to interrupt.” Then, incongruously: “Is there any more wine?”

Kirk smiled and filled her glass. As she resumed her seat, he reached across the tub to fill Kendall’s outstretched glass as well.

“You really do have fantastic tits,” Dawn said again.

When Kendall moved to sit back down, I guided her to my lap instead. My erection slid between her thighs as she half turned and looked a question at me.

“I thought you should sit up,” I said, grinning whimsically, “so we can talk about your tits. We couldn’t really see ’em before.”

“’Zactly,” Dawn said. Then she turned to Kirk. “What d’you think of ’em, honey?”

He hesitated for a moment, glancing at me.

I inclined my head minutely.

“Seriously,” Dawn prodded, “what do you think of Kendall’s tits?”

Kendall put her arm over my shoulder and held her breath. The tits in question shone with water, full and round, her nipples puckered in the cool air.

“I think they’re fantastic,” Kirk said at last.

Kendall’s face lit with delight, and I made a mental note to tease her about it. Then I grew bold: I reached up and cupped her breast, startling her.

“I think they’re fantastic too,” I said.

“Is it getting hot in here?” Dawn asked, only half joking.

"I think it is," Kendall said.

Without warning, Dawn hoisted herself out of the water and sat on the edge of the tub, her body steaming in the cool air. When Kendall saw that Kirk was looking at her, she followed suit, her breasts swaying as she settled herself.

"Aren't you hot, guys?" Dawn asked suggestively.

Kirk and I looked at each other, both of us undoubtedly thinking the same thing: *what about my hard-on?*

"Oh, come on," Kendall said, as if reading my mind, "I'm sure Dawn won't mind."

"Mind what?" Dawn asked, feigning innocence. A moment later she and Kendall broke into giggles. "Poor guys," she said at last. "Are you hard? Hmm?"

Kirk shrugged. "What'd you expect? We've got two hot women flirting with us…"

"And playing with your dicks," Kendall said, slurring a little.

"And playing with your dicks," Dawn echoed. With a grin: "Big plans… and getting bigger by the minute."

"Oh, I think it's as big as it's gonna get," Kirk said sardonically.

"Then show us," Kendall demanded. She glanced at me nervously, but then held her chin high, defiant in case I objected.

"Yeah, c'mon, guys," Dawn said, "show us your cocks."

"Show your cocks!" Kendall cried.

With a half-stifled giggle, the girls began chanting "Show your cocks!" over and over.

Kirk and I exchanged a sober look, both of us marveling at our decidedly *un*-sober girlfriends.

"What the hell," he said at last.

I shrugged in agreement.

With that, we lifted ourselves out of the water at the same time. I couldn't help glancing at his dick; it was at least as long as mine, and just as thick. At the sight of it, Kendall stiffened and took a quick sip of wine to cover her reaction.

"Nice," Dawn said, unabashedly looking at my jutting dick.

Kirk and I shared another semi-incredulous look and shook our heads in wonder.

"What's the matter?" Kendall asked, recovering her composure. "Can't women look at men's dicks? You look at our tits."

"And our pussies!" Dawn cried.

"And our pussies," Kendall agreed with a nod. "So why can't we look at your dicks?"

"Their *cocks*," Dawn said. "We like looking at their *cocks*."

Kendall gazed at Kirk, an eyebrow arched in challenge.

"Be my guest," he said, returning her gaze.

Incredibly, Kendall's eyes lowered and she looked directly at Kirk's manhood.

"Now that we've got *that* settled," Dawn said, oblivious, "I want some more cock… er, *wine*." She and Kendall giggled girlishly.

With a smirk, Kirk filled the girls' glasses.

The conversation picked up again, with all of us trying not to be obvious about staring at each other. But we were definitely staring, and I caught Dawn looking at my dick more than once. Kirk was fighting a losing battle not to stare at Kendall's breasts, and for her part, Kendall's eyes kept flicking to his erection.

"I love your waist chain," Dawn said to Kendall during a lull in the conversation.

Kendall glanced at it and then smiled.

In amazement, I watched her uncross her legs and spread them slightly. Then she splayed her fingers over her stomach, mere inches from her smooth slit. She quickly glanced at Kirk to make sure he was watching. He was, so she spread her legs a bit more.

"Where'd you get it?" Dawn asked, drawing my attention from Kendall's little show.

"Paul gave it to me," she said, smiling fondly.

"I like how the pendant thing points toward your pussy," Dawn said. Then she looked thoughtful. "Does Paul go down on you more since you're shaved?"

I nearly blew Coke through my nose. When I finally recovered, everyone was looking at me with a mixture of concern and amusement.

"Are you okay?" Kirk asked.

I wiped my chin and nodded. "I guess I just didn't expect…" I gestured vaguely.

"That's my girl," he said. "Full of go-for-the-throat questions."

"Well, I wanted to know," Dawn said, semi-defensively. "I mean, we're all friends here, right?"

"Right," Kendall said immediately, lifting her glass.

"So, does Paul go down on you more since you shave?" Dawn repeated with drunken earnestness.

Kendall smiled and glanced at me. Her eyes barely lingered on Kirk as she turned back to Dawn. "I don't think it's because I shave," she said diplomatically.

I felt my face heating, but my dick throbbed sadistically, as if it might get harder still.

"No, seriously," Dawn pressed. "Most guys get really excited when we talk about our pussies. Why do you think I say I've got a 'magic pussy'?"

"Oh," Kendall said, "I understand." After a moment's consideration, she glanced at me and then shook her head. "Maybe he gives me a *little* more attention, but I end up going down on him a lot more than he does me."

I tried not to inhale my Coke a second time.

"Oh, I do," Kendall teased me gently. "I give you head a lot more than you go down on me."

"I went down on you this morning," I said, trying not to sound defensive, heedless of the other couple.

"I know, and I returned the favor," she said. "But how many times have I gone down on you when you *haven't* returned the favor?"

"I don't know. I mean, you're usually begging me to fuck you, so…" I made a helpless sound of frustration.

She smiled soothingly. "I know, and that's the way I like it."

"But you said…"

"I didn't say I felt *slighted*. I'm very happy with the way we do things. I *like* giving head. And I really like feeling you inside me. I like when you go down on me, too, but I like the other things more."

At that point, both of us grew conscious of the other couple, and Kendall's cheeks colored from more than the wine.

"I know what you mean," Dawn said in the ensuing silence. "Kirk does this incredible thing

with his tongue, and I just love running my fingers through his hair. But I'm like you; I like fucking and sucking more, especially since he's so well-hung."

It was Kirk's turn to look abashed. Kendall stiffened, and I had to hide a grin as her cheeks flushed deeper still.

"Paul's pretty well-hung, too," Dawn said, her eyes playful, "so we're both lucky."

Kendall took a sip of wine, but nodded in agreement.

"I mean, I've got a girlfriend who's dating a guy who's on the small side," Dawn continued. "According to her, he's not even that good at giving head. So I told her she should dump him and let Kirk do his thing for a couple of hours."

Kendall nodded attentively, but I could see the effort it took for her not to look at Kirk's hard-on. For the next few minutes, the girls talked about Kirk's and my sexual techniques. He seemed just as dumbfounded as I was, and we exchanged several incredulous looks as our girlfriends shared intimate details in their drunken camaraderie.

Fortunately, the spring air cooled the conversation as it cooled our skin, and the girls slipped back into the warmth of the water. Kirk and I followed suit, and Kendall's fingers quickly found my erection.

"Ask for some more wine," I whispered to her. "But when you sit back down, I want you to sit on my lap." I paused for effect. "On my *dick*."

She stiffened as the implications of what I'd said worked their way through the fog of alcohol. Then she breathed a soft moan of anticipation.

"Ready? Go," I said softly.

She paused a moment, mustering her courage. Then she drained the remainder of her wine—*liquid* courage—in one swallow. Kirk saw, and reached for the bottle before she could ask. When he finished pouring, she nervously looked back at me.

With a secret grin, I watched her left shoulder shift as she thrust her arm between her legs. I guided her hips back and felt her fingers wrap around my shaft. She set the tip at her opening and eased back. Halfway down, she stopped, her pussy tight around my manhood. When Dawn saw her expression, she grew concerned.

"Are you okay?"

"What? Huh? Yes, I'm fine," Kendall stammered.

I pulled her down a little more, my thick cock spreading her open. At my gentle insistence, she turned her shoulders and put her arm around my neck. Her breast was distractingly close to my face, but at least her body wasn't blocking my view of the other couple. Finally, she settled onto my lap, my cock filling her completely.

"Oh, yes," she groaned without thinking.

Dawn was drunk, but hardly stupid; her eyes lit up, and they flicked from me to Kendall and back again. She arched a questioning eyebrow, but I merely gazed back at her with all the equanimity I could muster.

"Are you sure you're okay, Kendall?" Dawn asked.

"What?" Kendall said, a little dazed. "Oh, yes, I'm fine. I guess the wine went to my head. This'd better be my last glass."

"Do you want me to get you a Coke?" Kirk asked.

"More like a *cock*," I whispered.

"No, thanks, I'm fine," Kendall said, her face flushed from a combination of the comment, the wine, and my dick.

Conversation resumed a few moments later. Dawn obviously knew what we were up to, but if Kirk did, he didn't show it. He *did* look relaxed and happy (especially with Kendall's generous breasts in full view). And judging by the angle of Dawn's arm across his chest, he had another reason to look like he was enjoying himself.

With a grin, I turned back to my *own* reason to enjoy myself. Even though Kendall was impaled on my cock, she didn't squeeze me with her internal muscles; she'd drunk enough that she couldn't muster the concentration.

While we talked, I mercilessly teased Kendall's clit. Dawn's arm moved almost imperceptibly, and Kirk spoke less and less. Kendall didn't say much either, so Dawn and I did most of the talking. Our conversation was laced with sexual innuendo, but it was mostly lighthearted, since both of us were paying attention to our partners.

Dawn's eyes twinkled mischievously and she kept glancing at Kirk to judge his reaction. He was trying to act nonchalant, but he was having a tough time. Kendall was squirming with pent-up ecstasy, though, so she didn't notice.

Finally, Dawn smiled triumphantly and Kirk stiffened. He didn't make a sound as she stroked him to completion. When his orgasm subsided, his head lolled for a moment, but then his eyes snapped open.

"Why'd everyone stop talking?" he asked.

Dawn chuckled.

Kendall laughed too, but hers was simply an automatic reaction.

I smiled at Dawn and inclined my head in admiration. Even drunk, her expression held a playful eagerness. For a moment or two, I imagined having a foursome with her and Kirk. I was usually attracted to women with bigger breasts, but Dawn had a certain indefinable *something* which made her incredibly attractive.

I closed my eyes and pictured her beneath me, her expression urging me on as I pumped into her, my cock filling her completely. I'd just begun to wonder how I could ask them if they were into swinging when Dawn spoke up.

"Time to take me to bed," she said. "I need some of that attention we've been talking about."

My eyes snapped open and I started to reply. Then I realized how ridiculous that would seem, so I shut my mouth abruptly.

Dawn looked at me and grinned with drunken misunderstanding.

I smiled wryly, as much amused by my own reaction as by her expression.

"Huh?" Kirk said.

"It's time to give my magic pussy a little attention," Dawn said to him.

He merely grinned at her.

Kendall looked at me, her eyes unfocused. "What's going on?" she whispered.

Belatedly, I realized that I was still playing with her clit. I jerked my fingers from the sensitive bud.

She frowned blankly.

"I guess it looks like we're gonna head to bed," Kirk said.

"Ooooh, goody," Dawn said, clapping her hands with girlish enthusiasm. "Happy pussy!"

Kirk glanced at her and merely shook his head in amusement, his cheeks coloring slightly.

As the other couple stood, I gently lifted Kendall off my shaft.

"Are you two gonna stay in the tub," Kirk asked, "or head up to your cabin?"

"We'll probably head up to the cabin," I said. "I'm getting a little waterlogged." That was true, but I also wanted to fuck Kendall. When I glanced at her, she nodded, her eyes shining with lust.

"Then let's put the cover on the tub," Kirk said.

With that, we climbed out of the water. After Kirk's orgasm, his dick hung limp, while I still had a raging hard-on that we all pretended to ignore. Well, *Kirk and I* ignored it; I noticed both girls casting surreptitious glances my way.

As I turned off the hot tub's jets, Kirk tugged the unwieldy cover into place. After we seated it properly, Kendall handed me a towel. When I finished drying myself, I wrapped it around my waist, but my hard-on made a noticeable bulge. Kendall had also wrapped her towel around her waist, leaving her breasts in full view. Dawn followed suit, and for a surreal moment, we all looked at each other, no one sure what to say.

Kirk and I broke the tension by diffidently shaking hands; a half-second later, the girls hugged each other. Then Kendall gave Kirk a hug, her breasts flattening against his chest. That left Dawn and me in an awkward position. To follow Kendall's lead, Dawn would have to dodge my towel-covered erection as she hugged me. But if she merely shook my hand, she'd appear standoffish.

I watched those same thoughts flicker across her expression, but then she moved to hug me. My erection pressed into her stomach and I felt her lips near my ear.

"You're so wicked," she whispered.

I merely grinned as she pulled back.

After another round of goodnights, the other couple waved as Kendall and I headed out. We didn't make it out of sight of the lights of the house before I tugged her towel loose. She squawked at the unexpected assault, but I quickly silenced her with my lips. Then I pulled her close, my tongue invading her mouth as I pawed at my own towel. A moment later it joined hers, my erection bobbing free.

Without words, I turned her to face a pine tree and she braced herself against it, arms outstretched as she watched me over her shoulder. I entered her from behind, her pussy molten around my cock. Then I gripped her hips and began pumping into her, the slapping sounds of our sex filling the quiet pine forest.

As I thrust, I reached forward and cupped her swinging breasts, squeezing gently, enjoying how the pliant flesh moved under my strong fingers. Then I slid my left hand to her pussy, teasing the hidden pearl of her clit with my fingertips.

Since we were both so worked up, we didn't last long. I buried myself inside her and unleashed a torrent of semen, filling her with white-hot blasts. Then, still panting, I bent over her back, my fingers busy at her clit. I felt the first twinges of her orgasm a moment later, her pussy clamping around my softening dick.

A flood of warmth surrounded my cock, both my own fluids and hers. I tugged on her nipple with one hand while the other moved in small circles over the hard bead of her clit. My cock was still buried inside her, so I rocked my hips, moving my semi-hard shaft against her inner ridges.

She gasped and then grew silent, her pussy spasming in quick waves. Finally, she sagged against the tree, her back heaving as she panted. I cupped her breasts and pulled her toward me, straightening as I did. My breath warmed her ear as I kissed her gently, our bodies still joined.

We enjoyed the tingling post-orgasmic sensations until the night air penetrated our bliss. We found our discarded towels, but they were damp and freezing, so we ran the rest of the way to the cabin.

Once inside, we immediately hopped into the shower, the water as hot as we could stand it. Our ardor had cooled with the frigid run up the hill, but after a few minutes under the spray, it returned full force. I pulled Kendall against me, my tongue invading her mouth.

"Oh my goodness," she panted between kisses, "you make me so hot."

"Kirk makes you hot too," I said without reproach.

"Dawn's so lucky," she said. Then her eyes snapped open and she studied my reaction.

I merely smiled and waggled my eyebrows at her.

"You don't mind?"

"I really don't mind," I said. "As a matter of fact, I was trying to figure out how to invite them to join us, but…"

Kendall's eyes fairly blazed with lust. "You were?"

"Yeah. Dawn's cute, and I know you'd love to have sex with Kirk—"

"In a heartbeat," she said, the wine removing all traces of inhibition. "I'd spread my legs for him in a heartbeat." She covered her mouth in surprise when she realized what she'd said.

I felt a pang of jealousy, but only a small one, and I banished it with a chuckle.

"Oh, Paul, I'm so sorry. I didn't mean it like that—"

"Don't worry about it," I said. "I think it's sexy when you talk about spreading your legs."

As if to assuage my bruised ego, she kissed me, her hand dropping to my erection. I pulled her close, her breasts flattening between us. The shower chose that moment to turn tepid and then cold. With rueful looks, we separated and I turned off the water.

"Did you really mean it?" she asked a moment later, as we dried off.

"Did I really mean what?"

"Do you think it's sexy when I talk like that?"

"Like what?"

"When I talk dirty."

I shrugged. "I guess. Why?"

"'Cause sometimes I feel like talking dirty to you, but I don't want to seem like a slut."

"You're not a slut," I said with a chuckle. "Besides, even if you were, you'd be *my* slut, so that's okay."

She grinned and kissed me again. "I love being dirty for you," she said when we broke the kiss. "I love shaving my pussy. I love when you come on my face. I love when you fuck me in front of another couple. I love all the things you make me do—the things I *want* to do, but don't have the courage to do without you."

She kissed me again, and as our kisses heated up, we groped our way to the bed. We fell onto it in a tangled heap, but I didn't care. It felt good not having to worry about roommates, visitation hours, or any other distractions of campus life.

We kissed for a long time, our hands roaming, teasing, and caressing with familiar intensity.

We weren't in a hurry, and we took turns pleasuring each other. She sucked me for a while, but then I rolled her to her back and climbed between her legs, my face parting her inner thighs.

I spent several long, languorous minutes nuzzling her pussy, but then climbed up her body, kissing as I went. When I rolled to my back, I pulled her with me and she kissed my chest, her hands gliding over the muscles of my sides.

We kissed for a little longer, but I could tell that she wasn't in the mood to have sex again. Not immediately, at least. I was hard, but it was a pleasant feeling, not urgent. So her mood suited mine perfectly

"Wow," she said softly as she settled against me, our legs entwined. After a few moments, she lifted her head and gazed down at me, the embers of lust still burning in her eyes. "Were you really thinking about inviting Kirk and Dawn to join us?"

I nodded.

"That would be so sexy. Kirk's got such a gorgeous dick. Not as gorgeous as yours," she added quickly, "but I'd love to have you and him fuck me at the same time. I've never actually had two guys at once."

"I thought you had," I said, thinking back.

"Well, sort of," she said. "Your dad went down on me while I gave Dennis Raeford a blowjob, but that's it. I've never had two guys fuck me at the same time."

I arched an eyebrow.

"You've had two women, so why can't I have two men? You've had *more* than two women at once. I should get equal time."

At first, I thought she was overreacting for effect, but with a start, I realized that she was serious.

"Yes, I'm serious," she said, reading me perfectly. "I like sex as much as you do. So what's the matter if I want two guys to fuck me at once? What about three? Heck, I've got hands too; I could jerk off two guys while the rest fucked me."

"Do you *really* want to have sex with five guys at once?" I asked, a little incredulous.

She turned sheepish. "No, not really," she said at last. "I guess that's just a fantasy. But two would be nice: you and Kirk."

"And what about Dawn?" I asked, only a touch facetiously.

"I'll go down on her when I'm done with you and Kirk!"

"Ha!"

"You don't think I would?!"

"I know you would," I said, placating her, my expression sincere. Then I chuckled.

"What?" she asked, her feminist dander still up.

"Nothing," I said, unsuccessfully smothering the chuckles.

"What?!"

"I guess I was just laughing because you're pretty worked up about Kirk."

"So? Why shouldn't I be? The whole time we were in the hot tub, I kept thinking about what his dick would feel like. And then it felt so good when he got hard as I hugged him. So why sh—"

"He got hard?"

She looked at me blankly for a moment, repeating her words in her head. Then her cheeks

turned rosy.

I merely arched an eyebrow.

"He's a man," she said defensively. "What's he supposed to do when a half-naked woman hugs him? Besides, it's not *my* fault he likes my tits."

Although you definitely know how to use 'em, I thought glibly. I tried not to smirk, but she knew me too well

"What's that look supposed to mean?" she asked, genuinely piqued.

I decided to stop teasing her. In a flash, I rolled her to her back and straddled her thighs. "It means," I said deliberately, "that I love you. I love that you've got big tits, and that you know how to use them. I love that you want to have sex with two guys at once, and that you're willing to *tell* me about it.

"I love that you shave your pussy," I continued. "I love that you like me to come on your face. I love that you like me to fuck you in front of other people. And I love that you do all those things I 'make' you do. In short, Kendall Lynn Payton, I love everything about you. So there," I finished with a grin, "*that's* what that look's supposed to mean."

Abashed, she merely blinked for a moment. Then her expression softened. "Really?"

"Mmm hmm," I said with a nod. Then I kissed her, long and lingering and full of heat.

"Oh, my," she muttered when I pulled back.

The next thing I knew, she was kissing me, hard. She groaned into my mouth, the taste of wine on her breath as her tongue sparred with mine.

"Make love to me, Paul," she said when we finally broke the kiss.

I nudged her thighs apart and climbed between them in a flash, my erection bumping her mons as I settled into place. With practiced ease, I adjusted my angle and felt the tip of my cock slide down her slit. Her dusky eyelids fluttered shut when I entered her, and by the time I ground my hips against hers, her face was a mask of ecstasy.

We made love a long time, moving together effortlessly, our bodies synchronized. By the time I filled her with my seed, she'd already come once, and was working on number two. When I stopped moving, she slid her hand between us and began playing with her clit.

I could feel her labia moving around the base of my semi-hard shaft as she worked herself toward climax. I bent to suck her nipples, and a minute later, she stiffened, her pussy spasming around my shaft.

She looked into my eyes when her orgasm subsided and she returned to her senses. She didn't need to say "I love you." I felt it in my heart, and in my loins, and in every other body part that came into contact with hers.

✧ ✧ ✧

I awoke with a start the next morning. Kendall was snuggled close for a change, her leg thrown over mine. The blankets were all in place and I wasn't cold. Early morning sun filtered through the cracks in the shutters, but a quick look at my watch confirmed that it was barely past six o'clock.

Then I realized what had woken me: a soft knock on the door.

I gingerly rolled out from under Kendall's warm body and ran my fingers through my hair. Then I padded across the cold wood of the floor toward the door. When I opened it the sunlight nearly blinded me.

"Good morning," Susan said, entirely too chipper. "I was in the neighborhood, and I decided to stop by. Is it too early?"

"No, not at all," I said automatically. "C'mon in." One look at Kendall's nearly comatose form made me regret my answer.

Susan took a half-step inside and came to the same conclusion. "Maybe it *is* too early."

I grimaced in apology.

"Perhaps I should go. I'll see you at breakfast," she said diplomatically.

"No!" I blurted. Then, calmer: "I mean, you don't have to go. Um… why don't we step onto the porch."

She grinned affectionately.

"Sorry," I said without preamble, easing the door shut behind me. "I guess we had a late night."

Susan nodded.

"Did you come up here to… um…?"

"To do what?" she asked. When I stammered in reply, she took pity on me. "Yes, I thought you and Kendall might be up, and I wanted to spend some time with you."

"Spend some time with us?" I asked rhetorically, arching an eyebrow at the euphemism.

"Oh, all right," she said at last, smiling in self-deprecation, "I came up here hoping to get laid. I was horny, and I wanted to see you. There. Are you happy?"

I grinned.

"Oh, don't be smug," she said, feigning irritation.

"Yes, ma'am."

"And don't call me ma'am."

"No, ma'am."

"Who taught you to be so self-possessed in the first place?" she quipped. "I'll have to talk to whoever it was."

I chuckled softly. "I'm really not all that self-possessed," I said at last. "You just inspire hidden talents."

"Is one of your hidden talents taking pity on a horny woman?"

"I could probably do that." Grinning: "I've never *done* it before, but it shouldn't be too hard."

She rolled her eyes but then stepped close when I offered her a hug. "Oh, I forget how much I enjoy being with you," she said softly. Then she kissed my chest before stepping neatly to my side.

For a few minutes, we simply stood arm in arm and watched the stately progression of the sunbeams through the trees.

"I miss having a man in my life," she said quietly.

I looked a question at her.

"Having the boys home—and having you here—reminds me how much I miss having a man around. For a long time I didn't," she said, her voice still soft, but without remorse. "I didn't *allow* myself to. I lived in the world of my sons, raising them to be men. But now, I realize there's something missing in my life. And I don't mean sex, although that's what I came up here looking for," she continued. "I have my toys, and I occasionally get together with close friends, but that's not the same. It's not the same as someone to share my life with."

"No, it's not."

"I've really only loved three men in my life," she mused. "The first is beyond my reach, lost to time and distance and too much bitterness to overcome. The second is beyond my reach even more than the first, long-dead and buried."

"And the third?" I asked, knowing the answer even as I finished asking the question.

"Also beyond my reach," she said, a touch wistfully, "through youth and having his own life."

I wordlessly hugged her. "I'll always be a part of your life," I said softly.

"I know you will, but I can't *share* your life. Nor can I share mine with *you*. We'll always be friends, and I hope we'll always be lovers, physically or not, but we can't be partners."

My first urge was childish: to deny it. But then I started thinking rationally, and I kept my mouth shut. Even though I didn't speak, Susan sensed the agreement in my silence.

"Do you think I'll find someone to share my life with?" she asked in a rare display of uncertainty.

"Absolutely," I said without hesitation.

"I hope you're right."

"I am."

She nodded and rested her head on my chest as I enfolded her in my embrace.

"You'll find someone," I assured her softly.

From within my arms, she laughed. Then she stepped back half a pace and smiled up at my confused look. "I'd better find someone *soon*, though," she said, smiling with brimming eyes. "I'm still horny."

I laughed.

"I *am*," she said, her tone full of self-mocking defensiveness.

I started to offer to take care of her, or to wake Kendall and ask her to join us, but I didn't. Even though I was also horny (I was horny *every* morning), I didn't feel right about having sex with Susan without Kendall's knowledge, or rousing Kendall from a hung-over sleep. The little head certainly wanted me to, but the big head was firmly in control for a change.

"I know," Susan said, as if sensing my mood.

"It wouldn't seem right," I said softly, knowing she'd understand.

"You made the right decision."

I laughed, a bit ruefully.

"Yes?"

"I can't believe I just turned down sex with a beautiful woman."

"You're maturing."

I grimaced. "Don't tell anyone, okay?"

"Okay, I won't," she said with a laugh. Then she turned thoughtful. "You still think I'm attractive? After all, I just turned forty-two."

I tilted her chin and looked into her deep blue eyes. "I said I think you're *beautiful*," I corrected. "Women like Dawn are attractive. Even though she's smart and sexy and ambitious, she doesn't have the grace and poise of a forty-two-year-old. She doesn't have your *inner* beauty, not yet at least. I think she will, eventually… but for now, she doesn't. So yes, I think you're attractive. But I also think you're beautiful."

"You say the nicest things," she said, smiling with unshed tears.

I pulled her close and wrapped her in my arms. “That’s because I love you.”

✧ ✧ ✧

Later, I had breakfast with Susan and Kirk. Dawn was still fast asleep, and Kirk didn’t need to ask where Kendall was. Afterward, I scrounged some aspirin and headed back up to the cabin.

Kendall stirred but then pulled the covers over her head, so I roused her with the aspirin and a glass of water. She ended up drinking two more glasses before I could coax her into the shower. Her headache eventually dulled, and her stomach settled, but she was still feeling very delicate as we walked down the hill to meet the others at the lake. Dawn looked nearly as bad, and smiled in commiseration when she saw Kendall.

Around mid-morning, Erin and I drove to the airport to pick up our parents. When we returned, everyone was clustered in a group by the lake.

“What’s going on?” I asked Kendall.

“Doug asked Olivia to marry him,” she said, her hangover all but forgotten. Then she slipped her arm around my waist, her breast pressing against my side as she kissed my cheek. “She accepted, of course.”

“Well, good for Doug,” my dad said.

While the women clustered around Olivia, commenting on the ring and the details of the proposal, the guys congratulated Doug.

“You just had to do something first, didn’t you Dougie,” Kirk said, full of big-brotherly pride.

Doug merely grinned, still a bit bewildered by the enormity of it all.

The party later that day was a double celebration: part birthday party, part engagement party. Gunny and Lenore were there, of course, as well as the rest of the camp’s permanent residents. Most of them had watched Doug grow up, and they were happy for him.

To my surprise, Jason and Stacy were there as well. When Stacy saw Kendall and me, she smiled and said a quiet word to Jason. Then they headed toward us. I tried not to be obvious about it, but I studied her as she walked, her body as lithe and sexy as I remembered it.

“Susan didn’t tell me you’d be here,” she said. Then she leveled an accusing glare at the older woman, who had just joined us.

“She didn’t tell us you’d be here either,” I said, grimacing for effect. “I think someone wanted to see the surprise on our faces.”

“So sue me,” Susan said, smiling mischievously.

“Well, you could’ve told us, Susan,” Stacy said. Then she turned to indicate her fiancé. “Paul, you remember Jason?”

I nodded and shook his hand.

“And it’s good to see you too, Kendall. You both look great,” Stacy said. The two girls hugged in greeting, smiling as they pulled back.

As Stacy settled comfortably under Jason’s arm, I realized that she looked better than I’d ever seen her: polished, self-assured, and happy. She was a far cry from the emotionally battered girl whom Susan and I had met in a Winn-Dixie checkout lane. She was still the girl who’d been my friend and lover, but she had blossomed into a confident woman, and I marveled at the transformation.

“It seems I’m not the only one who’s still got a crush on someone from the past,” Kendall whispered when we had a moment alone.

I felt my face heating.

"But since you were so understanding about Kirk, I guess I should return the favor."

I arched an eyebrow at her.

"Oh, I've always thought Stacy was attractive. And Jason…"

"All right," I said, feigning exasperation, "don't go crazy with the whole 'it's okay to look at other guys' thing."

She laughed. "Okay," she said after a moment. "Jason's not really my type, though. He's too… soft. I like a leaner guy. Not *too* lean, though," she cautioned.

"Yes, dear," I said laconically.

With that, she smiled and fell quiet, hugging herself to my arm as we watched the other party guests.

A little while later, Stacy and I found ourselves in a pocket of silence. Kendall and Dawn were admiring Olivia's ring (again!), and Jason was talking to Gunny.

"You and Kendall look happy," Stacy said.

"We are. You and Jason look pretty happy too."

She practically beamed. A moment later she sobered. "Susan told me about you and Gina."

I took a deep breath in an effort to control my emotions.

"I'm sorry things didn't work out."

"Me too," I said simply.

"I always thought Kendall was more your type, though."

I looked a question at her.

She shrugged. "I don't know… I can't really explain it."

"That's okay," I said.

After a suitable silence, she turned and looked at me expectantly. "I want to ask you something, but you don't have to give me an answer right away. Okay?"

I nodded.

"You know Jason and I are getting married in October, right?"

"I didn't know you'd set a date."

"October 9th. So, now you know. But that's not what I want to ask."

I looked at her expectantly.

"I want you to be in the wedding party."

My eyebrows shot up.

"You know I don't have any family," she said by way of explanation, "and you're the closest thing I've got to a brother. So I thought you should be one of Jason's groomsman. If you want to, that is. And I want Kendall to be one of my bridesmaids, of course."

"Wow," I said. "Thank you very much."

"I don't need an answer right away, so talk it over with Kendall."

I nodded. Then a thought occurred to me. "Who's going to give you away?"

"Jeremiah."

I smiled at her girlish affection. "Of course I'll be a groomsman," I said at last. "And I'm sure Kendall would love to be a bridesmaid, but you're right, I need to talk to her first."

"I knew you would," Stacy said, nodding.

"It's that whole communication thing," I said affably. Then my mind drifted to Gina, and how

I'd screwed up "that whole communication thing" with her. Maybe Susan was right, maybe I *was* learning from my mistakes. I chuckled to myself in mild astonishment.

"What're you smiling about?" Stacy asked.

"Something Susan said."

"I find myself doing that a lot. Uncanny, isn't it?"

"No kidding."

"Well, we should probably get back to the party," she said after a companionable pause. "I don't want Kendall to think I'm trying to steal you away or something."

I shook my head, grinning.

Before we moved, however, she stopped, lost in thought. When she turned, she looked pensive.

"Is everything okay?" I asked, suddenly concerned.

"Oh, I'm all right," she said. "I… I just don't know how to say this, and I don't want to hurt your feelings." After a moment to gather her thoughts, she continued. "I think meeting you and Susan was one of the best things that ever happened to me, short of Randy taking off, that is."

I frowned at the mention of her abusive husband.

"And don't take this the wrong way, but I'm glad you and I never got more serious than we did. I really enjoyed our time together, but…"

"But?"

"But I've got something with Jason that I don't think you and I ever would've had."

I felt my brow furrow.

"It's hard to explain," she said vaguely. "He and I… we're… comfortable. Don't get me wrong, I still get tingles all over when I think about him, but I don't have to worry about what he thinks about me. Do you understand?"

"Not really," I admitted after a moment.

"I guess I always worried what you thought of me. Was I good enough? Was I smart enough? Was I respectable enough?"

"Of *course* you were respectable enough," I said immediately.

"Well, I'm glad *you* thought so," she said, "but I wasn't so sure. Now I am. Does that make sense? I *know* I'm good enough for Jason. He knows about my past, and he's never judged me. Oh, don't get me wrong, I don't think you ever judged me either, but…" She shrugged. "It's hard to explain."

"I think I understand," I said.

"I'm happy with Jason. I've come to grips with my past, and I guess I'm happy being me."

"Good," I said.

"I'm glad you understand." She shook her head. "It never would've worked between us. And now I know why."

I nodded, happy for her in spite of my uncertainty.

"But I wouldn't trade our time together for anything in the world," she said, her brown eyes full of love—*friendly* love.

"Me either," I said, firmly grasping one of the few things she'd said that I understood completely. Then, heedless of what anyone else might think, I put my arm around her and pulled her close.

She returned my hug, her body warm against mine.

When we separated, we exchanged bashful grins.

"Oh, my," she said, "is it warm in here?"

✧ ✧ ✧

As the party wound down, I sought out Susan.

"Kendall and I need to go soon," I said. "We've still got a long drive back to Knoxville."

Susan nodded.

"Happy birthday," I said. "I'm sorry Kendall and I couldn't get you a better present, but…" I shrugged. "We're on college students' budgets."

"Simply being here was the best present of all," she said. "And thank you for bringing Gina's present."

"I wish she could've been here…," I said, trailing off.

Susan stepped close and I put my arm around her, hers sliding around my waist. "That's okay," she said. "She called, and we had a long talk about it. It's the thought that counts, more than anything."

We lapsed into a companionable silence for a few moments. Then I looked down at her to judge her reaction. "I'm sorry about this morning," I said hesitantly. "About… you know."

"Love is about more than sex. Remember?"

I nodded, relieved.

"Besides," she added with a grin, "I managed to slip away with your parents before the party started."

I barked a laugh.

"I'm wily in my old age."

"You're *not* old," I said immediately.

She paused for a moment and then nodded. "You know, you're right. I don't feel old at all. Maybe I can't do everything I did when I was twenty-two, but I'm a lot better at the things I *can* do."

"I'll say," I playfully muttered under my breath.

"You had your chance," she teased.

"I know, and I'm glad you understand why I couldn't…"

She nodded.

"I *wanted* to, but…"

"I understand," she said, reassuring me. "Maybe some other time."

I nodded gratefully.

"Thank you again for coming," she said. "The camp is always so empty in the off-season, and it's good to have people here."

"Yeah, it's nice. I'm going to miss it this summer, though."

"Will you be working the whole summer?"

"I may get to spend a few days here, but…" I shrugged meaningfully. Then I told her about Trip's schedule. "So we'll be busy until about a week before school starts. *If* we're lucky, that is. Trip says something unexpected always happens, so we might be working until the last minute. I hope not, but…" I shrugged again, unconcerned. "I want to be an architect more than I've ever wanted anything, and if this is what I have to do…"

She nodded, her arm tightening around my waist in a supportive hug.

"I might fly in for the weekend every once in a while, but I don't know. I mean, if things go wrong, we'll be *working* on the weekends."

She nodded, and her expression turned businesslike. "How much do you expect to make?"

"Trip says fifteen to twenty percent. So we should make about ten thousand dollars each."

"That's worth working weekends," she said. Then she grinned.

"What?" I asked nervously.

"I was thinking that I'll have to hire you two to come renovate some of the buildings here. Then I'd be able to spend time with you during the summer." Another grin. "Not to mention the construction crews. All those handsome young men… hard muscles… even harder…" She trailed off with a laugh.

"Are you serious?" I said. "I mean, I don't know if you really want construction workers here in the summer. What about—"

"Oh, I'm kidding. Mostly," she amended. "I do need some renovations around here, but I'll probably have the work done in the off-season. But still… it'd be nice to have some strapping young men at my beck and call."

"You're incorrigible," I said. "And probably horny, too," I added in a more circumspect tone.

"Can you blame me?" She grinned, irrepressible and playful. "Now, where's your father when I need him?"

I rolled my eyes. "You're impossible," I said, unconsciously mimicking Wren. "Simply impossible."

"True. But I'm *your* impossible."

At her words, so much like Gina's, I sobered.

Susan sensed my mood and immediately grew quiet. "Was it something I said?" she finally asked.

I shook my head, a polite lie. "I was just thinking about Gina." After a moment, I snorted softly in regret. "Boy, did I screw up."

"Yes, you did," Susan said without reproach. "But you had help."

I looked a question at her.

"Gina and Kendall," she said simply. "Relationships don't usually fall apart because of one person."

"Yeah, I know, but still…" After a moment of silent contemplation, I forced a smile. "But I've got Kendall, and a summer job, and I'm doing well in school. Hell, I'm even starting to think Professor Joska might be good for me." I grimaced. "Although the jury's still out on that one. That man can drive me crazy faster than anyone I've ever met."

Susan laughed.

"But he makes me think… I'll give him that. And I guess maybe I haven't been thinking enough for the past couple of months. I've just been plodding along, letting life happen to me, instead of taking it by the reins." I laughed, short and sharp. "Life would be pretty boring if I were perfect."

"That's the spirit," she said.

I nodded. "I may have a lot to learn, but at least I *realize* it. That's better than most people, right?" Hesitantly, I looked to her for confirmation.

"A lot better," she said. Then she turned to smile at me fondly.

We shared a few unspoken words—more silent reassurance than anything else—and I hugged her tight.

✧ ✧ ✧

Kendall and I packed our things and said our goodbyes about an hour later. The drive home was long, but I actually enjoyed it. Kendall was in a good mood, and we talked about all sorts of things, from everyday stuff to our relationship, from Stacy's wedding to Kirk and Dawn.

By the time we got home, a little before midnight, I was tired, but not exhausted. Unfortunately, I was sunburned. Where Kendall had a faint tan, I had turned pink, and my shoulders and back had begun to itch. It wasn't a *bad* sunburn, but it would definitely be unpleasant for a couple of days.

The benefit of having a sunburn was that Kendall felt responsible (in reality, *neither* of us had remembered sunblock), and she offered to put lotion on my shoulders and back. One thing led to another, and she ended up riding me, her breasts swaying gently as she worked herself toward release. When she came, she shuddered quietly, my fingers busy on her nipples. Then she collapsed forward and I hugged her tight. As I began moving within her, she quietly told me how much she loved me, punctuated by kisses along my neck and ear.

I finally tensed up, my back arching as I spurted into her deepest recesses. When I finally came to my senses, I relaxed, my hips sinking to the bed.

"Wow," Kendall said.

"No kidding."

"Thank you for this weekend," she said after a moment. "I had fun, especially in the hot tub. And thank you for being confident enough to let me look at other guys. I know I don't need your permission in the first place," she added, "but it makes me love you even more."

I caressed her back in silent agreement.

"Oh, Paul," she said softly, breathily, "I'm glad you're part of my life."

With that, I caressed her again. As we drifted off to sleep, I thought about my life. For the first time in a long time, I was genuinely happy.

Chapter Thirty

As the weather warmed, I came to the conclusion that spring is a great time to be a guy on a college campus. T-shirts and halter tops replaced long-sleeve shirts. Short skirts and even shorter shorts replaced jeans and slacks. Arms and legs and cleavage appeared, creamy and white from the winter, ready to freckle and tan.

My sunburn faded, but Wren still teased me about it ("And what were you doing in South Carolina, that you got sunburned *down there?*"). She'd come back from Spring Break with an all-over tan, so she knew *exactly* what I'd been doing in South Carolina. Christy's surfing tan had deepened, highlighting her blonde hair and bright blue eyes. Even Kendall tanned better than I did, despite her winter-fair complexion.

Kendall, Abby, Trip, and I spent a couple of afternoons at the UT pool, but so did hundreds of other students. We quickly decided that we'd rather spend time at Abby's house instead, since it had a perfectly nice pool. So I got to work on my tan—*with* sunblock—and I spent the time reading for English class, working calculus problems, or doing any of a dozen other things my professors demanded.

The time by the pool was enjoyable, but since I was usually doing schoolwork, it wasn't nearly as relaxing as modeling. When I posed for Siobhan's classes, my mind roamed free. Unfortunately, Kendall had grown bored with modeling, and felt she could spend the time better, reading or doing schoolwork.

Wren and I had settled into a comfortable routine, and we talked as much as we flirted. We still had an undercurrent of mutual attraction, but neither of us openly pursued it. Christy and I spent our time together on our bench, which was another source of relaxation. She was easy to be around, and when she wasn't chattering happily, she was a good listener.

We spent most of our time drawing, though, which suited me fine. I even asked her to give me tips on drawing people, although I remembered the basics from high school art class. I knew I'd never have her deft touch, but I could see definite improvement when I leafed through my sketches.

For her part, Christy asked me to show her how to draw buildings. She had the basic skills, but her hand was freer than mine, less precise. Her eye saw things differently, too; where I saw straight lines and geometric shapes, she saw colors and textures and shades of light and dark. With a few gentle strokes of her pencil, she could change the emotion of a drawing, but she couldn't easily capture the beauty of a Greek temple's symmetry and classical proportions.

I chuckled about that more than once, but then I thought about my drawings of people. I could breathe life into a complex Beaux-Arts façade, but I couldn't capture simple facial expressions. The people in my drawings were stiff and still, nothing like the ones who imbued Christy's sketchpad with life. I think she admired my talent as much as I admired hers, as different as they were. She had a gift I could only recognize, never imitate. But I realized I had an inimitable gift as well. I couldn't explain it, but I saw the "rightness" or "wrongness" of a building at a glance.

"I do the same thing with drawings of people," Christy said. "I can't explain it either, but I can just look at a sketch and it's either 'right' or 'wrong.' But the problem is, I can't *explain* what's 'wrong' with it, or tell someone how to do it 'right.' Siobhan *can*, and that's what makes her such a great teacher. I've learned more from her than I *ever* did in high school."

I nodded.

"Nobu could do the same thing," Christy mused, "but not about drawings of people or buildings or anything like that. He just had a way of looking at... the *world*, I guess." She shrugged. "He could see the beauty in anything. I think that's why I like Buddhism so much. It's more a way of looking at things than an actual religion."

"Is that why you don't see a problem being a Buddhist Catholic?" I asked, more teasing than serious.

"Absolutely," she said, taking me seriously, "although Simon thinks I'm crazy. He's an atheist, which *I* think is crazy. That's *another* reason my father doesn't like him." Suddenly, she cocked her head to the side and studied me. "What're you?"

"What am I what?"

"Are you Protestant? Atheist? What?"

I shrugged. "I never really thought about it. I mean, I didn't go to church growing up. I believe in God and all, but I guess I'm not really religious."

"Why not? Don't you want something to believe in?"

Once again, I shrugged. "I guess I believe in *me*. Yeah, God probably had a bit to do with the way I am, but He gave me free will, didn't He?"

"He did," she said, almost solemnly.

"So unless God's controlling my actions—"

"He isn't."

"—I guess I'm responsible for what I do. As much as I don't like to admit it sometimes," I added, sotto voce. I searched my feelings about God, but then shrugged. "I guess I don't think about it much."

"You should come to Mass with me sometime," she said. "I think you'd like it. I don't go very often, but I really enjoy the Consecration. It's… peaceful… and I feel so close to God. I mean, I'm the next best thing to a lapsed Catholic, but that doesn't mean I don't enjoy it when I go."

"Why don't you go very often?"

"One of the things I've never really liked about the Catholic Church is the idea that I need a priest to talk to God. If God loves each and every one of us—and I know He does—then I should be able to talk to Him whenever I want." She leaned over in an aside: "Don't tell my father that, though. Or my brother Harry, for that matter." She rolled her eyes. Then she grinned, her eyes dancing with mirth. "I've never been partial to the 'no sex before marriage' thing either." She laughed at my expression. "*Definitely* don't tell my father about that."

"Oh, I won't," I said, fighting not to laugh.

As we went back to drawing, my imagination wandered. Not surprisingly, I thought about Wren and Christy together, caressing each other with soft lips and insistent fingers. Fortunately, my sketchpad hid my erection, but it was a long time before I could concentrate well enough to finish my drawing.

A long time indeed.

✧ ✧ ✧

At the end of April, Trip and I flew to Franklin for the house closings. Coincidentally, we entered the landing pattern one plane behind my parents, who were in our family Cessna. Trip's father arrived a few minutes after we finished fueling the planes, and after greetings all around,

we drove to the bank.

It was a local bank, but they agreed to loan money on our house in Atlanta, simply due to the strength of their relationship with Trip and his father. My parents and I completed the paperwork for the second mortgage on our family's home, and with well-hidden nervousness, I signed and initialed my way into twenty thousand dollars of debt.

Our first house closing (the Colonial Revival) was scheduled for eleven o'clock, so we drove to the title company. Trip, Frank, and my father seemed completely blasé about the entire process, and I tried to affect the same self-assurance. My nerves were thrumming, though, and I had to fight not to fidget. My mother, perceptive as always, smiled at me confidently.

After lunch we returned to the title company to close on the Craftsman bungalows, which took nearly an hour and a half. With the stroke of a pen—many, *many* strokes, actually—I was in debt up to my proverbial eyeballs. Not counting the second mortgage, I was a joint signer on eighty thousand dollars of real estate. It was a stupendous amount of money, and my head swam with visions of all the things that could go wrong. Trip seemed to thrive on the challenge, though, and his mood had turned boisterous.

With the closings safely behind us, and three sets of keys in hand, we headed to the houses to take measurements so I could create accurate floor plans. We spent more than an hour in the Colonial Revival, and I filled a dozen pages of my sketchpad with drawings and dimensions (thank you, Professor Ledbetter!).

At the first Craftsman bungalow, we got lucky—*incredibly* lucky. When Trip stuck his head in the attic to see what was there, he discovered a large, crackling roll of paper. We spread the pages on the kitchen counter and shared a goofy, ear-to-ear grin.

"You know what these are, don't you?" he asked rhetorically.

"Of course I do," I said, gazing down at the deep blue paper. As I hastily scanned the drawings, I began to realize the magnitude of our discovery.

"What is it?" my mom asked as she entered the kitchen, drawn by the sound of our excitement.

"Construction blueprints," I said. "*Original* construction blueprints, from the Twenties."

With the plans in hand, I spent a half-hour making sure they reflected the actual layout of the house. After a cursory tour of the second house—which was identical—Frank drove us to meet the rest of his family for dinner.

Trip ordered a bottle of champagne, but Dad and I didn't drink any, since we had to fly. Unfortunately, we spent too much time at the restaurant, and twilight greeted us when we left. Worse, clouds had moved in and the visibility looked marginal for VFR.

After a pull-no-punches conversation with my father, Trip and I decided to spend the night with the Whitmans. My parents could've flown home, but Trip's stepmother insisted that they spend the night in the guest bedroom, and they graciously accepted. Later that evening Frank opened a bottle of champagne.

"To my son and his new partner," he said, raising his glass in a toast. "May they always find success."

"Hear, hear," my father said.

Trip grinned and I blushed as the others drank.

"To making a profit," Trip toasted, and we drank again.

I felt I should say *something*, so, awkwardly, I stood. “I guess I just want to thank Trip,” I said. Despite my uncertainty, I plowed on. “I mean, he didn’t think twice before offering to make me his partner. I never even *thought* about what I wanted to do this summer, but Trip’s been confident in me since I met him, and I guess maybe some of that is starting to rub off.”

At that point, I grew uncomfortably aware that I was making the longest toast of the evening, and I hoped my cheeks weren’t as rosy as they felt. “So I guess I just want to say thanks, Trip, for having confidence in me. I won’t let you down.”

He smiled and flashed me a thumbs-up.

“Oh!” I said suddenly. “I also want to thank my parents for having confidence in me, too. Thousands of *dollars* of confidence.”

My father smiled reassuringly.

“And thanks to Frank and Darlene for letting us spend the night,” I added, embarrassed that I’d forgotten them in my rambling. With that, I decided that I shouldn’t make impromptu toasts, so I hurriedly thought up a suitable conclusion. “I guess I just want to say thanks to all of you, for having confidence in us, and for doing everything to make sure we succeed.”

“Hear, hear!” Frank cried. “Here’s to Whitman Hughes Homes, to confidence, and to success!”

I drained my glass in one swallow. I’m sure my face turned redder still, but after one look at my parents’ proud expressions, I didn’t care.

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Trip and I actually had a bit of trouble on our return flight. President Reagan was in Knoxville to open the World’s Fair, and the Secret Service wanted to close the airspace around downtown. Fortunately, Earl Walker told them that we were students returning from a scheduled flight, so they allowed us to land.

Meeting the agents in their dark suits and sunglasses was a thrill I was willing to forgo, however. Still, we had a good story to tell at dinner that night with our friends. Christy surprised me by laughing when I got to the part about coming face to face with the dour agents.

“I always thought Secret Service men were handsome,” she said.

“Well, they’re not so handsome when they look like they want to shoot you,” I said.

Trip nodded emphatically.

Christy laughed again. “Oh, I’m sure it wasn’t all that bad.”

“You wouldn’t say that if *you’d* met them,” I said.

“But I *have* met the Secret Service,” she said, almost sweetly.

Wren smirked.

“Yeah, right,” I said.

“Paul,” Christy said patiently, “my father commands a *Carrier Battle Group*. There aren’t so many of those that they just pick any old sailor. Of course I’ve met the President… *and* his Secret Service agents.”

“You *have?*”

“Yes.” She giggled at the memory. “President Reagan’s very funny… and charming. And the agents were extremely polite. Mrs. Reagan even chatted with my mother and me while the President talked to my father. She’s a very smart woman.”

I looked at her in amazement.

Around us, conversation resumed as Trip fielded questions about our encounter with the agents.

Christy held my eyes, hers sparkling with laughter. I fought not to smile, but in the end, I couldn't help myself.

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A group of us went to the Fair the next day. Trip and I were *thoroughly* familiar with the major buildings (from Design projects), and had fun pointing out hidden details. The crowd was heavy, though, so we headed back to campus after a few hours.

The next evening, I got to work on the renovation plans. Even though it wasn't schoolwork, I decided to work in one of the A&A design labs. I had just finished for the night when I felt a presence behind me.

"And what project is this, Mr. Hughes?" Professor Joska's voice asked.

It was well after dinnertime, and I fought not to stiffen in surprise.

"You're surprised to find me here?" he asked.

"Um… yes, sir."

"One of my fifth-year design classes has a project due in a few days," he said, nodding toward a group of students at the other end of the lab.

The students were working on foamcore models, and I paused to study them for a moment. The groups were small, and they worked with practiced coordination, putting the final touches on their models or making last-minute changes. In a few years, I knew I'd be just like those students: one of a handful of survivors from the hundreds who'd entered the architecture program.

"So," Joska asked, intruding upon my fantasy, "what latest distraction is occupying your time?" He leafed through my drawings, giving them a keen-eyed appraisal.

"Trip and I are renovating houses this summer," I said. I felt a rush of overweening pride that I *should've* suppressed, but I guess I was trying to impress him. "I'm doing the design."

I expected a biting comment, but he surprised me by nodding thoughtfully. "Why are you removing this wall?" he asked, pointing to the plans for the bungalows.

"Because we want young families to buy the houses," I said, unconsciously falling into the familiar role of the student being grilled by the professor. "And they only have one bathroom. So I decided to take out this pantry—the wall wasn't load-bearing—and extend the master bedroom so I can add a private bath."

"You need to remember storage, too. Not only in the kitchen, but here as well," he said, indicating the linen closet between the two smaller bedrooms.

"The house already *has* storage," I said, pointing to the small closets in each of the bedrooms.

"But if you move your linen closet *here*," he said, pointing, "you can give these bedrooms larger closets, which means more storage space."

"But if I move the linen closet, then I'll have to redesign the master bath."

"Why not have the linen closet open into the master bath as well as the hallway?" he suggested.

"Because then I'd have to…" My voice trailed off as I actually *considered* his idea.

"You could have a full door for the hallway opening, but a cupboard-style door for the master bath. It would only be for the top shelves, but a housewife would be able to retrieve towels

without having to walk back into the hall."

I started to protest again, purely out of habit, but my words died unspoken. He was right, and I immediately saw the wisdom of his suggestion (even though I hated admitting it, however silently).

"Bring these plans by my office tomorrow, Mr. Hughes."

"Why?" I asked, not bothering to hide my suspicion.

"Think of it as extra credit," he said.

"Will I actually *get* extra credit?"

He smiled with a combination of amusement and benign tolerance. "No, but you *will* need a licensed architect to review them."

I looked at him in growing understanding. And dismay.

"And I wouldn't want your first real-world design project left to some unknown architect."

"You don't have to do that, Professor Joska," I said. "Trip has an architect lined up. I'm sure—"

"With all due respect to Mr. Whitman's choice in architects, I'm sure he doesn't understand your strengths and weaknesses as well as I do."

I clamped my mouth shut and suppressed a snarl of frustration.

"Do you know when my office hours are?"

Reluctantly, I nodded.

"Then I expect to see you there tomorrow."

In my mind, I was silently gnashing my teeth: Joska already ruled my academic life, and he'd just taken over a significant portion of my budding *professional* life as well. I wanted to rail at the injustice of it all. I wanted to tell him to mind his own damned business. I wanted to—

"I'll tell my secretary to expect you, Mr. Hughes," he said. With that, he nodded farewell and strode toward his fifth-year students without a backward glance. They greeted him deferentially, and I clenched my fists in exasperation.

There ain't no justice! I silently howled.

When I calmed down, I looked at my drawings again. I knew I couldn't get out of showing them to Joska—not if I wanted to stay in the architecture program—so they'd have to be *perfect*. Nothing less would satisfy him.

On top of all that, I still had my class projects to complete, and I knew that Joska wouldn't cut me any slack because I had house plans to work on as well. To make matters worse, his suggestion about the linen closet was both intuitive and clever. I could ignore it, but I knew myself well enough to admit that *I* wouldn't feel right if I didn't do the best job possible.

Unfortunately, the plans would take hours to redraw (especially to Joska's exacting standards), and I was supposed to meet Kendall. I reluctantly decided that she'd have to wait. I wanted to see her, but…

I started to pull out my eraser when I had a sudden thought: I hadn't made time for *Gina*, either, and it had cost me the relationship. After thinking it over for several moments, I went to the lab's campus phone and called Kendall.

"Hi, sweetie," I said. "I'm still at the design lab. And I'm sorry, but I've got another couple hours' work to do."

"But it's already nine o'clock," she said.

"I know. But I just had an idea, and I need to redo a drawing." Kendall wouldn't care whose idea it was, but I mentally chided myself for taking credit for it.

She sighed. "All right."

"Why don't you come down here?"

"To the A&A building?"

"Yeah. The desk next to me is free, and you can study while I finish my drawing."

"Okay," she said immediately.

I told her which design lab I was in and then went back to work. I was proud of myself for inviting her, since I'd get to finish my drawing *and* spend time with her. It wasn't the relaxing evening we'd planned, but it was better than nothing.

I just wish I'd done the same thing with Gina, I thought. *Maybe if I had…*

I was still lost in thought when Kendall tentatively stuck her head into the lab. I shook off my melancholy and took a deep breath. Then I caught her eye and waved her over.

"Hi," I said, kissing her. I cleared my things from the adjacent desk. "I'm sorry about dragging you down here, but…"

"Oh, I don't mind. I'm just happy we can see each other tonight. Now, you get back to your drawing, and I'll get back to my French."

Maybe I am *learning from my mistakes,* I mused, smiling at her sidelong as she opened her book. *Maybe, just maybe.*

✧ ✧ ✧

I looked at my watch as Professor Feller worked toward the climax of a haranguing lecture about Ayn Rand's *Atlas Shrugged*. As the minutes crept past, I wondered why she spent so much time on a book she obviously hated. Personally, I liked it, even though it was as thick as a Bible. But maybe I liked it simply because Professor Feller *didn't.*

Finally, the bell rang, but she held up a hand for us to stay, so she could finish her condemnation of Rand's "misguided elitist egotism." I shook my head and sank back into my seat, along with the rest of the annoyed students. Finally, the professor reached her conclusion and we bolted. In the hallway, I almost ran someone down, and when I turned to apologize, I froze.

"Paul!"

"Gina?!"

She smiled, and my heart skipped a beat. For a moment, we simply stared at each other, at a loss for words. The moment passed, however, and years of friendship and intimacy came rushing back. Pain came with it, but was quickly overwhelmed by the other feelings. Her cheeks flushed, but she mastered her emotions and smiled stoically.

"What're you doing here?" I asked.

"I just got out of Western Civ., down the hall."

"I was in English," I said, determined to act normally. Then I made a sour face. "The professor is this former hippie who's—"

"Professor Feller?"

I furrowed my brow. "Yeah. Have you had her?" Without thinking, we fell into step, headed for the stairs.

"No, silly," she said, rolling her eyes.

Her beautiful, dark, full, liquid eyes… Stop it!

"I heard you talk about her all the time. Duh." She grinned to take the sting out of her words.

"Oh, yeah. Sorry. Duh! Anyway, she was going on and on about Rand's elitist this and elitist that. I swear to God, Gina, I was ready for her to start using words like 'proletariat' and 'inevitable dialectic of materialism.'"

She laughed. "Lemme guess, you're reading *Atlas Shrugged*, right?"

I nodded.

"I never did like it. I mean, I like Rand's ideas about individualism," she said, "but I think she created an artificially simple society in order to make her theories work. You should read *The Fountainhead*. She wrote it before *Atlas Shrugged*, but it's got a lot of the same ideas. I think you'd like it."

"Why?"

"Because it's about an architect who won't conform to society."

I felt my face heating in chagrin.

Gina laughed, musical and soothing at the same time.

My chest grew tight as I realized that I missed her more than I thought possible.

"I didn't mean it like that," she said, checking her natural impulse to reach out to me. "But now that I think about it…" She grinned.

"All right, all right," I said. "Enough teasing the ex-boyfriend."

"Okay, I'll quit."

I glanced at her sidelong.

"I *do* think you'll like the book, though. Maybe…" She faltered, but then went on in a stronger voice. "Maybe Kendall has a copy."

I nodded, my mood turning subdued.

"How is she?"

I didn't want to hurt Gina's feelings by rubbing her nose in Kendall's happiness, so I hedged. "She's okay."

Gina knew me well enough to recognize my hesitation for what it was, so she changed the subject. As we walked toward the dorms, we talked about other things, all of them innocuous. When we reached the Carrick breezeway, we paused and looked at each other awkwardly.

"It was good seeing you," she said at last.

"It was good seeing you, too."

She smiled diffidently.

I smiled in return, although I probably looked just as uncomfortable.

"Okay… well… I guess I'll see you around," she said.

"Yeah. Seeya 'round."

We lingered for a moment before she turned to leave. I watched her go, but she didn't look back. I could see the tenseness in her shoulders, how stiffly she held them, fighting the urge to look back. I smiled to myself wistfully, and headed into my own building.

I hate to admit it, but two days later, I walked out of English class and loitered, my eyes searching the faces streaming down the hall from the direction of Gina's classroom. When I saw her, I hastily looked down and pretended to study my watch.

"Hi," she said from right in front of me.

I looked up in feigned surprise.

She smiled wryly. “Don’t try to fool me,” she said. “I know you too well.”

“Was I that obvious?” I asked, my cheeks heating.

“Maybe a little. But…”

I looked a question at her.

“Okay, maybe I was hoping you’d be here.”

“You were?!” I hastily schooled my expression and cleared my throat. Then, deliberately nonchalant: “I mean… you were?”

Her dark eyes sparkled.

I laughed, an admission of guilt. “All right, you got me.”

“Now, what should I do with you?” she asked archly.

It took every ounce of willpower not to tell her what I was *really* thinking: that I wanted her to take me back. But I knew she wouldn’t. More importantly, I knew that our relationship had changed, and that we could *never* go back. I didn’t want to admit it, but I was too honest to deceive myself. So I didn’t say anything, and I could see the silent thanks in her eyes. I nodded in recognition and she smiled.

“Were you headed back to Carrick?” she asked, changing the subject.

“Yeah. You?”

She nodded, and we began walking. On the way, we talked about her work at the hospital, and my house plans. Our goodbyes in the breezeway weren’t *quite* as awkward as before, but they were still hesitant and unfamiliar.

The following Monday, I didn’t even pretend to be doing something else as I waited for her. When she saw me, her eyes lit up, and we fell into step together. Our conversation was a bit easier, less stilted and artificial. We talked about her chemistry professor, and intramural soccer. When we reached the breezeway, we lingered a moment and then said our goodbyes, promising to see each other in two days.

I didn’t tell Kendall about spending time with Gina, since I knew it would just cause trouble. Gina and I had been friends far too long to simply throw it all away in the blink of an eye.

I understood why we couldn’t be boyfriend-girlfriend, but I guess I wasn’t willing to give up her friendship. In a way, I think I craved it. I definitely still loved her, but I also liked her. I knew she still loved me, but I hadn’t been very likeable toward the end of our relationship, and I wanted to make up for that.

At first, I worried about doing it for the wrong reasons, for *selfish* reasons. But then I realized that I honestly wanted Gina to be happy. And knowing I wasn’t bitter or resentful went a long way toward that. So I quelled my longing and heartache, and I gave her what she wanted—friendship—with no strings attached, and no ulterior motives.

Seeing her in the afternoons weighed on my conscience, though. And it made me think of Felicia. I didn’t like keeping things from Kendall, but I also didn’t want to face her disappointment, or worse, her wrath.

To complicate matters, I could make a good argument for both sides: telling her or *not* telling her. As I thought about each, I chuckled—the world wasn’t as black and white as I’d once thought. I saw shades of gray all around me, from my own actions with Gina and Felicia, to people like T.J. and Regan.

"What's so funny?" Christy asked as she knelt in front of her refrigerator.

I started to lie, but then decided not to. Instead, I thought I'd be mature—*before* I made a mess of things—and ask her advice. "Would you be upset if you found out your boyfriend was talking to his ex-girlfriend?"

She set down a bag of carrots and looked up at me.

For a moment, I was taken aback by the piercing familiarity of her eyes. *So different from Gina's, yet so alike,* I thought.

"I think the boyfriend in question better have a good explanation," she said. "If I ever found out about it, that is."

"Huh?"

She stood and smoothed her hands over her Bermuda shorts, gathering her thoughts. It was a familiar gesture, and I smiled as she did it. Finally, she looked at me—*studied* me, really. "Do you want to keep talking about this in abstract terms," she asked, "or do you want to tell me about you and Gina?"

I blushed guiltily.

She merely cocked her head to the side, her blonde hair falling across her face as she gazed at me calmly, inquisitively.

So I told her about meeting Gina in the hallway, and our subsequent meetings, our *deliberate* meetings.

"So you're still friends after all?" she asked when I finished.

"Yeah," I said, relief coloring my tone. "I know I wasn't the only one who made mistakes, but I did so many things wrong that…" I trailed off and shrugged. "Anyway, I don't know why it's so important that we're still friends, but I guess it is. To me *and* to her."

Christy nodded in understanding.

"But the thing is," I continued, "I don't want to tell Kendall about it. She'll just be upset, and I don't want to worry her. I mean, I *know* I'm never going to get back together with Gina. Gina knows it too. But that doesn't mean we can't be friends. We were friends *before* we were boyfriend-girlfriend, so why can't we be friends *after?*"

"Why indeed?" Christy said seriously.

"But I feel guilty for not telling Kendall. I don't like hiding things from her"—I thought of Felicia and felt a sharper pang of guilt—"but I don't want to cause more pain or hurt feelings."

"Are you willing to *live* with the guilt?" Christy asked pointedly.

I paused to consider for a moment.

"Confession is good for the soul, but *bad* for relationships," she said in the silence.

I looked a question at her.

"Why do you think the Catholics have Confession?" she asked. "But it's with a *priest,* not your spouse. That *is* something I like about the Church. I can confess my sins to God and receive forgiveness without ruining my relationship."

I nodded.

"For instance, do you think I don't feel guilty about spending so much time with you, when I should be writing to Simon?"

I blinked.

"I do." She dithered, nervously smoothing her shorts. "You and I are more than friends," she

said softly, “and I spend a lot of time alone with you. It’s almost as if—” She shook her head in agitation.

I silently admitted that I hadn’t thought about it much, and admonished myself for being so self-centered.

“Oh, don’t worry about it,” she said, reading my change in mood, “it’s something I have to deal with. It’s not a sin to have a guy friend, but I do feel guilty for spending so much time with you. I’d never *tell* Simon about it, though, since it would just make him upset. He’s not really a jealous person, but why borrow trouble?”

“No kidding,” I said earnestly.

“You’re in the same situation with Gina and Kendall. So why borrow trouble?”

“But what if Kendall finds out?” I asked, thinking about more than just Gina.

“That’s a risk you’ll have to take, if you’re going to keep seeing Gina. But if Kendall knows about it, you’ll either have to live with its effects on your relationship, or stop seeing Gina altogether.”

I nodded soberly.

“Neither of those things are really good alternatives, are they?” she said.

“No, not really.”

“Then if you know that Gina isn’t a threat to your relationship with Kendall, you’ll just have to live with the guilt.”

“‘Confession is good for the soul, but bad for relationships,’” I quoted, and she smiled. “So who do I confess to?” I asked. “A priest?”

“Now that’s *another* thing I don’t really like about the Catholic Church,” she said, her eyes sparkling with amused self-reproach. “A priest has sworn a vow to protect the sanctity of Confession, but I’ve known some priests I wouldn’t trust with my bra size, much less my innermost secrets. So why shouldn’t it just be someone you trust?”

“Someone like you,” I said.

“If you trust me,” she said matter-of-factly.

“‘Trust isn’t a thing for half-measures,’” I said, quoting her a second time. “And I trust you.”

She actually blushed. Softly: “Thank you.”

“I trust Wren too,” I added.

Christy looked up sharply. When she saw my knowing expression, her cheeks turned rosy, despite her golden tan. She started to stutter a question, but I held up a placating hand.

“Let’s just say that the three of us have an interesting relationship,” I said. “If I tell either of you something, the other’s going to know about it soon enough.” I shrugged philosophically. “That’s okay, though. I mean, I’ve had a bit of experience with girls who’re as close as you are.”

“I guess you have,” Christy said softly.

“And besides, I’m not blind.”

“Did Wren tell you?” she asked, oblique yet direct.

“I kinda figured it out on my own, but yeah, we talked about it.”

“When you took her home for Spring Break,” she said, a statement rather than a question.

I nodded.

“She didn’t tell me *that* part of your couch adventure,” Christy said, smiling ruefully.

“You don’t mind that I know?”

She shook her head. “I guess I knew you knew,” she said. “In the back of my mind, at least. I hadn’t *admitted* it to myself, though. But you’re right, you’re not blind, and after your relationship with Kendall and Gina…” She let her words trail off, her meaning clear. Then she smiled wistfully. “And now you’ve discovered *another* thing I don’t really like about the Catholic Church.”

I suppressed a mental image of her and Wren lying together, nude, disheveled, and thoroughly sated.

“How did you learn so much about me?” Christy asked, not expecting an answer. “So many deep, dark secrets…”

“I don’t think they’re dark,” I said, mastering my treacherous imagination. “Deep, maybe, but that’s because most people wouldn’t understand them.”

“And you do?”

“I don’t understand about Laurence,” I said frankly, wincing inwardly as pain tightened her eyes. “I’ve never lost someone I loved. But I understand how Trip’s dealt with it, and I can learn from him. And when it comes to the other things…”

“When it comes to Wren and me having sex, you mean,” she said, removing the veil of ambiguity entirely.

I nodded, chuckling. “And when it comes to that, I understand completely. I may’ve made a mess out of my relationship with Gina,” I said, “but that doesn’t mean I don’t understand a thing or two about how girls work. Now, *applying* that knowledge is another thing entirely,” I added with a self-deprecating laugh, “not to mention actually listening to my own advice. But…” I shrugged helplessly.

We stood in silence for a moment. Then, almost subconsciously, we moved together. I wrapped her in my arms and rested my cheek on her head.

“Just look at me,” she said when she finally stepped back, wiping her damp eyes. “I’m a mess.”

I shook my head, firmly.

“And this started off as a conversation about you and Gina,” she said with forced good humor. “Some friend *I* am, hijacking your conversation for my own ends. Now, where were we?”

“I think we were doing what friends do,” I said.

“Oh, and what’s that?” she asked disingenuously.

“Listening.”

“For a guy with such a good eye, you’re a pretty good listener too,” she said, smiling with genuine warmth.

“I try. You’re not so bad yourself, though.”

“Just listen to us! Now come on, let’s get a snack. We’ve got to get to class. So, do you want carrots or celery?”

I looked at her deadpan.

“Well, you can’t blame me for trying,” she said in mock exasperation, her mood brightening for real.

After she packed our snacks, we headed to the A&A building in companionable silence, both of us lost in thought. I was thinking about the truth—and guilt—and I eventually decided that I wouldn’t tell Kendall about my time with Gina. If it came up, I’d deal with it then, but I didn’t

want to make trouble where I didn't have to.

Felicia was a different matter altogether, and a much larger betrayal. But Felicia was also months in the past, and hadn't been part of my life since. So I decided that Christy was right: I'd simply have to live with my guilt. Telling Kendall would only make things worse. Besides, if I had to live with the guilt, I wasn't likely to cheat again. I chuckled darkly at the thought, and hoped it was true.

Then I took heart: I hadn't cheated with Wren, despite the opportunity we both knew had existed. That was partly her determination not to sleep with me, but I also realized that a part of Wren secretly *wanted* me to overcome her objections. I think she respected me even more for not *trying*, and that was one of the foundations of our deepening friendship.

When Christy and I reached the A&A building, I held the door for her, and she smiled up at me, her eyes mischievous.

"Were you just thinking about Wren?" she asked.

I looked at her quizzically. "How could you tell?"

"You're not so Mysterious after all," she said.

"You're still a Bunny, though," I teased.

"Is that a bad thing?"

"You tell me," I shot back, suppressing a grin.

She rolled her eyes. Then, much to my surprise, she rose on tiptoe and kissed my cheek. I stood rooted to the spot, and stared dumbly as she grinned and took a step back. With a girlish laugh, she turned and walked away. I put my hand to my cheek—the feeling of her lips still vivid in my mind—and followed her with my eyes until she turned a corner and disappeared with a playful wave.

✧ ✧ ✧

When I wasn't spending time with Gina (or being kissed by Christy!), my life was relatively normal. Busy, but normal. I studied for class, I did my homework, and I worked on projects. Kendall and I spent time together on Thursday afternoons, or by the pool with Trip and Abby, relaxing and doing school work.

Our intramural soccer team practiced and played games, and Jeff was a wonder to behold. I kept up my instrument lessons with Earl, and I was getting close to the required flight time for my IFR certificate.

During Professor Joska's office hours, we reviewed my plans for the Franklin houses. From minor things like base molding to major things like HVAC ducting, Joska was both a font of knowledge and a source of endless frustration. As always, he was unforgiving, and reinforced his dissatisfaction with his ubiquitous "You'll have to do better than this."

I finally snapped.

I ranted and raved for five minutes—and called him every name in the book in the process—while he listened in stony silence, his expression unreadable. Finally, I wound down and took a deep, shuddering breath.

"Are you quite through, Mr. Hughes?" he finally asked.

Embarrassment replaced the fury heating my cheeks. Worse, fear prickled my skin, and I was convinced that he'd kick me out of the architecture program. After a moment to steel my nerves for the coming verdict, I nodded.

"Then please," he said calmly, "have a seat."

Surprised and chagrined, I retrieved my overturned chair and sat down.

He gazed at me for a long moment, and the claws of fear in my belly drew tight. Finally, he sat forward and laced his fingers together.

I glanced down in anxious, dejected silence.

"Mr. Hughes, you need to learn to control your emotions, at least when someone critiques your work."

At his unruffled tone, I looked up in surprise, and a spark of hope flickered to life somewhere deep inside me.

"You're entirely correct that architecture is about emotion and creativity and beauty," he continued, oblivious to my reaction, "but it's also about discipline and attention to detail. You've come a long way since last autumn, but you still have a long way to go. I drive you hard because I see your potential. Your *unrealized* potential, I might add."

He negligently indicated the drawings between us on the desk. "These mistakes are trifling. They're beneath your level of ability. Like your class work, they show flashes of brilliance shackled by mediocrity. I won't accept mediocrity, Mr. Hughes. I expect perfection from you. But more important, you should expect it from yourself."

I looked at him and blinked, my eyes stinging. Was he going to give me the axe? Was he just toying with me? Or was he…?

He gazed at me without malice. "Michelangelo said, 'Lord, grant that I may always desire more than I can accomplish,' What do you think he meant by that?"

I shrugged, confused but determined not to show it.

"I think he meant that he always strove for perfection, even though he knew he'd never achieve it. He said to himself, 'I'll have to do better than this.'" After a long silence to let his words sink in, Joska held my gaze. "Until you learn to say that to yourself, Mr. Hughes, I'll say it for you. And judging by your recent work, I'm going to be saying it a lot."

As his words registered, I realized that he *wasn't* going to kick me out of the program, and a wave of relief washed over me. I still had to deal with my outburst, though, and I felt more ashamed than ever.

"I don't criticize your work out of any personal animus," Joska continued. "I simply tell you where it needs improvement. You have a wealth of talent and a surprisingly good eye, but what you *don't* have is experience and an uncompromising attention to detail. I can give you the former, but you'll have to learn the latter for yourself."

I nodded jerkily.

"Very well," he said. "I think we've worked enough for tonight. For the *week*, as a matter of fact. Take a break and study for your midterms. Afterward, we'll resume work on your house drawings. You show a lot of promise, Mr. Hughes, but you have a long way yet to go. It's up to you whether you succeed or not."

"I understand, sir," I said immediately, the first time I'd spoken since my tirade.

"Good," he said, surprising me. "Then quit complaining about the standards I require. My comments aren't personal, and I'm making allowances for your relative lack of experience."

"Thank you," I said, humbled.

"You're welcome. Now, take your drawings and don't touch them for at least a week. After

midterms, we'll return to work."

I stood to roll the drawings. After I gathered the rest of my things, I walked to the door. Before I opened it, however, I took a deep breath, turned, and squared my shoulders. "Professor Joska?"

"Yes?" he said, looking up.

"I… I'm sorry I got angry. I know you're just trying to teach me how to do things, and I shouldn't've gotten so upset. I… I just hate getting things wrong, and I think I'm more angry with myself than anyone else. So I'm sorry. It…" I swallowed hard. "It won't happen again."

Surprisingly, his lips quirked up in a smile and he actually *chuckled*. "Oh, I doubt that. I'm an unforgiving master, Mr. Hughes. I demand excellence, and I have no patience for anything less. That wears hard on a man. You're not the first young architecture student to curse me, and I daresay you won't be the last. I will say that you're one of the few to actually *apologize*, and for that, I commend you." He paused for a moment to let his words sink in.

"I don't do this to be liked by my students, Mr. Hughes, much less loved," he continued. "I do it for the love of architecture and the pursuit of perfection. As long as you're willing to partake of that love and share in that pursuit, you're welcome to curse me and call me whatever names you like."

I summoned all the dignity I could muster. "I think 'sir' would be appropriate." I held my breath, waiting for his response, and almost jumped when he barked a laugh.

"You never cease to amaze me, Mr. Hughes," he said, shaking his head in wonder. Then he smiled, almost paternally. "We'll return to the plans after exams. Until then, enjoy your respite. Good evening."

"Good evening, sir," I said, and left his office.

My heart thudded in my ears and my blood sang with the aftereffects of adrenaline, but I had a sneaking suspicion that maybe Professor Joska was human after all.

With a bemused grin, I shook my head.

Naaah!

✧ ✧ ✧

My relationship with Gina had returned to normal—normal for two friends, at least—although we only saw each other after class, for the time it took to walk from the Humanities building to the Carrick breezeway. Neither of us mentioned the break-up, and our conversations delicately skirted Regan and Kendall, but we talked like friends.

I wanted to ask if she was seeing someone—a guy—but I couldn't bring myself to. She didn't say, but I didn't think she was. I also wanted to ask if she had stopped doing cocaine, but I decided not to. I didn't want to seem like a narc, or worse, like I was trying to run her life.

So we talked about other things, safe things. But when she glanced at me one day with an anxious look in her eye, I let the conversation die. She was obviously gathering her courage, so I waited and walked in silence.

"Paul?" she said at last. "There's something I want to tell you, but I don't want you to get upset."

"Okay," I said as calmly as I could.

"I… I'm transferring to another university."

A fist gripped my heart.

"It doesn't have anything to do with you," she added in a rush. "These last couple of weeks have been… really nice… but this is what I've always wanted."

"UCLA," I said, without acrimony.

She turned and looked up at me, her eyes beseeching. "Paul, you've got to understand, I—"

"I *do* understand," I said, surprising myself. Then I forced a smile. "You always did want to go there."

"I should've listened to you when we were still in high school," she said, sullen and apologetic at the same time. "But…" She shrugged.

"You came here because you loved me, and you wanted to make me happy," I said in the ensuing silence. "There's nothing wrong with that. I'm just sorry I dragged you here."

"You didn't 'drag' me here, Paul," she said sternly. "I'm a grown woman, and I can make decisions for myself." When the forced timbre of her voice registered, she blushed. "Okay, maybe I don't make the best decisions when I'm emotional."

"Neither do I," I said, more heavily than I intended. The thought of not being able to see Gina scared me to death, but I didn't want to criticize her decision, especially out of selfish fear. "I'm happy for you," I said at last.

"Do you mean it?" she asked, her eyes brightening hopefully.

I smiled and nodded. Fortunately, she couldn't read the turmoil behind my pasted-on expression.

"I applied for a fall transfer," she said. In a softer tone: "I did it right after… you know." The cloud passed from her expression and she looked up in excitement. "I didn't hear back from them until today. You're the first person I told."

My eyebrows shot up. "Even Regan?"

She shifted guiltily. "Well, I didn't *tell* Regan, but she got a letter too."

"Got a letter?" I repeated, puzzled. Then I Got It, and the wind whooshed from my lungs. "Regan's going with you?"

"With Rod's arrest and all…," Gina began, but then trailed off. "I guess maybe she's running away too."

"Are you *really* running away?" I asked seriously. "Or are you doing what you should've done in the first place?"

She looked at me and blinked.

"Gina, look," I said, "I loved you—still do, actually—more than anyone in the whole world. All I ever wanted was for you to be happy. I was happy with you here in Knoxville, but you were right, I came here because of the architecture program, and because of Kendall. It's not that I didn't think about what you wanted, but…" I sighed, and my shoulders slumped. "I was selfish, I guess."

"I was selfish too," she said. "I spent more time with Regan and the sorority than with you. I was just so frustrated, and I didn't know what to do. And I never should've gone with Regan… that night. I guess…" She fell silent, quiet and repentant. "I guess we *both* made a mess of things. And I'm sorry."

I paused for a moment, gathering my thoughts. "I don't *want* you to go to UCLA, but it's what *you* want to do. And I guess I just want you to be happy, Gina. I love you more than I'll ever be able to tell you, and two thousand miles won't do a thing to change that."

Her dark, liquid eyes softened and she reached for me. She pulled back when she realized what she'd done, and we looked at each other for a shocked moment. Finally, she laughed, her eyes glinting with moisture. It was either laugh or cry, so I decided to make the best of a bad situation. We ended up hugging each other, the flow of students silently breaking around as we stood in the Humanities plaza, the statue of *Europa and the Bull* looming above us.

"I'm happy for you," I said at last, releasing her from my arms.

She wiped her cheeks and smiled. "Thank you."

"I'm gonna miss you, though."

She sniffed and nodded, too emotional for words.

"Now c'mon," I said, my arm going over her shoulders with old familiarity, "people are gonna think we're boyfriend-girlfriend if we don't watch it."

"Let 'em," she said cavalierly. "But you're much better than that."

I turned to look down at her, my eyebrows lifted in question.

"You're my *friend*," she said.

Back at the dorms, we stopped and gazed at each other for a moment. Her tears had dried, but her eyes still held the anticipated pain of our separation.

"I really am happy for you," I said at last. I think I was trying to convince myself as much as her. "I know you'll do well at UCLA." I forced a laugh. "Besides, *someone* needs to keep Regan out of trouble."

Gina smiled, her eyes tight, as if fighting back a fresh round of tears.

"I love you, Gina Coulter. I always will. I'm sorry I screwed things up—" at her reproachful look, I amended my words "—I'm sorry *we* screwed things up, but you'll always be my friend."

"Thank you," she said, stepping into my arms.

We stood together a long time, neither of us willing to let the other go. In a way, it was goodbye. I knew I'd see her again, but we'd never again share that sense of closeness, of *oneness*. My stomach felt leaden, but I was determined not to let her know it.

And that's what friends are for, right? Putting someone else's needs ahead of your own?

I kept telling myself that as we silently said goodbye.

✧ ✧ ✧

In a way, I actually *was* happy that Gina was going to UCLA—we could still be friends, but I wouldn't have the pressure of hiding it. Writing letters wouldn't make me feel as guilty as actually spending time together. At the thought of writing a letter, though, I had an idea.

Gina's birthday was days away, but I didn't have *any* idea what to get her. In the past, I gave her things a boyfriend would. But those days were gone, and I didn't want to give her something too intimate. I didn't want to give her something too generic either, or worse, not give her anything at all. A letter, however…

That weekend I sat down and wrote a letter to her. I poured my heart into it, telling her how I felt about our break-up, painful as it was, and how I enjoyed our newly rekindled friendship. I told her how much I still loved her, and why. I told her what a wonderful person she was, and why I was lucky to know her.

On her birthday, I gave her the letter without explanation, telling her to read it later, alone. When my phone rang that evening, I knew it was her. She cried and told me how much she loved

me, and how happy she was that I wasn't upset. She talked about how excited she was, and how nervous.

When we finally said goodbye, I felt a mixture of sadness and hope: sad that we'd never be together again, but hopeful that she'd finally be happy. After I hung up, I stood quietly in the foyer for several heartbeats. Behind me, T.J.'s door opened, and I stiffened.

"I don't mean to be nosey," he said, "but was that Gina?"

Without turning, I wiped my eyes and nodded.

"How is she?"

"She's good," I said, my emotions tightly controlled, although I still didn't dare turn around. "She's transferring to UCLA for the fall."

"It's an okay school," he said. "They've got a good football team, at least. Good for her."

I nodded.

"I always liked Gina," he mused. "More than Kendall. And a lot more than that Felicia girl. Man, she was a head case. I'm glad you dumped her."

I clenched my fists in shame and guilt, and turned to regard him.

When he saw the look in my eye, he shifted nervously. "Just kidding."

"It's okay, T.J.," I said, letting the tension flow through my shoulders. As if draining from my body, I felt it course down my arms and out through my fingertips. Finally, I looked at him calmly. "I'd better go," I said at last, nodding toward my room. "I've got drawings to work on."

"Sure, man, no problem," he said.

After I closed my door, I stood there for a moment, lost in thought. Instead of returning to my sketchpad, I pulled out my weights and stripped to my shorts. I watched myself in the mirror as I did curls and then military presses, but my thoughts were a million miles away.

✧ ✧ ✧

As I shut Siobhan's office door behind us, Wren turned and gave me a speculative look. We had just finished modeling, and I deliberately avoided looking at her body, gazing calmly into her eyes instead. When she still didn't say anything, I raised my eyebrows. She tried to look sultry, but I mustered as much equanimity as I could. Finally, she cracked.

"Why do you have to be so damned self-assured?" she said, piqued and trying not to be amused.

I laughed, a release of tension. "What're you talking about?"

"I'm trying to look seductive," she said. Then she cupped her breasts and lifted them. "Don't these do anything for you?"

"I think they're beautiful," I said. "But I thought we agreed…"

"I know what we agreed," she said irritably. "But could you at least look at me and drool every once in a while? Or make a pass at me? Or get a hard-on? Or… *something?*"

I fought not to grin.

It was contagious, though, and she broke into a smile of her own.

"Now, what're you ranting about?"

"I want you to do something," she said at last, "and I thought I could… you know… flirt you into it."

"Why don't you just *ask* me?"

She waved a hand dismissively. "What fun would that be?"

With a laugh, I reached for my clothes.

She tried to look cross, but she couldn't pull it off. Instead, she started getting dressed as well.

"Okay," I finally asked, "what do you want me to do?"

She looked at me, her hazel eyes wide in feigned innocence. "You'd do something for li'l ol' me?"

I rolled my eyes. "You need to get laid," I said matter-of-factly. "I think you're stuck in 'flirt mode.'"

She started to protest, but then blushed guiltily.

"What," I asked, grinning, "are your batteries dead?"

"No," she said with mock petulance.

I snapped my fingers in sudden understanding. "Ah, I get it. Christy's been working on her portfolio for her review. And she's been too busy to—" I made a vague motion with my fingers "—you know. Right?"

"That's none of your business," Wren said as haughtily as she could. Then she cracked a rueful smile. "Is it that obvious?"

"No," I said with a laugh and a headshake, "I just know you." A moment later: "The offer's still open if you wanna join Kendall and me."

She shook her head. "I *want* to, but…"

"I understand," I said.

She thanked me with her eyes.

"So what is it you wanted?" I asked, tactfully changing the subject.

"Well, you noticed that Christy's been working on her portfolio a lot, but Siobhan isn't the only reason."

I looked a question at her.

"The 22nd will be one year since Laurence was killed," she said matter-of-factly. "So that's why Christy's been spending so much time on her portfolio."

"I *thought* I noticed something…," I said absently, trailing off. "But I guess I wasn't paying enough attention."

"You don't hear her crying at night," Wren said, trying to take the sting out of my self-criticism.

Our eyes locked and I nodded solemnly.

"I was thinking…," Wren continued, "maybe we could throw another party? I think she needs it now more than ever."

"I'll take care of everything," I said.

✧ ✧ ✧

Once again, Trip insisted on paying for the party. Abby offered to let us have it at her house, and Luke was more than happy to cook. He managed to find shrimp, although he complained about their size. They were *fresh*, though, and that's what he wanted, so he happily commandeered the Evans's kitchen and made gumbo. To counter the heat—of the weather *and* the food—he made strawberry daiquiris, complete with fresh strawberries.

The gumbo was fantastic, the pool was refreshing, and the girls looked great in bikinis. Luke's new girlfriend, Natasha, even got a little drunk, and wanted to go topless. He tried to convince the rest of the girls to join her, but Abby quickly squelched the idea. (To most of the guys' muted

disappointment, she objected *before* Natasha removed her top.) We managed to have a good time anyway, and it was a welcome break from the grind of school.

Unfortunately, the grind returned full force the following Monday, and my life was even busier than usual. Trip wanted to get the demolition started on our houses, so I worked feverishly on the plans. Joska was as hardnosed as ever, but he never mentioned my tirade. At times, I still wanted to pull my hair out and shout at him, but I never did.

For his part, he tirelessly reviewed my drawings, and I found that I was taking up about half of his office hours every day. No one ever interrupted us, and I eventually learned that he'd told his secretary to hold all calls and visitors. I resented his brutal criticism, but I was silently grateful that he dedicated so much time to helping me.

Trip, curse his soul, was happy that Joska had taken an interest in our project. It meant we wouldn't have to pay an architect to review the plans. I don't think he truly understood what I had to go through in order to save a couple hundred dollars. I didn't exactly *resent* Trip's happiness, but I definitely had a short temper for a while.

Trip bore it with equanimity, and I realized that he was supporting me in his own way. His mix tapes were upbeat and high-energy, and he never complained when I snapped at him. He was more than happy to bring me dinner at the design labs, and he made sure I always ate breakfast. Between him and Christy, I was better-fed than I'd ever been, and it bothered me that I might be gaining weight. But I had too many other things on my mind, all more important.

The Friday before my birthday, Professor Joska sat back and gazed at my latest drawings with something close to satisfaction. I'd been in the design lab until two in the morning, but I was finally happy with my work.

"What do you think?" he asked after a moment.

"I think they're ready," I said.

For thirty minutes, he grilled me on every aspect of the renovation, from the drawings themselves to the building codes. I answered every question, defended my decisions, and explained my reasoning. I'd spent nearly a month on the plans, and I knew them better than I'd ever known anything. Finally, Joska sat back and laced his fingers across his midsection.

"Mr. Hughes, you've done an excellent job."

"Thank you, sir."

"Mind, you still have a long way to go before I'm willing to turn you loose on the world, but this is a promising beginning."

With that, he took out a pen and signed the drawings. I watched in near-exhaustion as his name flowed onto the paper, followed by the date. Then he reached into his desk drawer and withdrew a seal. With the same meticulous care that he did everything else, he stamped his seal next to his signature on each drawing.

I felt a sense of triumph as I watched him do it. I'd fully expected him to be grudging or even surly about it, but he seemed to be enjoying himself. When he was done, he looked up and held my eyes. Then he stood and extended his hand. Almost formally, I rose as well, and we shook hands over the signed and sealed drawings.

"Congratulations, Mr. Hughes," he said.

"Thank you, sir."

"Now, I should probably let you get back to the design lab. I understand the rest of your team

is working on their American Pavilion drawings."

I nodded tiredly. On top of all my work on the renovation drawings, I still had to finish a project for class. I sighed. Then I gathered my things and turned to go. At the door, Joska stopped me with a word, and I turned.

"It doesn't get any easier, Mr. Hughes," he said softly. "Are you sure you want to be an architect?"

"More than anything in the world. Right now, more than sleep, and that's saying a lot."

"Very well, then," he said. "I'll stop by the labs later to see how everyone's doing."

"I'm sure we'll be there," I said wearily.

"I'm sure you will. Good evening."

I merely nodded in farewell and headed out.

We ended up working till well after midnight. My drawings were barely half-finished, though, since I'd been working on the renovation plans instead. I still had to critique my teammates' drawings as well, but fortunately, theirs were in pretty good shape.

I went to the design lab on Saturday too. Kendall spent most of the morning with me, studying psychology. She left before lunch, bound for the library to continue studying with a group from her class. Surprisingly, Christy showed up a little later. Even more surprising, she arrived with a picnic basket.

"I hope you're hungry," she said cheerfully, unpacking her basket. "Trip said you were over here, so I offered to bring you some food. I've got peanut butter and banana sandwiches, granola, grapes, an apple, a plum, and some yogurt for dessert."

I looked at her, my eyes heavy from lack of sleep.

"Come on, put down your pencil and eat. What do you want to drink? I've got water, apple juice, and Coke."

"Coke, please," I said. "I could use the caffeine."

"Coke it is," she said with a flourish. "Now here," she continued, unwrapping the wax paper from a sandwich, "you eat while I cut up your apple."

With a slightly bemused expression, I watched her lay food in front of me. I *was* hungry, though, and started eating with more energy than I thought I had in me. By the time I was done, I'd polished off two sandwiches, the granola, the grapes, the apple, and two Cokes. Afterward, Christy cleaned up and then took out her sketchpad, obviously planning to draw as I worked.

"Thanks," I said simply.

She smiled, her eyes shining warmly. "That's what friends are for."

✧ ✧ ✧

For my nineteenth birthday, I slept late. Happy birthday to me.

I'd been at the design lab till three in the morning, but I was finished with my project drawings and critiques. Unfortunately, the phone woke me before I really wanted to get up. It was my parents, calling to wish me a happy birthday. I talked to them for a while but then returned to bed, intent on getting another few hours' sleep.

T.J. banged on my door and woke me a little later. "Happy birthday, dude," he said, grinning as he held out the phone. I hadn't even heard it ring.

It was Susan, also calling to wish me a happy birthday. We talked for a while, about… I don't remember what. When I hung up, I stumbled back to bed, but the ringing phone convinced me

that I wasn't going to get any more sleep, no matter how much I wanted to.

"Hi," Kendall's voice said.

"Hi yourself. What's up?"

"Happy birthday. Can I come up?"

"Thanks. Um… sure," I said. "Lemme jump in the shower and then I'll meet you in the lobby. Fifteen minutes?"

"I'll be there," she said cheerfully.

We spent the day together and then went out to dinner. I wanted to get a hotel for the night (I'd obviously recovered enough that I was horny), but Kendall insisted on going back to her apartment. When she unlocked the door and the apartment was dark, I should've realized that something was up. But I didn't, and I nearly jumped out of my skin when someone flicked on the lights and everyone yelled "Surprise!"

"Happy birthday, darling," Kendall whispered in my ear. Then she kissed my cheek and beamed at my poleaxed expression.

All of our friends were there, and even some other familiar faces like Billy, Samantha, and Antonio.

"We totally had you fooled," Luke boasted, shoving a drink into my hand.

Trip merely grinned over his shoulder.

"Did you two have anything to do with this?" I asked them.

"We all did," Trip said, "but it was mostly Kendall."

I turned to smile at her. "Thank you," I said softly.

She smiled, her deep blue eyes sparkling.

"C'mon, Loverboy," T.J. shouted from across the room, "say something!"

The din quieted and everyone looked at me expectantly.

"Um… thank you all for coming," I said hesitantly, lamely.

"Shoot," T.J. said, "we wouldn't've missed this for the world. You shoulda *saw* the look on your face."

I smiled bashfully, the face in question heating.

With that, someone turned up the stereo and the party began in earnest. I was surprised by the number of people who'd managed to cram into the tiny apartment, but with the alcohol flowing, everyone was in a good mood. Even my exhaustion faded away as Trip's party music and Luke's rum concoction worked their magic.

Since it was a Sunday, we couldn't party all night long. Things wound down around eleven o'clock, and the last guests trickled out around midnight. Wren and Christy stuck around to help clean up. When we were done, they said their goodnights and left. Trip and Abby lingered a while longer, but then got up to leave.

"We're gonna spend the night in my room," he said. "You know, to give you and Kendall some privacy for the, ahem, *real* birthday celebration."

I'm sure I blushed suitably, as intended.

Trip winked at me, a little buzzed. "C'mon, Abs," he said, cupping her ass (much to her surprise), "let's go. We've got our own celebrating to do."

Abby turned bright red.

Trip merely laughed. "Happy birthday, dude," he said at last. Then he stepped forward and

hugged me.

I slapped his back and thanked him quietly.

"All right," he said. "We'll see you two at breakfast tomorrow. Try to get some sleep in between… you know."

Abby elbowed him in the ribs.

After a few more goodbyes, they headed out and Kendall shut the door. Then she leaned against it, a seductive gleam in her eye. I felt an answering twitch in my pants. I'd been so busy with my various projects that we hadn't had much time together, and I was beginning to feel the lack.

"Are you thinking what I'm thinking?" I asked.

Her answering smile was the best present of all.

✧ ✧ ✧

The next day I returned to my suite after lunch to find an envelope and a gift-wrapped present leaning against my door. I looked around, as if I might spot who had put them there, but the foyer was empty. In my room, I opened the envelope first. It was from Gina, a simple lavender card with her monogram in silver.

Paul, you mean more to me than I'll ever be able to tell you. I'm sorry I made so many mistakes, and I hope you can forgive me. I'll never forget our time together, and I'll always cherish your friendship. My ring hangs near my heart, reminding me of you. I know you can't wear yours, and I understand why, but think of me whenever you use these… Love always, Gina.

After a long, silent moment, I blinked to clear my eyes and then opened the present. It was a set of Faber-Castell technical pens—an *expensive* set at that.

I set the box on my desk and idly ran my finger over the texture of the card. The faint scent of Gina's perfume lingered in the air, from where her wrist had brushed the paper as she wrote. I stood at the window, but my eyes were far, far away. I wondered if I'd ever get over her. I wondered if I *wanted* to.

Love is about more than sex, Susan's words echoed in my mind. Then I mentally chided myself. *Love is also about communication, and trust, and respect. So why did Gina have to break up with me to make me remember that?*

Maybe I'd paid so much attention to the sex that I'd forgotten about the rest. If for nothing else, I owed Gina for reminding me what was truly important in life.

✧ ✧ ✧

With three weeks remaining until the end of the quarter, everything seemed to go into high gear. Professors doled out last-minute assignments, and began reviewing for final exams. We also began the familiar routine of advising and registration, with the added burden of housing request forms for the following school year.

On top of all that, I was studying my dog-eared FAR/AIM to get ready for my IFR Practical Test, the first step in getting my instrument certification. When I mentioned it to Earl, he took me aside.

"I'm sorry, Paul," he said in a quiet, earnest voice, "but I don't think you're ready."

I blinked in surprise.

"I'm sure you'd pass your Practical and Oral tests, but book-learning isn't your problem. You

need more practice in the air," he said bluntly. "Your situational awareness is good, your instrument interpretation is good, and you've got a light touch on the yoke. But you haven't done enough VOR navigation or ILS approaches, and you definitely don't have enough systems failure experience."

I jerked a nod, my jaw clenched. I wanted to argue with him, but I kept my mouth shut instead.

"All that takes time and practice. These're skills you can't learn from a book. You just have to *do* it, over and over, until you get it right. And I'm sorry, you're just not ready yet." At my look of frustration, he continued. "Don't worry. It takes most pilots a year to get their ticket."

But I'm not most pilots, I thought sullenly. Then I chastised myself: *And what makes you think that?* "I understand," I said aloud.

When I got back to my room, I moped around for a while, angry and discouraged. I started to change into my workout clothes, but then had a better idea—a *mature* idea. I acted on it for a change, and picked up the phone.

"Hi, Mom," I said when she answered, "is Dad there?"

"Is everything okay?" she asked immediately.

"Yeah, sure," I lied. After a pause: "I mean… no, not really. I just got some bad news and I guess I want to talk to Dad about it."

"Sure. Hold on a second."

My dad came to the phone a moment later. "What's going on?"

"Life sucks," I said, dejected and sounding like it. Then I told him what Earl had said. "I want to kick and scream and shout that life just isn't fair, but that won't do me any good. And Earl's probably right," I added. "I *hate* admitting it, too, which is even worse."

To my surprise, my dad chuckled. "Don't worry about it, Paul. You just need practice, that's all."

"That's easy for you to say," I said. "You've got thousands of hours, and this is all easy for you. Besides, you've already *got* your IFR certification."

"And several others besides," he added, "but that doesn't mean I didn't have to *earn* them in the first place."

"I guess," I said, more admission than evasion. "To make matters worse, though, I've just about used up all of the flight time Susan gave me, so I'll have to start paying for it now."

"We might be able to help out," he said. "After all, if you're paying for school next year, then—"

"No," I said, more abruptly than I intended. My face heated as I heard my tone. "Um… sorry, Dad," I said. Calmer: "I didn't call to beg for money. I'll figure out how to pay for the flight time and lessons. I guess I just called to complain to somebody who'd understand."

He laughed softly. "Oh, I understand. Flight training was a little different for me, but I remember what it was like…"

We talked for thirty minutes about everything from instrument navigation to the differences between civilian and military aviation. At least I didn't have to learn to shoot rockets and drop bombs (although an image of Rod's Porsche came to mind as I thought about it). When I finally hung up, I didn't feel any less dejected, but at least I realized that I wasn't the only one who'd ever made mistakes or not learned something as quickly as I wanted.

✧ ✧ ✧

Aside from my disappointment with my IFR certification, my life was pretty good. Very, *very* busy, but good. The intramural soccer season came to an end, and our team made it to the quarterfinals. Unfortunately, we lost to a team from Clement Hall.

Kendall and I went on a double date with Trip and Abby to see Billy's musical, *1776*, and had a great time. Billy even invited us backstage afterward, and introduced Trip and the girls to his friend, Jamie.

The renovation plans were in the hands of the subcontractors for bids on materials. Demolition work on the bungalows had begun, and Trip made several trips home to check the progress. According to his schedule, we were a little behind, but the renovations on the Colonial Revival weren't as extensive as expected, so we could make up time there.

I was worried about advising for the fall quarter, though, since it came with an added complication: a permanent faculty advisor. I hoped I'd be assigned to someone like Professor Ledbetter, but I knew what was going to happen before I even got the card for my appointment.

"Welcome, Mr. Hughes," Professor Joska said as I sat down across from him.

"I thought you just ran the advising center," I said.

"Oh, I do," he said, entirely too congenial, "but I advise a limited number of Design students as well."

"Of course," I said, as laconically as I could.

"I take comfort from the fact that McDonald's is always hiring, so you're here because you *want* to be."

I felt my face heating.

He merely gazed at me, a challenge in his eyes.

"The only McDonald's application I'll need is the one to write my graduation speech on," I said at last, with hard-learned self-control keeping even *more* bravado from my voice.

"We'll see, Mr. Hughes," he said. "We'll see." Then he took out a note pad, and turned businesslike. He wrote a list of times and section numbers on it. "These are my Design Strategy sections. And you'll need to take Professor Littleton for your Architecture History classes; these are the relevant sections. In addition, we're introducing a new computer class for architects; Professor Liang is teaching it, and I want you to take it. Do you have any experience with computers?"

"Yes, sir, I do," I said. "I actually own one." *Thank you, Susan!*

"Excellent. You'll undoubtedly do well."

Once again, I felt my face heating, but out of humility, instead of the more-common embarrassment.

"You'll need to take a history elective—I suggest Western Civilization—and Physics—"

"Actually, sir," I interrupted, "I have AP credit for Physics. So I'll probably take an elective."

"Which one?"

"I don't really know. I was thinking about interior design, since I enjoy human factors so much."

"An excellent idea, Mr. Hughes," Joska said. Without even looking at the timetable, he began writing. "Here is a list of professors and their sections." He finished the first page and turned to another. "And here is a list of books you need to read over the summer."

My eyebrows shot up. Joska's handwriting was neat and precise—he *was* an architect—and I could easily read it upside down. Surprisingly, the list was full of biographies: Leone Battista Alberti, Andrea Palladio, Christopher Wren, Louis Sullivan, and several more.

"I think that should be enough for now," he said, tearing off the note pages and handing them over. "Are you planning to model for Professor O'Riordan's classes next autumn?"

Once again, my eyebrows rose involuntarily; I'd never told him *whose* classes I modeled for. I shouldn't have been surprised, though, since he seemed to know everything *else* about my college career. Eventually, I composed myself enough to answer, "Yes, sir."

"Good. You'll need the time to relax; you're going to be very busy next year." With that, he withdrew a sheaf of papers from his top desk drawer. "I have one final task for you—these are scholarships for which you should apply."

For once, my eyebrows stayed put. Instead, my jaw dropped. "S-scholarships?"

"Of course," he said. "You'll have to submit drawings, an essay, and your transcript for two of them, but just your transcript and an essay for the third. Use your Gateway Arch drawings, as well as your Sunsphere and American Pavilion drawings, since the World's Fair architecture is currently getting so much attention."

I blinked in disbelief. My grades alone should place me in the running for academic scholarships, but design scholarships were a competition, a *hard-fought* competition at that.

"Make an appointment with my secretary when you have your schedule worked out."

I nodded, speechless.

"And I'll need to review your scholarship applications before you send them out."

Another nod.

"You have a lot to do in a short period of time, Mr. Hughes."

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir." With that, I took the cue and gathered the papers. When I walked into the hall, I simply stood there. *Holy shit,* I thought, *what happened to the pitiless professor who hated my guts? And who was* that *guy?* I wondered, looking back.

✧ ✧ ✧

Trip stuck his head through my open door and cleared his throat. I looked up from my computer, the screen glowing with a half-finished scholarship essay.

"What's up?" I said.

"You up for some pizza?"

I shrugged. I didn't feel like doing anything, much less walking down to the Strip. I'd been up late every night, studying or writing, and I was exhausted.

"Luke and Jeff and I were gonna talk about housing, and we need you, of course."

Trip and I had talked about living together in the fall, but we hadn't made any definite plans.

"Jeff's girlfriend is a student worker in the Housing office," he said, "and she thinks she can get us our first choice. But we need to have the forms in by Monday. So, are you up for it?"

"I guess," I said at last.

Over pizza and beer, we filled out the forms. Audaciously, Trip suggested that we apply for the Apartment Residence Hall—Andy Holt Apartments (where Kendall and Abby lived). It was usually filled with juniors and seniors, and since we were mere sophomores-to-be, I didn't think we had a chance.

"Hey," Trip said optimistically, "even if Meredith *can't* get us our first choice, we'll still get

Morrill."

"She's pretty sure she can get what we want," Jeff said.

"But what if I don't want to live with you *couillons?*" Luke asked, grinning.

"Just shut the fuck up and fill out the form," Jeff said. "You dumb, hairy fuck," he added under his breath.

"Skinny freak," Luke shot back.

Trip and I merely grinned at each other. I was excited by the prospect of having an apartment, not to mention living with the three of them. We all got along, and we knew each other well enough that we'd quickly settle any disputes.

"Do I need to fill out another form for our fifth roommate?" Luke asked, holding up his right hand meaningfully.

"*Dude*," Jeff said, indignant, "if you start that shit, I'm not gonna room with you."

"Hey," Luke shot back, "I'm not lucky enough to have a girlfriend who's a nympho."

At that, Jeff's face turned bright red.

"Some of us have to do things the old-fashioned way," Luke continued.

"You've got a girlfriend," Jeff said.

"Yeah," Luke said, "but we don't do it three times a day, you oversexed freak."

"*Three* times a day?" Trip said.

Jeff turned a deeper shade of scarlet.

"Three times a day," Luke confirmed.

"Not *every* day," Jeff said.

Luke rolled his eyes. "Still… you go through a box of rubbers in less than a week. And besides…"

With a hidden sigh, I realized that I'd been in my own little world for the past weeks—*months* even. I had no idea what they were talking about, although the gist was obvious enough. Aside from soccer practice and meals, I hadn't talked to Luke and Jeff very much, and I regretted that.

"You've been busy with other things," Trip said in an aside, sensing my mood. He shrugged. "We all have. It happens."

"I guess."

"Don't worry about it," he said confidently. "The guys knew you were working on the house plans, and they didn't care that you were busy. You were there when we needed you." He smiled. "Trust me."

We looked up as the volume at the table rose.

"We'd better break this up," he said, grinning. To Luke and Jeff, louder: "C'mon, y'all, let's get these forms filled out."

"Fucking gross," Jeff muttered, looking askance at Luke. "I can't believe you tried to *touch* me with that hand."

"Don't listen to him, *mon chèr*," Luke said, kissing the back of the hand in question. "He doesn't mean it. He *loves* you."

"Ugh!" Jeff protested.

"Guys!" Trip called sharply.

With chagrined looks, Luke and Jeff returned to their forms. Trip and I merely shared a dubious headshake and returned to our own.

I was looking forward to living with them, but it was going to be an adventure!

✧ ✧ ✧

The final weeks of the quarter were grueling. I had a paper due in English class, but I'd only written half of it. I had flat-out skipped a museum viewing for Art History, so I'd have to fake it when I wrote the report. And I hadn't spent *nearly* enough time studying for Calculus. On the bright side, I was as prepared as I'd ever be for my architecture finals.

Through a ruthless, almost Darwinian process, I learned what I could skip and what I had to pay attention to. English and Art History were fun courses, but they weren't directly related to my degree. I'd even been picking and choosing which Calculus homework to do, based upon where I needed the practice.

So as exam week began I was struggling to play catch-up. I finished my English paper, but I was counting on Professor Feller's lax grading for at least half a letter grade, perhaps more. Christy had diligently quizzed me on Art History, although I was still weak on the French Impressionists. Fortunately, late nights with my Calculus book gave me hope that I might pull out a B.

In the end, I did better in Calculus (an A-), and worse in English and Art History. Professor Feller hadn't been impressed with my paper, and had given me a B-. I'd confused *Monet* with *Manet* on Dr. Bertrand's exam, and missed an entire series of questions, which dropped my score to a 72, barely a C.

The English paper wasn't enough to pull my overall grade below an A, but the Art History exam dropped my grade to a B. Combined with Calculus and three As in my architecture classes, I was still assured of making the Dean's List, but the solitary B rankled (and put a dent in my hitherto perfect GPA).

✧ ✧ ✧

With exams over, I was exhausted and relieved at the same time. Unfortunately, I still had to pack my things and move out of the dorm. Campus had already begun to empty, and still more students would leave over the weekend. Some would stay for the summer quarter, but most of my friends had jobs or other plans.

The move-out deadline was the following Tuesday, but Trip and I decided to skip the rush. We weren't in a tremendous hurry, though, since the renovation crews were scheduled to begin after the Fourth of July holiday.

Gina's parents had arrived earlier in the week, after her last exam. She and Regan were moving to Los Angeles, where they had jobs in a hospital, courtesy of Regan's father. Before Gina left, we got together one final time, to say goodbye—goodbye for who knew how long. We lingered over our farewells, both promising to write. When we finally parted, I felt an emptiness I couldn't describe.

On Saturday, T.J. and Glen packed their things and loaded Glen's pick-up truck. T.J. even laughed and joked with me as though we were lifelong friends. Glen had to suppress a smirk at my expression, but he shook my hand and nodded solemnly—silent approval for how far T.J. and I had come.

Billy actually hugged me and had to blink back tears when he said goodbye, telling me I'd been "the best roommate ever." Jeff moved home the same day, and Luke's parents arrived the

following morning.

Wren and I drove Christy to the airport, where she bid us a tearful farewell. She planned to visit Simon in England for a month, and promised to bring us back souvenirs. Wren's parents arrived later that afternoon, and her mother lamented our "break-up." Wren had told her that we were still friends, though, so I helped them load their car.

My family was already at the Pines, but they called Sunday evening. I thought I could fit my belongings in the Land Cruiser, but they insisted on flying back to Atlanta and driving to Knoxville in the station wagon, "just in case." I hadn't even begun to pack, though, and my room was a disaster.

Monday morning, I awoke to an empty suite and began planning my day: packing, packing, and more packing. As I began, I wondered how I'd acquired so much junk. Worse, I wanted to keep most of it. Several hours later I was busily pulling books and sketchpads from my shelf when Trip stuck his head through my open door.

"Man, this place looks worse than *my* room," he said.

I stood in the middle of a circle of boxes, crates, laundry baskets, and duffel bags. It looked like a tornado had struck.

"Are you up for some lunch?" he asked.

I *needed* to finish packing, but I *wanted* to take a break. Besides, I had skipped breakfast, and at the mention of food, my stomach noisily reminded me of the fact. "Sure," I said at last.

Kendall and Abby had also decided to stay until Tuesday, but they were still packing, so they declined our lunch invitation.

"What're your plans for tonight?" Trip asked afterward.

I shrugged. "Nothing, really. Why? What's up?"

"Abby mentioned this really nice Italian restaurant, so I thought we could get dressed up and take the girls to dinner. Then, since they have the apartment to themselves, we can hang out there. So, are you up for it?"

"*Absolutely*. After the week I've had— Hell, after the *month* I've had, I could use a good party, even if it's only the four of us."

"Six o'clock? I'll make the reservations, you drive?"

"Let me call Kendall to make sure she doesn't have plans," I said, "but yeah, that sounds good."

Kendall didn't have plans, of course, and Abby had already mentioned the possibility, so she had her dress laid out. I told her we'd pick them up at five thirty and then I went back to work on my room. At five o'clock I showered and shaved (high and low), and donned my suit. Trip knocked on my door as I was tying my tie.

"You ready?" he asked.

I slung my jacket over my shoulder in reply. Ten minutes later, we picked up the girls. Kendall was wearing her form-fitting silver dress, and looked fantastic. Trip did a double-take, although he hid it well. Abby's light blue outfit was more conservative, but the dress clung to her body in all the right places.

The Italian restaurant was dim and full of old-world ambiance, and a corner of my mind noted the northern influence of Venice in the design. While I was still staring at the architecture, Trip ordered a bottle of white wine. Chagrined, I dragged my attention back to the booth. Kendall

smiled and leaned close.

"You're so cute," she whispered affectionately. "Everywhere we go, you're always looking at the architecture."

I grinned guiltily.

Her eyes glittered with a smile as she turned to her menu. My answering smile died as she sighed almost imperceptibly. A moment later I realized why—the menu was full of seafood dishes.

"Do you want to go somewhere else?" I asked her in a low voice.

"I'll be fine," she said. "I'm sure I can find something."

"Is everything okay?" Trip asked.

"Kendall doesn't eat seafood," I said.

"I like shrimp," she said, almost defensively.

"Well then," Trip said without hesitation, "let's see what kind of shrimp dish we can find."

Kendall eventually settled on shrimp scampi, and smiled her thanks as she folded her menu. By contrast, I *loved* seafood, and had a hard time choosing. I was still trying to decide when the waiter returned with our wine. I finally chose a Venetian fish and polenta dish, which sounded delicious. After the waiter took our orders and left, Trip lifted his glass in a toast.

"To best friends and beautiful women," he said with a mischievous grin. "May we always hold on to 'em!"

Abby blushed, Kendall grinned, and I laughed outright, but we all raised our glasses and drank. Aside from a few other diners, we had the restaurant to ourselves, so we relaxed, ordered a second bottle of wine as the salads arrived, and proceeded to enjoy ourselves.

Since I had to drive us home, I stopped drinking wine after my second glass. Kendall was already tipsy, and didn't seem inclined to stay sober. That was fine by me, since she usually got horny when she was drunk.

Trip seemed to be plying Abby with wine as well, and he met my eyes as he finished filling the girls' glasses. With a smile and an arched eyebrow, he seemed to ask, "Are you up for it?"

I smiled roguishly.

When the girls went to the bathroom together, he confirmed my suspicions.

"I hope you don't mind," he said, indicating the wine. "I figure the girls'll have fun."

"Sounds good to me," I said. When he grew serious, though, I followed suit.

"We're pretty good friends, right?" he said, an opening line for more to follow.

"*Best* friends."

"I think so too. So d'you mind if I ask you something? Well, it's more like a favor."

"Sure, shoot," I said.

"Abby told me—" he looked around to make sure no one could overhear "—that you and Kendall are nudists."

I felt my heart quicken, but I nodded as calmly as I could.

"I hope you don't mind that she told me," he said, uncharacteristically nervous.

I shook my head, but kept my mouth shut and tried to figure out where the conversation was going.

"Anyway… I was thinking… I really want Abby to loosen up a bit. She's not a prude when we're alone, but she's not very adventurous in public. You know?"

I nodded.

"She's a great girl, but I wish she was more open-minded. And I was kinda hoping we could do something with you and Kendall tonight."

At that, my heart began to race in earnest. The phrase "do something" could mean anything from—

"Maybe after dinner, we could go back to the apartment and… you know… get naked or something."

"Get naked or something?" I echoed, unsure of what else to say.

"Yeah, you know," he said. "I mean, *I* don't have a problem with it. And since you and Kendall are nudists, I figured you wouldn't have a problem with it. So I kinda wanted Abby to get comfortable and all, without worrying about Phoebe or Vivian coming home, or anything else."

"Ah, I get it."

"I just thought it'd be cool to sit around naked and talk or something," he said. "But there's no way Abby would agree unless… you know," he added, nodding at the wine. "Like I said, she's normally pretty reserved, but… Anyway, what do you think?"

"Sure, I'm game," I said, visions of Abby's lithe body already filling my imagination. Then I sobered. Trip had been on sports teams all his life, so he was probably used to seeing other guys in the showers. But there's a big difference between the locker room and being nude with friends, especially *female* friends. "Are you sure about this?" I asked at last.

He nodded immediately. "I've been thinking about it ever since Abby told me about you and Kendall." Then he blushed. "And this isn't just an excuse to see Kendall naked, even though…" He shut his mouth with a clomp and covered his embarrassment by taking a drink of wine.

"That's all right," I said, laughing to ease his mind. "I don't mind other guys looking at Kendall. I mean, I know you're cool."

He looked immensely relieved.

"Besides," I added, "she looks fantastic in that dress."

"*I'll* say," he said automatically.

With the barest hint of a smile, I delivered the coup de grâce: "You should see her *out* of it."

Trip rewarded me by choking on his wine.

"Are you okay?" Abby asked as she and Kendall returned.

Still coughing, Trip nodded. Then he cast a reproachful glance at me. "I'm fine," he said at last. "I just swallowed when I should've breathed." After another accusing glance my way—answered by a smug grin—we slid out of the booth to let the girls sit.

The rest of the meal flew past, the wine flowing and the conversation rife with sexual innuendo. Both girls were tipsy, and Trip had a healthy buzz as well. I was mostly sober, but I was thoroughly enjoying myself.

Finally, Trip sat back and put his arm around Abby. His hand hung over her shoulder, and with studied casualness, he began caressing her cloth-covered nipple. Her eyes flew wide, and Kendall abruptly stopped talking.

"So, how about some champagne," I suggested in the lull.

Abby was shocked, but she was drunk enough that she didn't move his hand.

While Trip summoned the waiter and ordered a bottle of Asti Spumante, Kendall glanced at

me, confused. I leaned over, my lips close to her ear as I explained. When I sat back, her face was flushed with excitement.

"Really?" she asked quietly.

I nodded.

"Wow."

I darted a glance at Trip. He saw me out of the corner of his eye. When he lifted an eyebrow in question, I nodded as surreptitiously as I could. His answering smile was goofy and excited.

The waiter brought the spumante and glasses, poured, and then departed. Trip made another toast, and we all drank. Then he whispered something in Abby's ear. She flushed, her eyelashes fluttering. In one long swallow, she finished her spumante, her hand delicately going to her nose as the bubbles tickled.

"Why don't we finish this bottle and head home," I suggested, my hand working its way up Kendall's thigh to the warmth at their juncture.

At that point the minutes dragged by, of course. Fortunately, Trip called for the check as soon as we finished the bottle. He absolutely refused to let me pay for my half of the meal, though, and I'm ashamed to say that I didn't argue as hard as I should have.

After the girls took a quick trip to the ladies' room, we left. We stopped at a liquor store near campus, and Trip emerged with two more bottles of Asti Spumante. Kendall and Abby were feeling no pain, though, so I didn't think we'd need much.

During the short drive back to the apartment, I worried about what Trip and I were doing. Kendall was obviously willing, but Abby seemed nervous and reluctant. She was going along because she loved Trip, and because she was buzzed. But I reminded myself that alcohol doesn't make people do things they don't want to. Besides, Trip and I weren't planning to *force* anyone to do anything. We were simply going to take off our clothes and relax.

Still, the sexual energy fairly crackled around us, and I was secretly hoping that Trip might be open to a foursome. I definitely wasn't bored with Kendall, but the idea of having sex with a new girl was almost overpowering. I ruthlessly suppressed the impulse, though. In the first place, I had no idea how to broach the subject. In the second, going from friends to nudists to swingers in one night was probably more than Trip and Abby were ready for.

At the apartment building we pulled into the parking lot and quickly found a space. Trip and I shoved the wine bottles under our sport coats as we headed inside. Upstairs, I put one bottle in the freezer and the other in the refrigerator for later. Then I returned to the living room, where Trip was taking off his coat.

"Boy, it sure is hot out there," he said, dramatically loosening his tie.

"Why don't you change into something comfortable," I suggested.

"I wish I'd brought something with me," he said with a theatrical shrug. "But you know, it's too bad we have to wear clothes at all."

The situation was turning into a scene from a bad movie, so I took over. "We're all friends here," I said to nods all around. "And you know that Kendall and I are nudists, right?"

Abby snuck a glance at Trip, who had the presence of mind to appear surprised.

"Well, we are," I said to him, playing my part.

"Oh, okay," he said. "That's cool."

"And since we're all friends," I continued, "why don't we get… um… comfortable? Without

our clothes, I mean." I looked at Trip and deliberately repeated his favorite phrase. "Are you up for it?"

At that, Kendall fought to suppress a tipsy laugh.

I tried not to glare at her, but when she darted a meaningful glance at the bulge of my erection, I felt my face warming. *Am I "up" for it? Indeed!*

Kendall lost her battle and burst into giggles. Fortunately, that was the perfect thing to do, since it defused the tension in the air.

"Come on, Abby," Trip said when we finally composed ourselves. "It'll be fun. We're all friends. And besides, we've got the apartment to ourselves, so no one will barge in."

She looked dubious.

"It'll be fine, Abby," Kendall said. "You'll get used to it. Besides, it's nothing the guys haven't seen before." With that, she turned her back to me and swept her hair aside so I could lower her zipper. It hissed down her back, revealing her smooth, tanned skin.

"C'mon, Abs," Trip said. Then, insidiously, he pulled her close and kissed her bare shoulder.

I watched her resistance crumble as he planted kisses up her neck to her ear. There, he whispered something. After a long moment of indecision, she nodded.

Kendall had been watching as intently as I, and she smiled at me over her shoulder. Then she wriggled, and her dress slid down her arms. Trip's eyes nearly bugged out when he saw her breasts. Then he stifled a gasp as she shimmied and pushed the dress over her hips. A moment later, she stepped out of her panties, tossing them aside. At that, Trip *did* gasp.

He looked at me, eyes wide, and I had to hide a chuckle as he swallowed hard. I guess Abby hadn't gone so far as to tell him that Kendall shaved her pussy. With another silent gulp, he looked away. Fortunately, his composure returned as he focused on Abby's zipper. After he lowered it, she let the dress fall to the floor.

Hesitantly, she turned to face him, and unfastened her bra. It came loose and she shrugged free of it. As she gazed up at Trip, I took a moment to study her breasts, which were round and firm, though smallish, and capped by brown nipples. Kendall discreetly cleared her throat, drawing my attention away. I'd been staring, and I felt my face heat at the realization. Kendall merely grinned, her blue eyes full of laughter.

When I turned back to Trip and Abby, they were still facing each other, but Abby had removed her panties. Trip reached for his tie but then stopped, his Adam's apple bobbing as he swallowed hard.

I hid a smirk as he tried not to look down at the bulge of his hard-on.

"Um…," he said at last, "I just thought of something." He looked at me, his eyes round with apprehension. "Can I talk to you for a minute? Alone?"

I nodded, and we stepped into the kitchen.

"One thing I didn't think of…," he began guiltily.

I knew what he was about to say, but I was having fun watching him work up to it, so I kept my mouth shut.

He grimaced in accusation when he realized what I was doing.

"Hey, this was your bright idea," I said at last.

"Yeah, but I guess I didn't think it through."

Smugly, I shook my head.

"Okay, Mr. Nudist Colony, what—"

"*Camp*," I interjected, suppressing a grin.

He looked a question at me.

"We call them nudist *camps*."

He rolled his eyes. "I'll get you back for this," he said without heat. Then he laughed. "Okay, man," he finally asked, "what do you do if you've got a hard-on?"

I chuckled, low and dark. "I dunno," I fibbed, "it's never happened to me."

"My *ass*."

"Okay," I admitted with a laugh, "you got me."

"So what are we supposed to do? I mean, I really wanna do this, but…" He finished with a helpless shrug.

"Just ignore it, man," I said, taking pity on him at last. "I mean, it happens sometimes. It's natural, you know? So let's just pretend we're not sporting woodies. Okay?"

"But what about the girls?"

"I don't think they're gonna get hard-ons," I said with a straight face.

He automatically started to agree, but then realized what I'd said.

My lips quirked up in a smile as he scowled.

"I really will get you back for this," he threatened as ominously as he could. Then he laughed, the release of tension almost palpable.

"Don't worry about it," I said. "Seriously. I don't think the girls'll say anything. Kendall certainly won't." I suspected that her reaction would be *delight*, rather than shock. "And can you imagine *Abby* saying anything?"

He barked a laugh. "No way, man."

With that, it was my turn to clap *him* on the shoulder, despite our six-inch height difference. "Now come on, my horny, soon-to-be-nudist friend—"

He grinned at me sidelong.

"—let's not keep the girls waiting."

Back in the living room, Abby and Kendall were sitting on the couch. I didn't want to make Abby any more nervous than she obviously was, though, so I barely spared her a glance.

"What took you so long?" Kendall asked, all sweetness and innocence.

"We had to discuss something that came up," I deadpanned.

Beside me, Trip tried not to snort with laughter, but he quickly succumbed. Kendall, as sharp as ever, started giggling. I tried to look nonplussed when Abby turned to me for answers, but she figured it out a moment later, and her cheeks turned rosy. As she hid her eyes behind her hand, I took the opportunity to study her body.

Her breasts were smaller than Gina's, but very attractive. Her stomach was flat and trim, and her hips flared to smooth thighs. She had her legs crossed demurely, though, so I could only see the top of her dark bush.

When I finally looked away, Kendall was smiling at me. I arched an eyebrow, as if to ask, "What?" She rolled her eyes, silently saying, "*You* know." I grinned in admission and then turned to Trip.

"Are you okay, buddy?" I asked solicitously, slapping him on the back.

He straightened, his face red from laughter. "I mean it," he said, chuckling as he wiped his

eyes, “I’m gonna get you for this.”

I shrugged with lighthearted unconcern.

“I thought we were going to get comfortable,” Kendall said from the couch.

Trip and I looked at each other.

“Well,” he said at last, “here goes.”

Neither of us looked directly at the other as we took off our clothes, but I was acutely aware of his presence. When he finally stood after removing his socks, our eyes met. Out of my peripheral vision, I could tell that his dick was hard. Mine was too, and he pointedly avoided glancing down.

“So far, so good,” he said.

I nodded, smiling. “Let’s see if the wine’s cold yet.”

It wasn’t, so we used the simple expedient of dropping an ice cube in each cup. Our erections didn’t flag as we went through the mundane task of opening and pouring the wine. With a silent, jaded chuckle, I realized that I was probably just as excited as he, albeit for different reasons.

A part of me—a *small* part, admittedly—still thought he might agree if I suggested swapping girlfriends. But Abby would never go for it, and I hadn’t even discussed it with Kendall, although I didn’t think she’d object.

The girls were talking quietly as we returned with the cups of wine. They looked up, and Abby immediately averted her eyes. Kendall, on the other hand, discreetly glanced between our erections, no doubt comparing the two. (I hadn’t done more than glance sidelong at Trip’s dick, but it looked about the same size as mine.)

I handed Kendall her cup of spumante and then sank to the floor next to her, my erection jutting upward as I sat cross-legged. Trip sat next to Abby, also on the floor.

“So,” he asked, “what should we talk about?”

“Why don’t we talk about the first thing that comes up?” Abby suggested with too-deliberate casualness.

It was *my* turn to choke with laughter, but I was hardly alone. When we recovered, Abby grinned, shy and clever. Then she looked at Trip, although her eyes carefully avoided his erection.

For the next thirty minutes, we drank and talked, the tension easing as the wine flowed. The alcohol was making inroads on Abby’s inhibitions, and she let her eyes roam a little freer. Trip wasn’t completely relaxed, but he was getting used to being nude.

As we talked about everyday things, our erections gradually flagged. My dick never softened completely, though, and neither did Trip’s. Not surprisingly, the slightest things were likely to make us hard.

We each had several incidents, from things as random as a snippet of conversation or a gesture. Each time it happened, we kept talking. But we definitely *noticed*, whether we acknowledged it or not, and the sexual tension was almost palpable.

When we emptied the bottle, Kendall and Abby excused themselves to use the bathroom. Trip gestured for me to join him in the kitchen.

“Dude,” he said, obviously buzzed, “I hope you don’t think I’m gay or anything, but do you shave… you know… down there?”

I felt my face heating, but nodded nonetheless.

"Why?"

I shrugged. "I dunno. I guess I just like the way it looks."

"It makes your dick look bigger." When he realized what he'd said, he turned beet red.

I did too, but I overcame my shock quicker than he did. "Don't worry about it," I said at last. "I mean, neither of us is gay, right?"

He fervently agreed.

"So don't worry about it. I mean, I can look at your dick without being a fag."

"Absolutely."

"So you can look at mine without being one either. Okay?"

He looked immensely relieved.

"That's one of the things about being a nudist," I said. "You've got to get used to other guys… dicks and all. So don't worry about asking me if I shave down there," I said, as nonchalantly as I could. "That's cool. Now come on, my curious, not-a-fag friend," I said, affably mocking him, "let's get the other bottle of wine."

As a thought struck him, he grinned.

"What?" I asked, opening the refrigerator.

"I was just thinking how fitting this is. Usually, *I'm* the one who's confident and sure of himself," he said. "But now the shoe's on the other foot…," he said, trailing off with a grateful look. "I guess what I'm trying to say is thanks. Thanks for not laughing at me or being offended or just… getting weird."

I laughed good-naturedly. "You're welcome."

With that, we returned to the living room. As we drank and talked, Trip and Abby grew more relaxed—and buzzed—with Trip sitting on the easy chair while Abby perched on its wide arm, his arm comfortably around her waist. Kendall and I sat on the couch, her feet tucked beneath her as she leaned against my side, my arm draped around her.

The conversation barely faltered as our dicks swelled and shrank, but everyone was aware when it happened. By the time we emptied the bottle, Abby was definitely drunk, and Kendall had begun to speak deliberately. Trip seemed more buzzed than I was, but neither of us was really drunk, since we'd been shamelessly pouring more for the girls.

The end of the bottle signaled a general bathroom break, and when the girls returned to the living room, Trip took the opportunity to pull Abby into his lap. Kendall looked at me, her eyes unfocused by alcohol. Then she stumbled, and I stood to catch her.

"Oh my goodness," she said, "I'd better not have any more spu… spumante."

I hid a grin as I eased her down to the couch and then sat beside her.

Trip and Abby were oblivious, though, since he was kissing her. As Kendall and I watched, his hand brushed Abby's stomach and then cupped her breast. She didn't resist, and even whimpered as he tweaked her nipple. I took the opportunity to kiss Kendall, my palm covering her breast as our lips met. While Trip and Abby made out, Kendall and I did the same, my hands roaming freely.

A minute later I cracked an eyelid and glanced at the other couple. Trip was still cupping Abby's breast, gently twisting her nipple with thumb and forefinger. Kendall moaned softly against me, and I momentarily panicked; what if she caught me looking at the other couple? A quick glance confirmed that her eyes were shut, so I turned my one-eyed attention back to Trip

and Abby.

When he dropped his hand to her thighs, she resisted. He was insistent, though, and she eventually let him spread her legs. He played with her pussy for a moment, and I shamelessly turned so I could open both eyes and get a better look. Her pussy was lightly furred, and I glimpsed a flash of pink as Trip's fingers slid along her slit.

I didn't want to get caught staring, though, so I returned my attention to Kendall. When I turned to face her, she immediately reached for my erection, gripping it without regard for the other couple. My fingers found her slit, and she moaned as I brushed her hooded clit.

Abby whimpered in growing passion as Trip teased her pussy, and over the next few minutes, I snuck a few quick glimpses. Her legs were spread completely, giving him easy access, and he was slowly thrusting his middle finger deep inside her.

Kendall broke our kiss momentarily, and I snapped my eyes shut. Fortunately, she didn't notice, and started planting kisses down my neck. I glanced at the other couple, and my eyes met Trip's. He turned red and immediately glanced away, but I kept looking at him.

When he realized it, he looked back and met my gaze. I winked, and a slow grin spread across his face. Abby clutched him, and he took a moment to kiss her forehead tenderly. But when he looked back at me, I held his eyes for a moment, silently telling him, "Watch this." Then I leaned down, my lips close to Kendall's ear.

"Spread your legs," I said.

She looked up, oblivious to Trip watching us. Her brow furrowed.

"Spread your legs," I repeated.

Without even asking why, she did, and Trip's eyes widened as he got an eyeful of Kendall's shaved, shiny pussy. She went back to planting kisses in the hollow of my neck, her fingers squeezing my cock.

We continued like that for ten or fifteen minutes. Every once in a while, I'd glance up to catch Trip looking at us, and we'd exchange grins. Judging by his expression, he was as turned on as I was, and seemed perfectly comfortable being both watcher *and* watched.

Finally, however, Abby said something to him, and he withdrew his fingers from her pussy. She immediately closed her legs. I felt the mood change, and gently pushed Kendall away from my neck. She looked up in confusion.

For her part, Abby blushed, embarrassed by her behavior. I simply acted like it was an everyday occurrence.

"I'll be right back," she said to Trip.

Then she caught Kendall's eye, and the two of them went to the bathroom. Trip's dick was hard and very, very red. I spared a quick glance at my own manhood, which looked much the same.

"Abby sure has loosened up," he said after a moment. "I just wish she'd…"

"Wish she'd what?"

"Never mind," he said. "She never would."

"Would what?"

His eyes met mine and he gauged my reaction. "Kendall and Gina," he hinted.

I felt my brow crease.

"You know," he said, his expression trying to convey his meaning, "*Kendall and Gina*. How

they… you know." He made a vague sex gesture with both hands. "But Abby'd never go for it," he continued. "So I know better than to even ask." He grew quiet, and I could see his imagination working overtime behind his eyes. "But wouldn't it be great if she would…," he mused quietly.

Before he could say anything else, the girls returned and Abby beckoned for him to stand.

"Abby and Trip are going to take our room," Kendall said to me as I rose in turn. "I'll make up one of the beds in the back bedroom and we can sleep there."

"Or *not* sleep," I said.

Trip and Kendall both grinned, but Abby blushed at the overt mention of sex. Kendall was already horny from the wine, though, and making out had only inflamed her more, so she grew insistent. Trip and I shared a quizzical grin as she practically tugged me toward the back of the apartment.

"We'll see y'all in the morning," I called out.

"G'night," Trip called after us.

A moment later Kendall closed the bedroom door and pressed herself against me, her breasts flattening against my chest. We kissed passionately before she sank to her knees. I groaned as the heat and moisture of her mouth assaulted my manhood, her tongue flicking against the underside ridge.

She began bobbing her head back and forth, her lips tight around my shaft when she pulled back, open again to engulf me on the in-stroke. Since I'd had an erection most of the night, I knew I wouldn't last long, and Kendall sensed my building orgasm.

She sucked me deep for a moment, her lips reaching nearly to the base of my shaft before she clamped them around me. Then she pulled back, her tongue working over my length. When my dick slipped from her lips, she flicked her tongue along the slit at the tip. My balls grew tight, and she began stroking.

I exploded with a grunt, a rope of white semen arcing to spatter her forehead, stretching from her hair to the tip of her nose. Two more blasts splattered her face, her smooth skin speckled with drops of semen. The fourth shot was stronger still, surprising me with its intensity, a thick jet of white trailing across her forehead and one closed eye.

She was careful to avoid the sensitive head, but she continued stroking me, gushes and drops flying everywhere. When my orgasm subsided, I felt an overpowering surge of lust. My dick seemed harder than ever, so I lifted Kendall to her feet and pushed her against the bed.

She sat abruptly and then lay back as I lifted her legs. I spread them and lowered my hips, my sperm-covered cock aimed at her pussy. I slid into her easily, the first few inches disappearing before I paused. She tensed, ready for the thrust that would bury my cock inside her. I lunged forward, and her breasts swayed with the force of my hips slamming into her.

As I fucked her, I gazed down at her body. Semen streaks and droplets shone pearlescent against the darker tan of her skin. Most of it had hit her face, but flying drops had landed on her breasts, stomach, and thighs.

The bed squeaked beneath us, but I didn't care who heard. After several minutes I threw Kendall's legs over my shoulders and bent her in half, my hips plunging down, slapping sounds filling the room as skin met skin. Her face contorted in ecstasy, shiny where she'd smeared my come over her skin.

Surprisingly, I came within minutes, pleasure exploding within my loins, the sensations racing along my nerves. I didn't shoot nearly as much as the first time, but I still filled the tight furnace of Kendall's pussy.

When I finally sat back on my haunches, I realized that I had scooted her halfway up the bed. Her chest rose and fell, her nipples hard, one of them shining with an errant droplet of semen. My own chest heaved as well, laboring to fill my lungs with oxygen.

"Wow," Kendall said at last, still a little dazed from the frenzied pounding.

I swallowed hard and merely nodded.

She wiped semen from her eye and tentatively opened it. Then she cocked an ear and grinned at me.

I looked at her in confusion for a moment, but then I heard it too: soft moans. They reached my ears from the next room, and rose in volume until Abby finally shrieked in passion. Kendall's grin only widened. Then she reached up and touched her face, my semen already turning sticky.

"Do you want me to get you a towel?"

She shook her head. "Let's just take a shower."

I nodded.

"I'm dru… drunk enough that I don't want to get sleepy." As if to punctuate her words, she yawned.

I yawned in turn and looked at my watch; it wasn't even midnight yet.

"I'm still very, *very* horny, though," she said. "So if I fall asleep now, I might wake up and rape you in the middle of the night."

"You can't rape the willing," I said with a grin. Then I pulled her to her feet and we headed across the hall into the bathroom.

We teased each other in the shower, the hot water and steam doing wonders to reinvigorate us. After we dried off Kendall wrapped her towel around her head and opened the door. Trip emerged from the front bedroom as we stepped into the hall, and he paused. His dick hung semi-hard, shiny from recent use.

Kendall could see that he wanted to talk to me, so she turned and kissed my cheek. "Don't be long. I want you to fuck me again."

My face heated as she pirouetted for Trip's benefit and then shut the bedroom door behind her.

He paused, nervously collecting his thoughts.

"So," I asked, breaking the silence, "do you think Abby enjoyed herself?"

He nodded.

"She seemed to be getting used to it."

Another nod. Then he grinned bashfully. "When Abby heard you and Kendall… um… you know… earlier…"

I nodded in understanding.

He breathed a sigh of relief. "She started really getting into it, telling me what she wanted me to do. It was pretty intense."

"It sounded like it," I said, teasing him gently.

At that, it was his turn to blush. "Well, I'd better go to the bathroom and then get back to her," he said at last.

We exchanged friendly grins and stepped past each other.

Kendall was making the bed in our room, the towel still wrapped around her head. I moved behind her as she bent over to tuck in the top sheet, but she didn't even flinch when I teased her plump labia from behind. She was already wet with anticipation, and quickly finished with the sheets.

When she did, she turned and sank to her knees. My manhood hardened under her determined assault. I pulled the towel from around her head and ran my fingers through the damp heat of her hair. A few minutes later she pulled my dick from her mouth, kissed the underside, and looked up at me.

"What were you and Trip talking about?" she asked, smiling seductively. "As if I didn't already know."

I grinned, blushing. "Yeah, some of that."

"Are you going to invite him to join us?"

My heart raced. "Tonight?"

"No, not tonight," she said, planting a wet kiss on the underside of my cock. "But sometime."

"I don't know if Abby would go for that," I said hesitantly.

"Then she can watch as the two of you fuck me."

My eyebrows shot up.

Kendall was oblivious, planting kisses along my shaft, rubbing it over her cheeks. "I want two guys to fuck me at once," she said, her expression dreamy.

With a start, I realized that she was drunker than I'd thought.

"Two hard dicks, pumping into me," she mused. Then she looked up, her lips trailing along my cock, her eyes glassy with lust. "Trip could fuck me while I suck you."

I swallowed hard and nodded.

"And then you could take turns fucking me. Even better, I could ride you while he fucked me in the ass, like you all did to Elaine." She looked up again. "Did you know that Abby won't let him fuck her in the ass?" She made a moue. "I told her it feels good, but she thinks it's dirty." She shrugged in disbelief. "It's her loss."

With that, she plunged her lips over my cock, her fingers teasing my balls as she slowly fellated me. When she pulled back, she let my dick slip from her lips and grinned up at me.

"Abby doesn't swallow, either," she said.

Once again, I found myself dumbfounded at the amount of information women were willing to share with each other.

"She'll let Trip come in her mouth," Kendall added, kissing my glans, "but she spits it out." She shrugged. "If you've already got it in your mouth, why not go ahead and swallow? After all, it's only semen."

I nodded.

"If Trip came in my mouth, *I'd* swallow," she said. Then her face lit up. "Or I could get you both to come on my face." She began sucking me again, her head bobbing as she impaled her mouth on my length. "Oh my goodness, Paul," she said at last, breathless from more than just sucking me, "I want Trip to fuck me. I want you to fuck me at the same time. I want two dicks filling me… mouth and pussy… pussy and ass." She looked up, her blue eyes round. "Can we do it? Can we ask him to join us? I want to have a threesome with another guy. Please?"

"Sure," I said, surprised by her enthusiasm.

"I love Abby," she said, rubbing my cock over her face, "but she's too reserved to do anything. I know you want to fuck her," she said without even sparing me a glance, "but she'd never do that. But do you think she'd be upset if I asked her to… oh, I dunno… let me *borrow* Trip?"

"Yeah," I said with a frank laugh, "she might be."

Kendall frowned. Then she kissed the side of my shaft, lost in concentration. "You're probably right," she said at last. After a moment she brightened. "Maybe this summer…"

I hung on her words, my imagination racing.

She didn't complete her thought, though. Instead, she wrapped her lips around my shaft, her tongue working the underside of my glans.

I was still in shock. I knew she liked looking at other guys, but I didn't know that *Trip* was among them. I guess I couldn't object, though.

"Oh my goodness," Kendall said at last, interrupting my thoughts, "I want Trip to go down on me while you fuck my face. Abby says he gives incredible head. Not that you don't," she added almost as an afterthought. "But the idea of two guys doing whatever I want… mmmmm… two long, thick, hard dicks… in me, on me… pumping, thrusting, spurting… You said you don't mind if I talk dirty," she finished, looking up at me past my erection. "Do you remember?"

"I remember," I said with a nod.

Her eyes grew far away, and she kissed her way down my dick and back. Then she took me as deep as she could, her lips straining to reach the base of my shaft. She couldn't quite get there, though, and had to content herself with all but the final inch. When she pulled back, she started talking again.

As she alternated between sucking and kissing me, she talked about how she wanted Trip and me to fuck her, to come on her face. She even added Kirk to the mix, and had all *three* of us fucking her, every opening full. At the end of that fantasy, she had us standing in a semi-circle around her, jerking off until we came on her face and chest.

"After all," she said at last, "it's only fair. You get to fuck all the women you want, so why shouldn't I get the same chance? I get horny too, you know. I want three men to fuck me, their hard, rampant shafts throbbing with desire."

At that point, I had to stifle a laugh. She must have been hitting her secret stash of trashy romance novels if she was trotting out phrases like "rampant shafts throbbing with desire."

Still hiding a smile, I lifted her to her feet. She looked at me with dazed, drunken, wild eyes, which drooped closed as I kissed her. I tasted myself on her lips, along with a hint of wine. All the alcohol must have caught up with her at last.

"Fuck me, Paul," she said when we broke the kiss. Before I could even answer, she turned and knelt on the bed. She bent forward, her breasts bulging to the sides as she rested on her chest. Then she looked at me over her shoulder, her hands reaching back to spread her ass cheeks. "Fuck me, Paul."

I knelt on the bed behind her and scooted forward. When I probed her opening with the tip of my dick, she moaned.

"Fuck me in the ass," she said. With a drunken, theatric frown: "Poor Trip… he doesn't get to fuck Abby in the ass. She doesn't swallow either. Did I tell you that? He gives great head,

though. She said he can make her come just by blowing on her. Wow."

I shook my head in quiet amazement. Then I eased forward, my glans spreading her inner labia.

"No, in my ass," Kendall said insistently. "I want you to fuck me in the ass."

"I have to get my dick lubricated," I said. Without ceremony, I gripped her hips and slid into her, burying my length in one long thrust.

She cried out softly, but grew silent as my dick raked along her inner walls. Then I began fucking her in earnest, the bed squeaking beneath us. When my dick was slippery enough, I pulled out and set the tip at the rosette of her sphincter. She groaned deep in her chest as I entered her in one long, steady stroke.

With long, even thrusts, I fucked her for five or ten minutes. I wasn't in danger of coming any time soon, so I took my time and enjoyed the tight heat of her ass. She began playing with her pussy and I felt her tense up in orgasm several minutes later. As she panted, she urged me to keep fucking her.

I wasn't about to disappoint her, so I rolled us to the side. After a bit of jockeying, we came to rest spoon-fashion, my dick still buried in her ass. I cupped her breasts as I continued pumping into her, tweaking her nipples and making her whimper with ecstasy.

She came again a few minutes later, her back arching as pleasure coursed through her. By the time I felt my own orgasm building, she was pushing back against me, eager to feel me fill her. With a grunt, I buried myself in her ass and spurted deep within her. She moaned, assaulted by aftershocks from her earlier climax. When my orgasm subsided, we held each other, panting from the exertion.

"Oh my goodness," she said at last.

"No kidding."

We held each other, my dick softening in her ass, our breathing slowly returning to normal. Then I kissed her shoulder and got up, bound for the bathroom to wash my dick. When I returned, I could easily hear the sounds of sex from the next room.

Kendall was still horny, and started sucking my dick. I didn't know if I was capable of another orgasm so soon after the last, but I wasn't going to pass up a good blowjob. I decided to return the favor, so I pulled her into a sixty-nine.

She bobbed up and down on my cock as I licked her pussy, which was still slippery from earlier. She came sooner than I thought she would, but it was a small, quick orgasm. I kept going, my face and chin covered in her juices.

I clenched my buttocks in exquisite pleasure as my glans passed the convulsive ring of muscle at the back of Kendall's throat. She kept going down, though, her throat surrounding the first inches of my cock as her lips sought the last.

I don't know how long we licked and sucked each other, but I eventually felt my balls draw tight with the familiar pressure of a building orgasm. Kendall sensed it too, and began plunging her supple lips over my shaft. My entire body stiffened when I erupted, and I half-stifled a deep groan.

When I finally came to my senses, I went limp, completely sated. Kendall kissed my cock for a few minutes and then swung her leg over my head. With a sigh, she turned around and collapsed beside me.

"Wow," she said at last, the word soft and deliberate.

As I held her, I felt her breathing grow deep and even, alcohol and exhaustion finally quenching the flames of passion. I lay awake for a long time afterward, though, thinking about the evening.

I'd known that Kendall was attracted to Kirk, but Trip was a surprise. I should have expected it, though. He *was* a charming, handsome guy, and she was bound to hear about his good qualities from Abby—including how good he was in bed.

Gina had always been interested in me and me alone, with an occasional girl added for fun. She'd been with other guys, but she'd always come back to me. As I thought about her, I let my mind wander over our years together, smiling at some memories, frowning at others. We'd each made mistakes, but we were still friends. *True friends.*

And friends are harder to find than lovers, I reflected with a dark chuckle.

When I thought about the wisdom of that, I realized how lucky I was. Trip was definitely a friend—a *lifelong* friend. Christy and Wren were friends as well, which I found oddly surprising, since I hadn't had many friendships with women—friendships without sex, at least. I really liked the two girls, and I knew we'd be friends the rest of our lives.

As I thought about the rest of my life, I took a deep, anxious breath. Soon, Trip and I would be hard at work on our houses. Kendall planned to spend the summer studying for the MCAT, and Abby had a job as a summer camp counselor. We'd all be busy making lives for ourselves, working toward our futures.

I could almost feel the pages of my life turning, the end of one chapter revealing the beginning of the next.

Unfortunately, Gina's chapter seemed to be over. I hoped she and Regan would be safe in Los Angeles, and I silently prayed she wouldn't fall victim to people like Rod, cocaine, or worse. No matter where she was, though, Gina would always hold a special place in my heart, and I wanted her to be safe and happy.

My relationship with Susan had changed as well. She was still a friend and a lover, but we had moved beyond just sex. I knew she yearned for companionship, for someone to share her life with, and I found it surprisingly easy to admit that I wasn't that person. Our chapter together definitely wasn't over, but we were writing a new one, where youth and discovery lead to maturity and growth.

Kendall and I were also writing a new chapter, and it was a welcome relief from the stress of trying to keep two girlfriends happy at once. I still had fantasies of a threesome with Wren (or Abby, or Dawn, or…), but I didn't want another girlfriend. And if Kendall had fantasies of a threesome with Trip or Kirk, then that was only fair.

My chapter with Trip was the beginning of my *professional* life, but it foretold the end of my innocence. I'd never again be a first-year architecture student, where stupid mistakes simply cost a letter grade. In the real world, stupid mistakes cost money, or worse, lives. I couldn't afford the former, and I *definitely* couldn't afford the latter.

With that, I turned my thoughts to the immediate future. In the morning, I'd pack up the remains of my youth, the remains of my freshman year in college. I looked forward to spending a few days at camp with my family, but it wouldn't be the same—Kendall would be there, but Gina would be in California.

After the Fourth of July, I'd move to Franklin and live with Trip in his garage apartment. I had no illusions about how hard I'd have to work, either, and the challenge seemed daunting. But I was willing to tackle it head-on, to survive it and maybe even learn a few things in the process.

With so much that had happened, and so much yet to come, I realized that I faced a pivotal point in my life. I snorted softly, an ironic smile flickering across my lips.

I'll have to do better than this.

Book 3 – The End

Look for the continuation of the story in *Summer Camp – Book 4: Christy*, coming mid-2006.

Author's Afterword

Once again, I was wrong about the size of the book. When I split the erstwhile Book 3 into two parts, I thought each would be about fifteen chapters, and 200,000 words. Well, I was *half* right. What can I say? I'm too fond of my own writing, I guess.

I did several things differently with Book 3, and I'm glad I did. Instead of the breakneck chapter-a-week pace, I slowed down and published a new chapter every three weeks or so. Because of the slower pace, I didn't burn out like I did at the end of Book 2. Avoiding burn-out is a good thing. Trust me.

I also expanded my reality team, a diverse group of people who give much-needed feedback and support. Each member brings a different perspective to the story, not to mention invaluable real-world experience. Since the reality team is mostly secret, I won't thank anyone by name, but you know who you are, and you know how much I appreciate your time, your advice, and your friendship.

Writing is hard work—and believe me when I tell you that it's *work*—but it's extremely rewarding. Through countless e-mails and Forum messages, I see how the story affects people's lives, and how everyone reacts in different ways. From laughter and enthusiasm to anger and frustration, I think I've managed to evoke every possible emotion. It's a heady feeling to know that something I created has such an impact on so many people.

I still haven't answered the two big questions, though. Who died? Who's the wife? Well, you'll have to read to find out… but you knew I was going to say that.

Thank you all for reading. I hope it never sounds trite when I say that, because I mean it from the bottom of my heart.

Nick Scipio
September 21, 2005
Southeastern US