

Connections

An attorney's first venture into criminal law leads her on an investigation where she encounters an interesting psychologist who changes her life

CHAPTER 1

MARK GUSTAFSON RECOGNIZED the tall, slender figure of his best friend as she approached. He made a small clucking noise as he watched his long time pal wade her way through the crowd. *How do I not notice 5'10" of gorgeous?* "Hey Claire, where've you been?" he said as they met.

At the sight of her friend, piercing blue eyes warmed and a smile swept across full lips. "Markie," she replied happily. Claire gave the big man a light punch on the arm, their usual greeting, but never slowed her stride. Glad to be out the hot courtroom, she tugged off her jacket and settled long dark tresses over her shoulders.

"Was that John Pears I saw you with?" Mark increased his pace to keep up with Claire.

"Yeah, that was him. That guy makes my skin crawl." Claire made a face. "I took over the Polaski case for Neil and Pears was up to his old tricks, trying to play mind games."

"And if I know you, you kept your poker face and were exceedingly polite. Ah, you and those impeccable manners."

Claire snorted and smiled at the assistant county attorney. He was every parent's "son-in-law fantasy." He looked impossibly wholesome with his wavy blond hair, dark blue eyes and cherubically handsome features. Add his 6'4" height and a solid build and you have a poster child for the Midwest dairy industry. His good looks and boy-next-door charm made him a favorite of jurors, and he was a tough lawyer who knew his criminal law.

"Claire, I haven't seen or spoken to you for almost a month. What's been up? Is corporate law still holding your interest?" Mark had rare insight into the tall lawyer's restless nature and short attention span.

"Same shit, different day," she offered wryly. "This is the last of Neil's cases I'm finishing up."

"Hey, I meant your personal life. I always know what's going on at the firm but you haven't told me about you. Come on, I've known you since we were both twelve years old," he cajoled. "When I don't hear from you after a couple a weeks, I know something's up."

She smiled wistfully. "Really Mark, it's nothing. I'm still me, which doesn't end up being very exciting. I get up. I go to work. I come home, and go to sleep. It's always the same."

"Are you in one of your slumps again?" the tall man inquired.

A dark eyebrow arched. "I just don't feel like seeing anyone. I like the solitude. Hey, by now you must be fully aware of my introverted, anti-social tendencies," Claire teased.

"I also know about your loneliness, Claire." His voice was friendly but serious. "You know that you have a standing invitation to my house for dinner, right? We've missed you the last few weeks."

"I have missed seeing you and the kids." She sighed. "Tell you what, let's try for next week."

"All right, I'll hold you to it. If we have to, we'll show up at your place with dinner. And I know about your new white couch and a three-year-old who would love to express his artistic side with some crayons. You've been warned," Mark joked with a smile.

She laughed and punched him lightly again. "You're such a menace! All right, I'll try to find the time to come over." Steering the conversation away from her personal life, Claire inquired about Mark's caseload. "Hey, any cases going this week?"

"Well, I've got one that's supposed to go, but my case is so solid, I think it'll plead out. I don't want to jinx myself, but this one is a slam-dunk."

"Your humility becomes you, my friend," she smirked. A muffled ringing sound from her briefcase indicated Claire had a call on her office cell phone.

"Hey, I'll talk to you later, I got a couple pre-trials." Leaning down, he placed a light kiss on her cheek and with a wave, he was whistling down the hallway once again, files in arm. Claire smiled as she answered the phone.

"Claire Easton.... Well, I was going to grab some lunch because... Another file? But I haven't even had lunch yet...But...A criminal case, huh? All right, I'll head back. Could you order me something from downstairs? Thanks."

Claire stowed her phone away and slid on her sunglasses. *She said something new for me to try. Why don't I like the sound of that?* The attorney thought as she headed to the parking lot.

Located in a renovated Victorian home on Grand Avenue in St. Paul, was the Cornerstone Clinic. Amanda Greer and her classmate Jody Penbrook established the clinic nearly two years ago. In addition to a small private clientele, the Cornerstone had a contract with the state correctional system. The contract allowed the two psychologists to see uninsured clients who couldn't afford their standard fee. In order to accommodate the steady stream of court referrals, Amanda's mentor and former teacher, Dr. Iris Park, had recently agreed to see clients on a limited basis at the clinic. Even though she was a talented counselor, it was comforting for Amanda to have Iris nearby. She knew she could always go upstairs and share her thoughts with her mentor.

Mondays were always the busiest day of the week, and this Monday was no exception. Amanda chewed her pencil thoughtfully, remaining silent. It appeared as though the two people in her office were in a staring contest, but in actuality, each was deep in thought. Finally, removing her pencil, Amanda broke the silence.

"How are you doing?" she asked gently.

Mike looked at Amanda a few more moments before answering. Amanda looked as if she was much too young to have graduated from college, let alone have a Ph.D. in psychology. With her shoulder length red blond hair and green eyes, the small, athletic woman could easily pass for a college co-ed. But Mike recognized her skill as a therapist and felt safe discussing his problems.

"I've been better, quite honestly," replied the client.

Amanda leaned forward. "Yeah, it is difficult, isn't it? Life is hard and nothing is ever going to change that completely. But we can have times in our lives that are less difficult than others. It may not seem that way right now, but things do get better. The challenge is to stay in the present and try to solve our problems. But at the same time, we should look forward to the possibility of the future," Amanda explained.

"I hate the way I feel, and I hate the feelings I have. It's so pathetic, Amanda," admitted Mike, his embarrassment clear.

"Mike, you may not be happy or particularly proud of the way you feel, but that doesn't make you or your feelings pathetic. Remember what we talked about at the beginning of our session? Feelings aren't good or bad or impressive or pathetic. They simply are. And our job is to manage them. Be gentle with yourself," she suggested.

"How am I going to be gentle with myself when I think I hate who I am?"

Mike couldn't meet her gaze. He looked around the room. Its décor didn't resemble what he thought would be stereotypical for a "shrink's" office. In the corner near the door, an octagonal table served as Amanda's desk. It was piled with papers, manila folders, various

personal pictures and a ceramic figurine of a bear. The rest of the room was set up similar to a comfortable den, with a small table as a centerpiece between a couch and several inviting chairs. Draped over the couch was a woven cotton blanket, while a large assortment of stuffed animals lay resting on the cushions. Art posters, paintings, and an enlarged photograph of a waterfall covered the walls. As required by law, her psychologist's license and graduate diploma, indicating her doctorate was from the University of Minnesota, were displayed on a shelf along with a few small plants. Again, Amanda waited quietly, allowing time for her client to think.

Mandy, maybe you should listen to yourself once in a while. Physician, heal thyself, huh? What did you do when you felt that way? Stew in despair like your client is now?"

Again, it was Amanda's voice that finally broke the silence. "It feels pretty crappy to be in that place, doesn't it? Mike, I don't have a simple answer to that. Although I wish I did. That's something we can pick up next week, all right? In the meantime, give yourself a break. You just have to hang in there and ride it out." She reached out and placed a comforting palm on his knee.

He smiled faintly back at her. "So I can't convince you to wave your magic wand over me and suddenly make me feel better, huh?" he asked in a droll tone.

Actually, if I had one of those, I'd wave it over myself first. Amanda shook her head and smiled. "Afraid not. Even if I did, the insurance companies and the HMO's would have me using it on two or three clients at a time to save money. That's always been one of your gifts, Mike. You have a good sense of humor which helps in the difficult times." She smiled at him encouragingly.

The psychologist got up, walked over to her desk and checked her calendar. "Well, looks like we're all set for next week. Bring your planner next time and we'll set aside some time for the next month." She walked him over to the door. "Take care, Mike."

After he left, she closed her office door again and pulled out his patient file from the locked metal file cabinet. Sitting down at her desk, she jotted down a few notes before leaning back into her ergonomically designed chair. Grimacing, Amanda began to rub her temples in an effort to forestall an impending allergy headache. Running a hand through her reddish gold hair, she added a few more notes before putting the file away.

Although she had a thriving practice, and was making a good dent in her student loans, there was something missing in her life. The young psychologist had recently bought a townhouse in Eagan that she shared with her infant daughter. Melissa was the apple of her mother's eye, taking up most of her time, but there was an emptiness in her life that Amanda recognized as simple loneliness. She couldn't quite figure it out. It was like a constant low-grade fever, nothing too severe, but uncomfortable enough to cause her concern.

Amanda glanced at the clock. *Looks like I've got just enough time to run to the bathroom before my next client arrives. Then again, she's usually early.*

It had warmed up considerably since she left this morning, and Claire was now carrying her suit jacket as she rode up the burnished brass elevators of the Norwest Center. She pushed a lock of hair from her face and stretched a bit, her back a little sore from sitting. The elevator door opened and she stepped onto the twenty-seventh floor, one of three floors her firm occupied in the building. She made her way past the receptionist to her office, which still contained several unopened boxes from her recent move. Anxious to see the new file, Claire tossed her briefcase and jacket on the nearest file cabinet. Trying to relax, she leaned back in her chair and stretched out. *Man, it ONLY took four years to get an office with walls and a door. Adios, to my old cube.*

This is what you've worked toward, ya know. I'm out of that lawyer mill but so far the only difference I've noticed is that I get a better office. Looking down, she spotted the new file on her desk. It was a criminal file. Opening it, she discovered the criminal complaint and almost nothing else. *Where are the motions to suppress or dismiss? No one's done anything yet!*

She scanned the complaint quickly. State v. Levine, six counts, ranging from misdemeanor possession, to possession with intent to distribute. The only other documentation was copies of the search warrants and receipts of what was recovered in the search.

Damn, heroin and high school kids? This is just great! Well Aaron, put your head between your legs and kiss your ass goodbye, cause you're gonna be in the custody of the Commissioner of Corrections for at the next least twenty years.

Claire closed the file and read the attached Post-it note.

C.,

I have to fly to Chicago this week to try and get a client extradited back to the state for trial. This one is all yours! Don't worry, I've already done all the work. Just show up and it'll be fine. If you need more info, ask Dave to give you some background

Ciao! Evan

What kind of dream world is Evan living in? I guess it's my turn to play clean up for Evan Moore. How does this guy win any of his cases, let alone get a reputation for being a hotshot criminal defense attorney? His biggest talent is taking credit for someone else's work.

Fixating on Evan's inadequacies, Claire thought of the string of first year associates that were assigned to Evan and how he put them through a meat grinder, and then took credit for their work. He was even too egotistical to allow them to second chair the cases they had worked so hard on. Another glance at the file and Claire noticed who the prosecutor was.

My first felony trial and have to go up against my best friend who happens to be one of the best drug prosecutors in the state. Maybe, we won't be having dinner next week, she mused.

Claire knew that her friendship with Mark would survive the trial. This was business, not personal. They had long since accepted that one-day they might be on opposite sides of the courtroom. Sighing heavily, she began reading. There was a ton of work to do and she only had 48 hours to prepare for her first criminal case. And what a piece of shit it was.

"That concludes the State's case your honor." Mark nodded to the Judge, confident that this was one rich-boy punk who wouldn't get away with his crimes. *Selling and doing drugs with high school kids in the bleachers of the school stadium. Talk about crappy!* The State's case had been carefully laid out, no details being left to chance. *Too many of these guys have been way too lucky lately. Time to win one for the home team.*

Claire watched as Mark put on a nearly flawless case. Although, several times she did manage to cast a scintilla of doubt on the State's key witnesses. But she knew it wouldn't be enough. *How could it be? It's so totally obvious this scum is guilty! The police did everything by the book and Mark hasn't let anything slip. Evan, you are truly an incompetent idiot! Why are we even here? Why didn't you advise this twerp to take the offered plea bargain? For Christ sakes! It was a more than a fair offer. And we have no case. At the very least you should have insisted on a jury trial.*

Claire looked over at the conspicuously empty jury box, then back to Judge Rumble.

There is no way "Uncle Luther" is gonna let this guy off. What were you thinking? She mentally rolled her eyes. That is, if you thought about this case at all. Even an inadequate

asshole like you knows that with a jury you always have a chance of acquittal, no matter how hopeless your case. But a bench trial? It's suicide for a guilty defendant. Any second-year law student knows that. It's nearly impossible to razzle-dazzle or distract a good judge. I think you just didn't want to be here when this dirtball is found guilty and gets a huge sentence! Nothin' like passing the buck. Well, look on the bright side Claire, at least this guy will get what he deserves and be off to Stillwater Penitentiary.

Oddly, even though it was clear she was going to loose her first big criminal case, she was comforted by the fact that the outcome would be just. *Heh. Somehow I don't think that thought is going to be very comforting to Levine.*

Judge Luther Rumble removed his wire-rimmed glasses, rubbing tired eyes. In a clipped serious tone, he spoke. "Thank you Counselor." Looking at Claire, "Ms. Easton, are you ready to proceed with the defense?"

"May I have a moment, Your Honor?"

"Five minute recess." CRACK!! The sound of the gavel boomed through the small courtroom. Judge Rumble leaned back in his dark leather chair, motioning to his clerk up to the bench. Shutting off the small bench microphone he leaned forward, and along with his clerk he started to shuffle through contents of the criminal file. The old judge grimaced and began fussing with the stiff white collar of his shirt.

You'd think he could get Helen to stop having the cleaners starch his shirts after 50 years. Claire smiled, thinking of the childhood cookouts her family and the Rumbles shared. How many years has it been now? Twelve? Fifteen? And those God awful formal dinners. Ughhhh! If Mom and Dad hadn't bribed me with the possibility of hearing some of Uncle Luther's legendary courtroom stories, I don't think I even they would've been able to force me to attend. The mental picture of herself in a horrible lavender party dress shook Claire out of her brief trip down memory lane. Putting a stop to her mental ramblings, she took this opportunity to lean over and quietly speak to her client.

"No! I told you! I can't go to jail," Aaron hissed.

"Mr. Levine, were you paying attention to the prosecutor's case? Weren't you the guy sitting next to me when they paraded out witness after witness? Weren't you sitting here when each one of those witness pointed right at you and detailed EXACTLY what happened that night?" Claire could see this approach wasn't working. *Corporate defendants are soooo much more practical. Okay. Plan B.*

"Aaron, if you're convicted, based on these charges, you're looking at nearly 22 years in prison. You know that right?" Aaron nodded and for a brief moment he almost looked ashamed. However, as quickly as the look appeared, it was gone, replaced by that annoying, cocky grin, he had been sporting the entire trial. Claire clinched her jaw, and continued. "I'm your advocate Aaron. And I'm thinkin' what's best for you is not to go to prison for so long that when you're finally released... Rogaine and Viagra will be regular items on your shopping list. Maybe if we stop this right now it won't be too late to accept the plea? Wadda ya say?" *That's assuming Mark has pity on you, Buddy. I know I wouldn't. I know he smells the blood in the water.* Claire looked hard into Aaron's muddy brown eyes. *Fuck. He's too stupid to even help himself.*

"Are you ready to proceed Ms. Easton?" The clerk had returned to his chair and the criminal file was now laid open and spread across the bench. Judge Rumble had just finished cleaning his glasses, and looked oddly impatient.

"Yes, your honor."

"Proceed."

She briefly flashed a look over at Mark who smiled slightly. *Shit. That was a pity smile if I've ever seen one.* Rising, Claire buttoned her blue silk jacket, and addressed the Court. Her eyes were still scanning her notes as she made a purely perfunctory motion. "May it please the Court. Based on the evidence presented by the Prosecution, Defendant moves for a directed verdict of acquittal."

Silence.

Claire looked up from her notes and glanced at Mark who was now leaning forward, intently watching the Judge Rumble. For a full 30 seconds the judge was silent. *What the hell is going on? Is he actually considering my motion?*

Mark was visibly growing more and more agitated. One of his fists was in clinched in a tightly ball. His knuckles were turning white and a slight flush began to appear around his collar. The unadulterated disbelief that the Judge would even consider acquitting this defendant, ESPECIALLY before he had even presented his own case, was plainly written across Mark's face. Claire returned Mark's look and was surprised when his face seemed to grow cold and even angrier. *Now what?* Then Claire turned to Aaron Levine and took in the smug look on his face. *I wouldn't count your chickens just yet you little shit,* she thought disgustedly.

The murmurings from the "peanut gallery" increased steadily as Judge Rumble remained silent. Finally, he cleared his throat and the courtroom went silent.

"Based on a careful consideration of the case presented by the State, this Court has no choice but to dismiss all counts... save count six...the misdemeanor possession charge. With the evidence presented, it is clear that a finding of guilt on counts one through five would be impossible."

The courtroom exploded. Claire was stunned. *Did I just win?* Aaron Levine immediately jumped to his feet and began hugging his shocked attorney. His words barely registered. "See? I knew you'd do it! You just had to keep the faith." Claire wasn't responding.

"Earth to Ms. Easton...Earth to Ms. Easton. Hey, are you still in there?"

What? Oh. "Ya...ya...congratulations Mr. Levine. But listen, the trials not over yet, we still have to worry about that misdemeanor possession charge. And..."

"ORDER! Keep it down in here or I'm CLEARING this courtroom." CRACK! CRACK! Judge Rumble raised the gavel a third time but stopped mid-motion as silence descended in the courtroom once again. This time you could hear a pin drop. His face was deadly serious and slightly flustered. "Counsel approach the bench," he commanded, and clicked off the bench microphone.

Mark was still trying to compose himself as he slowly made his way around to the counsel table and approached the elevated wooden bench. Claire followed behind Mark not wanting to look him in the eye. *What in God's name is Uncle Luther thinking? Did I miss something?*

Quickly raising a placating hand to forestall Mark's questions, the judge made his position clear. "Save it Counselor. I've made my ruling. I'll explain my reasoning in my Order and Memorandum. The only thing left to discuss is what you are going to do about count six."

"I won't voluntarily drop the charge," Mark challenged.

"No one is asking you to, Counselor." The judge turned back to Claire. "Come on Claire, we all know your client needs help. Isn't there any way to get him to take a plea so we can all go home?" The judge's voice had softened, and his eyes appeared watery.

What's with this case Luther? What's got you so upset? Claire glanced at her client, who was now hugging and kissing his spiky-haired girlfriend. *Bet Mommy and Daddy had a cow when you brought her home, she mused silently. Oh yeah...I'll bet they were pissed. Or is that the whole point?*

Turning back toward the Judge and still avoiding direct eye contact with Mark, she spoke. "He won't accept jail time under any circumstances. And I can't convince him otherwise. It's his choice."

"This is a lousy misdemeanor possession charge," the Judge grouched. "Who's talking jail time?" The judge was now solely focused on Mark. The inference was clear. "What about drug counseling?"

Mark briefly closed his eyes. *How am I gonna explain this to my boss? Crap! I've gotta get somethin' here. This case was a no-brainer. Anything, even a guilty plea to this one last pissant charge is better than nothing. I know when I'm licked.* Mark drew a deep breath and looked at Claire's face, but not into her eyes. Angrily, he stuffed his fists into his trouser pockets and murmured, "Minimum of 15 drug counseling sessions with a court contracted clinic. He misses even one session and he's violated."

Claire nodded. "I'll talk to my client. It shouldn't take long." The tall attorney made her way back to the defense table and a clearly pleased Aaron Levine.

"Why should I plead guilty to anything? Judge Rumble already tossed out the other charges," Aaron protested arrogantly.

"Because, the Judge made it clear he believes you have a problem Aaron. He wouldn't have come to that conclusion if he didn't think you were using. Trust me on this, you won't skate on the misdemeanor too. Look, there's no jail time involved just a couple months of drug counseling with a court appointed psychologist." It was clear Aaron was considering the deal. *Finally, he's starting to listen to reason. Am I ever glad I didn't have to work for this dickweed before today. I already feel like I've spent a lifetime with spoiled brats just like him.*

"Ok, Ms. Easton. You can tell the Prosecutor you've got a deal."

Claire breathed a sigh of relief. "I think that was a really smart choice, Aaron. It won't be too much longer, we'll just need to read the agreement into record and proceed with a few formalities."

Aaron leaned in towards Claire and clasped her arm tightly. "No jail right? I won't do actual jail time?"

"No jail time. You'll have to attend fifteen counseling sessions. And I mean all fifteen. If you miss even one then you'll be right back here. Understand?"

"Sure Beautiful, I understand." Aaron flashed his most charming smile and his grip on Claire's arm loosened. His hand slowly made its way down to her wrist.

Jerking away her hand, she stared at him coldly. "I'll be right back Mr. Levine." *Yuck! I wonder if I could get away with breaking his arm right here in court? Then again, after what I saw today...I'm not so sure I couldn't.*

Smoothing the sleeve of her jacket the attorney visibly straightened her posture and made her way back to the bench. Mark and Judge Rumble were both occupied with their own thoughts and appeared to be oblivious to the other.

Claire stopped next to Mark and spoke quietly, fully knowing that the day was a raving success for her client, which meant it was a rousing failure for her friend. "He'll take the deal, Mark."

The big man smiled at Claire's good sportsmanship. This was clearly a huge victory, especially since it was her first venture into criminal defense. "Well, I think they'll be a celebration over at Maylor & Moore. Good for you, Claire." Mark spoke softly to Claire, his smile never reaching his eyes.

"Come on Mark, let's get this over with and head over to Ryan's Pub for a drink. I'm buyin'."

"Damn right you are, Kiddo," he said gruffly. But this time the smile was genuine. "And, I may need two."

After having a few drinks with Mark at Ryan's Pub, Claire returned to the office to find David Bartolo, the head of the firm's criminal defense department, waiting in her office. He was stretched out on her couch, reading the latest issue of the National Law Journal. "And here she is, the newest member of the criminal defense department!" he proclaimed as soon as she entered the room. Leaping from his prone position he congratulated Claire by slapping her hard on the back.

Claire smiled at the veteran defense attorney. He was a small, wiry man with a full head of wavy dark hair and a mustache. His dark eyes absolutely twinkled with excitement. Although she was pleasantly surprised by the victory, there was something not quite right about the whole situation. The more she thought about it, the more convinced she became that something was downright wrong. What she *didn't* need right now was Dave Bartolo schmoozing her.

"Thanks Dave, but I haven't joined your department yet."

"It's just a matter of time. You and Evan will be the next legal dream team," he gushed. *Evan and I the next dream team? Dave, whatcha you been smokin'? Wonder boy just got lucky. He wouldn't know where to sign a motion unless there was a "sign here" sticker to help.*

Before Claire could respond, Dave started pulling her out the door. "Well, I sense some hesitation. But if you aren't convinced now, you will be soon. The grumpy old men have thrown you a victory party. Your parents will be there," he added excitedly.

"Where are we going?" *I don't feel like celebrating.*

"Luci Ancora. They rented out the whole upstairs!"

If this is so great how come I feel like shit? Claire pondered as the elevator door closed.

Luci Ancora, a peculiar two-story olive green stucco structure, was one of the finest restaurants in the Twin Cities. There was precious little parking so valet parking was an option. Dave had insisted on driving her there in his new Range Rover, promising to have someone drive Claire's Explorer back to her suburban home in Mendota Heights. Since it was nearly 7:00 p.m., the restaurant was crowded with eager diners. Dave proudly led Claire to the upstairs room. *I feel like a blue-ribbon heifer at the State Fair*, she thought testily. *If this guy doesn't lay off, I'm gonna spew.*

Claire immediately spotted her parents who were talking with one of the senior partners. Anxiously, they waived her over. One look at the Easton clan and it was obvious where Claire got her good looks. Claire's father was a tall, distinguished looking man, his thick black hair streaked with gray. His startling blue eyes were visible beneath designer glasses.

"There she is, the latest rising star at Maylor and Moore," laughed Robert Maylor as Claire sat down and inattentively began to peruse a menu. She'd managed to ditch Dave when he became distracted by one of the new attractive receptionists.

"You know Bob, we always thought Claire was a corporate lawyer, but she's proved us wrong!" declared Matthew Easton.

"Dad, please..."

"Claire, your father is so proud of you, we didn't know you had it in you to do criminal defense." Judge Anne Porter Easton was clearly ecstatic.

Claire took a deep breath as she released her napkin that was now twisted beyond use.

"Well Mom, I guess I surprised myself, didn't I?"

Sensing the approach of an awkward moment, Claire's boss launched into a detailed account of the trial. Her parents were immediately absorbed in the tale. Claire looked around the room. *Christ, I don't know half the people here.* But no attorney worth his salt would turn down a chance at free liquor. Add in the opportunity to schmooze the senior partners, and attendance might as well have been mandatory.

Looking up from the bottom of her glass Claire noticed a crowd at the door. Evan Moore had arrived. Evan cut a dashing figure with his tall, lean build, reddish hair and expressive hazel eyes. He simply oozed charm and charisma. His infectious laugh drew an attentive crowd of admirers. As he greeted the people around him, his eyes found Claire. Smiling, he strode over theatrically and took her hand.

"Well, well, we had a criminal defense lawyer locked away in the corporate department, I see. Good show! Hell of a good job," he proclaimed heartily as shook her hand with vigor. He ended the handshake with a firm slap on the back.

What is it with these criminal defense lawyers who love to slap people on the back? Isn't a handshake enough?" She reciprocated with an insincere smile and a lukewarm pat.

"You are amazing Claire, just like that, it all disappears," gushed Evan, snapping his fingers for emphasis.

"Actually, he did plead guilty..." began Claire.

"A chicken shit misdemeanor! I would have paid to see the reaction on Captain America's face when Rumble granted your motion," interrupted Evan.

"Mark put on a damn good case and he's a good friend of mine." Claire raised an eyebrow in challenge.

"Claire, no one is criticizing Mark's ability," her father soothed. "Evan is just proud of your victory."

Claire just sighed and stopped talking. Claire knew better than to try to change her parent's minds. *Ignorethemignorethemignorethem*, she silently repeated the familiar mantra. Claire's sour mood didn't escape the perceptive eye of the firm's founder.

"Young lady..." Robert Maylor pointed directly at Claire "you are a good attorney." Noting the dark circles under her eyes he added, "You look tired. I know we aren't easy on our junior attorneys, but I can see our training has definitely paid off with you." Claire tried to ignore his condescending tone. "But we aren't TOTAL slave drivers. I know you've been working your tail off. You have another appearance next week?"

"I have some discovery motion next week for the... uh...*what's the name again?????* Robertson file," she rebounded.

He smiled. *Quick on your feet, hey.* "Okay, after your motion, you are going to take some time off."

"That's very considerate of you Bob, but I really enjoy my work..."

"You're talking to an old man who still is a workaholic. This firm was founded on my drive, but now I have children I barely know and I hardly see my grandchildren. I've learned my lessons. I don't want you making those same mistakes. This.. is.. a.. direct.. order." A pointy finger emphasizing each word.

"After your motion next week, you take some time off. Don't worry about your cases. We have to keep those summer associates busy somehow." He smiled in anticipation.

The younger lawyer could see that arguing was futile. "All right, but after two weeks, I reserve the right to come back. I get bored easily when I'm not working," Claire confessed.

"The work will still be there when you get back. You just need some rest. Once you're rested up you'll realize how important that victory today was," he soothed.

Either that or I'll bail on criminal law altogether. A directed verdict...why?

Claire practically jumped out of Dave's Range Rover. She was pathetically grateful to be home. Her family heritage and high salary permitted her to indulge in many luxuries, but this house was one of the few she allowed herself. It was her sanctuary... a place where she felt completely safe and secure when the world became too much. The white brick house sat on an acre of land surrounded by trees and was nearly invisible from the street beyond.

It's lucky I didn't have to drive home tonight, she thought wryly. I'm still feelin' the effects of that last scotch. Or was it the last four? Come on, I need to chill out and let myself enjoy this victory. Why can't I just enjoy this without waiting for the other shoe to drop?

She gingerly made her way up the driveway, trying not to fall flat on her face. Claire noticed that the flowering trees and tulips were beginning to bloom. She had spent last fall planting row upon row of her favorite flower and was satisfied to see the fruit of her labors.

Maybe I should just garden full time and become a landscape architect? It doesn't involve being responsible for people's lives. There wouldn't be any guilt about outcomes. If your customer doesn't like a your work...fuck'em... he can plant his own trees. She snorted.

Shuffling through the door, and tossing down her jacket and briefcase, she stumbled into her modern but bare kitchen. The sleek marble countertops and oak cabinets were mostly empty, a testimony to her lack of culinary interest. The stainless steel refrigerator, did however, contain enough pre-packaged and carryout food to last her the week.

God, I hate nylons. Ripping them off as she walked towards the stairs, she nearly fell. *I gotta change out this moron uniform.* Heading upstairs to her bedroom, Claire passed her baby grand piano which sat lonely in her sparsely furnished living room.

Leaving a trail of clothing as she went Claire wobbled by her library, office and two spare bedrooms. *Shower. I must have a shower.*

The steaming hot water began working its way through Claire's scotch induced haze.

Shutting off the water, the brunette. Claire wearily pulled open the shower curtain and grabbed a towel. After several minutes of riffling through the clothes on the floor Claire finally hit pay dirt. *Shit...I guess tomorrow is laundry day.* Sitting on her unmade bed, it took great effort to slip on her favorite pair of running shorts and threadbare T-shirt.

What am I in the mood for tonight? Dammit, don't go there. You know you're in the mood for something you can't have. Messages, then music...

Punching the button on her answering machine she smiled faintly as the messages played. They were mainly notes of congratulations for winning her first criminal trial. Claire took a deep breath after listening to them, still troubled by her "victory."

Even given her non-existent experience in criminal defense, she still understood how rare a directed verdict was. *Mark presented a devastating case. He should have won!*

Her thoughts shifted to Evan. *How does an incompetent lawyer like Evan get such a kickass reputation? Evan probably spent more time on the Post-It than researching the case.*

Am I jealous of Evan? Am I jealous because it comes so easy for him and you had to work so hard to prepare this case? Be honest with yourself. What's wrong with this picture. My gut is telling me something. I just don't know what...Yet.

After retrieving the last of her messages, she noticed how thirsty she was. *That's what you get for emptying half a bottle of scotch. Well, at least it was good scotch,* she laughed aloud.

Opening her refrigerator she reached to the back corner and retrieved some apple juice. *1:00 a.m.? What could possibly be on TV this late?* She slowly padded into the den and began channel surfing, finally settling on the History Channel. *I forgot how thirsty drinking makes you,* she thought, as she gulped down the last of the juice.

Claire found herself mildly interested in the Greek archeology show, but she couldn't concentrate. Sighing, she clicked off the television and made her way into the living room. She needed to relax, and in a world of uncertainties, there had always been one constant - the piano. Playing was her favorite way to relax and think.

She didn't bother turning on the living room light. The dim lights streaming in from the hallway barely allowed her to see the keyboard. Sitting down on the padded leather bench she stretched out long fingers. Closing her eyes for a moment, she cleared her mind and began playing the beginning aria of Bach's Goldberg Variations. The gentle phrasing and flowing melody flowed through her. Although she liked playing all types of music, she preferred the classical masters like Bach, Handel and Scarlatti. The precise notes and the repeating patterns allowed her to concentrate. *I must be an idiot-savant. I'm actually playing better with a buzz.*

All right, I've got to put an end to this obsessing or it's going to drive me batty.

Tomorrow I can go to the office and take a look at Evan's files. Maybe I can figure out what happened to his other cases. Then I can let it go ... or, not. Deft fingers crossed the keyboard.

Come on Claire, quit fooling yourself. You won't let it die until you get to the bottom of the whole thing. God, I'm obsessive! I know it, and I still can't stop myself. But I can't do another criminal case until I know what happened with this one.

Her playing was fluid, hands moved up and down the keyboard with a natural grace. She started to play a Scarlatti sonata.

Hold it. You're not responsible for the kids Aaron Levine sold dope to. The only person I can control is myself. I had to learn that lesson the hard way, remember?

Claire finished the Scarlatti and went to another Bach piece.

Finally having made the decision to act on her suspicions she was able to relax. She stopped playing and sighed.

"Landscape architecture. Maybe I missed my true calling," she said with a sad laugh.

The traffic going into St. Paul was surprisingly light for a Monday morning. Claire crossed the over the Mississippi River and into the outskirts of the city with her mind on a mission. Her review of Evan's old case files had left her with more questions than answers. It appeared that Evan had been granted a directed verdict in several recent trials. Claire became even more suspicious after she noted that all of Evan's clients were ordered into counseling at the Cornerstone Clinic in St. Paul. As she got off 35E at the Randolph Street exit, her mind focused on her conversation with Mark last night. The two friends had made plans for Claire to come to dinner later this week.

"I don't know if this is sour grapes or not, but my track record has been lousy with Evan lately. What's even more surprising is that it was Uncle Luther who granted that motion. He's always been such a hard-ass, especially with drug dealers," Mark had explained.

Claire decided to check out this Cornerstone Clinic to see just what kind of services they offered. Turning off Lexington Avenue and onto Grand Avenue, she began looking at the building numbers. The clinic was located near Billy's, a favorite student hangout for the nearby William Mitchell College of Law. Claire found a parking space about a half a block down from the clinic and walked along Grand Avenue, stopping in front of a neatly

remodeled brownstone Victorian house. She looked at the discreet sign outside. This was indeed, the Cornerstone Clinic.

Claire carefully pulled open the door and went inside. She immediately encountered a waiting area, complete with a large couch and several chairs. Spotting a coffee table that held some magazines, Claire picked one up and looked at the date. *At least these magazines aren't two years old.* She also saw an assortment of toys and a tiny plastic picnic table in the other corner. There were two doors leading to the offices of the psychologists, Amanda Greer and Jody Penbrook. It appeared that the clinic was the sole occupant of the building. Claire wandered over to the stairs and looked up, seeing two other offices, a bathroom and a small kitchen.

Looks normal enough, Claire thought as she went over to a wall rack with brochures and booklets next to the offices. She picked one up entitled, "About Cornerstone Clinic," and scanned it quickly. *Nothing too out of the ordinary, just some background on the services provided and educational information about the two psychologists.* Claire looked at another one entitled, "The Therapeutic Process and You," and was about to read it when one of the doors opened and a man walked out of the office and into the waiting area. He went directly to the drinking fountain, giving her a friendly smile. She smiled back and went on reading the brochure, before picking up another one. The other office door opened and a woman walked over to greet Claire.

"Hi, are you here for an appointment?" asked a brown-haired woman in a friendly tone.

"Uh, no, not exactly. I was just here to... pick up some brochures about the clinic, you know," Claire replied a bit nervously.

Claire noticed another woman out of the corner of her eye. She was casually dressed in khakis and a soft cotton shirt. Claire felt that she was being watched and turned her full gaze to the petite woman. The woman looked very young, her reddish blond hair pulled back into a ponytail. Her eyes were a unique green which Claire couldn't recall seeing before. The attorney found herself smiling sheepishly at the woman, before turning her attention back to the brunette.

The woman smiled. "Okay, well take your time. You might want to look at this one." She handed Claire a pamphlet. If you have any questions, give us a call."

"Thanks. I will," Claire added, as she left the building.

Claire snapped out of her little trance and shook her head. *Shit. What was that all about? One smile and you're feeling all warm inside? It has been a long time, hasn't it? She shrugged. Maybe I know her from somewhere.*

The padded oak rocking chair tipped back into its normal position as Amanda rose and stepped forward. With a muffled groan she twisted her head. Straining her neck, she smiled with satisfaction as the vertebrae popped back into place. Careful not to wake the sleeping form resting against her shoulder, she swayed slightly backward and was rewarded with another audible pop, this time in her lower back. Amanda continued to unconsciously sing the song from her own childhood, even after she recognized the soft, even breaths of sleep, which tickled her neck.

"I see the moooon. The moon sees me. Shining beneath the willow treeeee. Please let the moon that shines on meeee...shine on the one I luuuv."

She drew a breath and turned her head slightly to the right, gently kissing the soft dishwater locks as she spoke in a low whisper. "Time for Mama to hit the sack, sweetheart. Looks like Mrs. Fisher must have really worn you out today...huh?" Carefully, Amanda padded over the soft carpet, bare toes digging in, as she navigated across the smooth surface in the dark. Slowly, she lowered the sleeping form only to have the baby

begin to fuss and grab for her blouse. "Ok... ok...shh...shh...I'm still here." As she settled the little girl into the crib she gently laid her palm across the warm chubby cheek, cupping it slightly. "That's it, Honey. Go back to sleep."

Several squirming seconds later, the girl was sound asleep and Amanda hesitantly removed her hand, immediately missing the warmth of the connection. She spent a full minute simply gazing at the baby, wondering how such a small person could have such a profound impact on her life. With a soundless sigh and one last adoring look at her daughter, she turned to leave the room. At that moment her stomach decided to protest its sad treatment as of late.

Oops. Time for snack I think. Amanda made her way to the small kitchen, not bothering to turn on the light. *What do I want? Healthy or decadent? I'm definitely in the mood for somethin' bad for me and I'm waaaay too tired to fix somethin' healthy. Any of those cookies left?* Small hands fumbled around blindly through the cupboards. *Finally!*

"Yummmmy, Oreos," she purred. Grabbing several cookies she turned and opened the refrigerator, the bright light temporarily blinding her. *Man, that's bright. Milk. Where's the darn milk? Ahhh. Okay, all set.*

Finally, a little quiet time to think. Blindly, she made her way to her favorite recliner. Snuggling down, she gazed through the glass of her patio doors into the night. The light pattern of the rain tapping against the glass and her rhythmic chewing began to relax away the day's tension. With eyes closed she leaned back heavily into the soft fabric, relishing its softness, and letting her mind drift back over her day.

I wonder who she was? I hope she's not a patient. A mental frown. Then again, I'd love to get a better look at her...just under different circumstances. She was pretty. Snorting slightly, Okay...admit it. She was more than just pretty. How often can you actually say that about someone? And those eyes. Wow!

Even from the doorway of her office Amanda could make out the depth and brilliance of their color. She realized she must have been staring for an inappropriate length of time when the woman suddenly looked up at her and broke into a slightly crooked smile, then quickly shifted her focus back to Jody. Quite without her permission, Amanda found an answering grin on her own face. *I wonder if she's shy? Jody handed the women some brochures and she was gone. She didn't look like she had a drug problem. Maybe she was there for marriage counseling. Was there a ring?* Knowing the absurdity of her own thoughts, Amanda chuckled. *Okay, and she didn't look like she had too serious a problem.* Some of the people that came in for drug counseling truly did appear to be on their last leg. *She looked healthy. Strong even.* Amanda felt an unexpected pang of disappointment at the more than likely prospect of never seeing this woman again. *Well, if she's not coming to see us professionally, maybe it's because she's deliriously happy. I hope she is. Someone should be.*

With that depressing thought, she sighed deeply and got up, pulling the curtain shut on the patio door. Leaving her glass on the coffee table, she turned towards her bedroom and away from gentle sound of the spring rain against the glass.

Amanda sat looking around the empty jury room that smelled like wood, dust and sweat. Rising from the uncomfortable wooden chair she walked to the window and peered out at to the grass below. The day had been a complete disaster. The hellish metro traffic had nearly caused her to be late. She arrived in court only minutes before she had to testify. She rubbed her temples in frustration. Her testimony had not gone well. Her client was a recovering alcoholic who had, at least temporarily, lost custody of his 8-year-old son.

His attorney had subpoenaed her to testify to her client's life improvements, apparently through successful rehabilitation. After receiving the subpoena she'd tried to contact her patient's attorney. For a solid week she left voice and email messages, with no response. The day before she was scheduled to testify she was desperate enough to skip over the attorney completely. She phoned her client directly only to get his answering machine.

The therapist knew the kind of testimony they wanted. She was expected to take the stand and say that her client had gotten his life together, that he had recovered from the disease which had crippled him for years, and that he was now capable of being a fit parent to his son. Only problem was...it wasn't true. Her client had made vast improvements since he began counseling. But improving didn't mean he was ready to have his son back. It was too soon.

Amanda earnestly testified that her client was making progress, all the while praying that she wouldn't be directly asked if she believed he was emotionally ready to take on the responsibility of an 8-year-old child. But of course, she was asked. And she responded in the only way possible. She told the truth. Her client had been livid, calling her a traitorous bitch. Their doctor/patient relationship was damaged beyond repair. She wasn't sure if she wanted to shout or cry. Months of progress had been effectively wiped away in all of 15 minutes. She only hoped he would continue with his treatment elsewhere. Now she stood, alone in the quiet jury room, licking her wounds and wishing she had stayed in bed this morning.

"That shouldn't be a problem. I've got a few minutes before my hearing so I'm gonna find a nice quiet spot and review the briefs... Okay...I'll be by later today and pick up some reading material so I'll have something to do on my enforced vacation...Ha..ha..very funny. See you later." Claire snapped her phone shut and began climbing the steps to the third floor jury room.

Boy, it's been a while sense I've come up the back way. I don't think I've even been up here since I stopped clerking for Judge Peters.

Shifting her briefcase into her left hand Claire opened the door to the jury room. It had been a favorite work spot when she was a judicial clerk. The room provided better lighting and more space than her small office and whenever it wasn't in use she'd claim it as her own. Claire sniffed as she opened the door. *Oh yeah...must have been a close one... criminal maybe.* Setting down her briefcase she suddenly noticed a silent figure in the corner of the room, standing in the shadows. Disappointed she exhaled, *I guess I shouldn't have expected the place to be empty. Stay or go?* The woman in the corner had her back to Claire and was staring out the window. She was apparently oblivious to the fact that someone else had entered the room. Claire noticed the woman's shoulders slightly lurch. *Is she crying? Well, so what if she is? She obviously wants to be alone or she wouldn't be in here. Man...This is none of my business! But even from behind she looks so sad.* A moment of indecision. *What the hell.*

Not wanting to frighten the woman, Claire made her approach much noisier than necessary. Hearing the loud steps, Amanda turned around quickly wiping an angry hand across her cheeks. "I'm sorry, I thought it would be okay if I used this room, it was empty so..."

"No, no, it's fine for you to be in here you just looked a little...er...upset... and I was just gonna see if you were okay ... or if there was anything I could do," Claire offered uncomfortably.

"I'm fine but thanks for..." Amanda stepped forward, completely out of the shadows and each woman immediately recognized the other. "Thanks for asking," the blonde finally finished.

Claire felt an instant tightening in her chest when she saw the trail of dried tears on Amanda's cheeks. *Anger? Am I angry at whoever's made her so upset?* Claire didn't have time to analyze the strange feelings before Amanda spoke again.

"You were at the Cornerstone Clinic earlier this week right?" she questioned.

She actually remembers me? Why not? I sure as hell remember her. "Yes, I was picking up some brochures for a friend." *It's not a TOTAL lie. Time to change the subject.*

"What's got you so upset? Dr. Penbrook?"

"Nope, that's my partner." Amanda extended her hand. "I'm Amanda Greer."

Claire gently gripped the offered hand, "It's a pleasure to meet you, Dr. Greer. I'm Claire Easton." *Her hand feels so soft.* Claire released the hand a second later than she should have. *Jesus, I need to get a grip. One look at those pretty green eyes and my mind goes blank.* Embarrassed, Claire quickly refocused on whatever was bothering Amanda.

"Have a seat." She gestured to the nearest chair. "Why are you in here all alone, and obviously upset?" she asked again.

Amanda's first reaction was to simply say she was fine and to leave it at that. But for some reason, she found herself more than willing to share what had happened.

"To make a long story short, I testified in a child custody hearing this morning. My client is the one who subpoenaed me. But he wasn't too pleased with my testimony." Amanda frowned. "Then my client's attorney must have decided to discredit me or...whatever... because he suddenly turned on me, basically trying to make it look like I wasn't considering my clients best interests and..." Amanda stopped and looked up at Claire.

"That's probably more than you wanted to know, huh?" Amanda cringed, embarrassed that she'd been rambling.

Claire winced knowing she'd employed that same tactic herself on rare occasion.

"Are you in here hiding too?" the smaller woman asked, trying to lighten the mood.

Chuckling, Claire responded. "Not this time." Then her face grew serious and Amanda wondered what she could possibly be thinking. When she spoke again her had eyes softened and she sat down next to Amanda. "Sounds to me like you could use some hints on how to survive in court."

"Are you offering?" Amanda queried, hoping the answer was yes. *Maybe this day won't be a total loss.*

"I guess I am." Claire shifted in her seat. "Wanna get together for lunch on Monday? I could give you a few pointers." *Say yes!*

"Do you get sued a lot or something?" Amanda joked. The friendly banter felt...comfortable...familiar even. *That's weird.*

"No." Claire laughed, but was painfully aware Amanda hadn't accepted her invitation. "I'm an attorney. I could tell you a little about what to expect in court. To be honest, your client's attorney should have done that before he ever put you on the stand."

"That sounds great I'd..." Amanda stopped, the smile dropping from her face.

"But...well...maybe we shouldn't." Claire felt her heartbeat increase, and she unconsciously gripped the arm of her chair, waiting for the inevitable excuses. "I mean I know you said you were picking up the brochures for a friend and all, but if there's a chance you'd end up a patient I really can't...ah.."

"NO!" Claire exclaimed, a little too loudly. Grabbing hold of her emotions she softened her voice. "No. There's no chance of me being a patient," she reassured. "Honestly." Amanda's smile immediately returned.

When she smiles she gets the cutest lines around her eyes and nose. Claire thought. Aackk! God, I'm downright disgusting!

Amanda stood and gathered her purse from below the table. "I have to be going. How about noon?" Claire nodded. "Okay, then. Since you know where I work why don't you pick me up there and we can leave from the clinic?" The tall attorney nodded again. "Till Monday then," Amanda waived and strode out the door.

As the door closed behind Amanda, Claire finally found her voice. "Bye," she called out to the empty room.

CHAPTER 2

IT WAS A BEAUTIFUL day for golf, and crowds of anxious golfers flooded the Hazeltine Golf Course clubhouse. Lawyers, judges, politicians, industry leaders, and local celebrities were often seen on its luxurious links and in its rich facilities. At least two of the trio at the ninth hole preferred not to be seen at such a high profile place, but the third person insisted.

Stuart Chow adjusted the brim of his baseball hat to shield his eyes from the mid-morning sun. He was still jet lagged from the hastily planned trip from Hong Kong. Adding to his irritation was the fact that someone of his rank was sent to deal with such a minor problem. Stuart, however, realized that nearly any "minor" problem could blossom into something major. Why else would Baba have sent he and his sister half way around the world to the Twin Cities?

Elizabeth Chow was listening politely to the tall man who spoke as he set down his tee.

"...So finally I tell the guy that I'm not your average tourist and that he'd better give me a better price on that camcorder. When he didn't respond, I told him that I was a personal friend of H.C. Chow..."

Stuart clamped down on his jaw to keep from blurting out a Chinese obscenity. *He used my father's name to get a discount? I don't know how you obtained this position. Are you stupid... or arrogant... or both?*

"Junior, do you know the reason my father sent us?" asked Elizabeth.

Junior nodded then took a few practice swings as he spoke. "Yeah, I know that Mr. Chow is worried about the way things are going."

This guy plays dumb well. I see why he was given such a position. Beneath that sunny exterior is truly a ruthless, calculated player. He looks like...how do the Americans put it? Ah, yes...the boy next door. Very smart Baba. I now see why Junior is our point man here, thought Elizabeth.

Her brother wasn't in a reflective mood. "Father is worried about these arrests. We're losing a lot of product and the publicity isn't good for business," Stuart stated bluntly. Junior stopped swinging his club and faced both Chows. His eyes went cold as he spoke flatly. "Mr. Chow does not have to worry about things here. Just as I have taken care of things in the past, I will take care of things now."

"And the missing product, Junior?" questioned Elizabeth.

"With the size of our operations, you're worried about a few kilos here and there?"

Junior retorted.

"It shows signs of carelessness. A little bit of carelessness can become a huge problem. A problem, I'm sure, for which you will not want to be responsible," Stuart reminded.

Junior resumed his swings again. "Does Mr. Chow express a lack of confidence in my skills?"

"Not at this point, but he is beginning to worry."

"Have I let the organization down in the past, Stuart?" He kept swinging and then bent down to adjust the depth of the tee.

"Thus far, no. But you have never faced this type of situation before. Father was wondering whether..."

"I knew exactly what I was doing when I joined the organization. Mr. Chow chose me over several others. He shouldn't have to wonder."

"All right Junior, I'll tell Father that things here will be...fixed. The next time we call, I expect that our supplies will be at normal level and the arrests will be down significantly. You know what you need to do," Elizabeth urged.

"Don't let us down. Don't let Father think he made a mistake when he gave you this position. Control your people, get the product back out there, and teach your grunts to be more careful," Stuart stated coldly, as he walked back to the golf cart and sat down.

"You still here Jody?" Amanda inquired, as she poked her head around the edge of the doorway and stepped into her friend's office. Hands on hips, she began to grin as she looked around the room, noticing several new additions to the already chaotic décor. The room was hectic, wild even, but in an odd, comforting sort of way. Amanda walked across the hard wood floor until she was standing on a multicolored woven rug of southwestern design. She stopped, eyes flickering from one object to the next.

In the corner of the room was a short black marble table. Perched in the center, a lava lamp peacefully pulsed. *No one in a million years would believe this is a psychologist's office*, Amanda thought as she brushed her fingers lightly over carved wooden animals, which were probably purchased at a local flea market, and stood proudly alongside crystal antiquities. Bleached wood bookshelves lined two walls of the room. Interspersed among the novels and reference books, were items familiar to an American childhood. A George Jetson thermos and an ever-trusty magic eightball were book-ending Gray's Anatomy. Anne Rice was poised to frighten a Faberge egg. High on the wall opposite the entrance, a pigmy blow-dart tube crisscrossed a Japanese samurai sword. Amanda exhaled loudly and smiled. *This room... is... just...so... Jody.*

"Here to steal my treasures I see," Jody observed as she marched into her office and peered over Amanda's shoulder. She immediately began to inspect Amanda's pockets in case any of her "treasures" had decided to leave with the shorter woman.

Playfully slapping Jody's hands away, Amanda growled. "Enough all ready with the touching. You know I won't be pawed by the likes of you," she teased.

"Humph....you should beeee so lucky. I'll bet your new lawyer friend wouldn't get scolded for seeing what's inside your pockets." The brown-eyed woman grinned evilly.

Despite her best efforts to stop it, the blonde began to blush. "I only said I wouldn't be pawed the likes of you," she valiantly bantered back.

"Ouch! Now I rank below a lawyer? You really know how to hurt a girl." Jody plopped down onto the low, thickly padded love seat and looked up at her friend.

Her face suddenly lost all traces of the prior teasing. "Amanda, you do know what they call a lawyer with a shit-eatin' grin on his face, doncha?" she asked seriously.

Amanda rolled her eyes but gladly played along. "No, Jody...what do they call a lawyer with a shit-eatin' grin on his face?" She looked down at her stoic faced friend who was doing her best not to giggle out loud.

"A cannibal of course!" Jody exclaimed as she burst into laughter.

"Ha...Ha...Jody. Veerrrry funny," she stated seriously. But a second later she was laughing along with her friend. When the chuckling finally died down, Amanda turned away from Jody, who was still looking incredibly pleased with herself and her latest joke. Scanning

the room, her eyes finally found and rested on Elvis, whose hips swayed rhythmically back and forth, and whose stomach heralded 11:50 am. Jody watched silently as Amanda began roaming the office again, stopping every so often to inspect a nick-nack. The older counselor didn't miss her partner's glance at the clock.

"A little nervous, Amanda?" she prodded. It took her only a split second for Jody to realize her friend really was genuinely worried. *Wow! I haven't seen her fidget like that in a while.* Jody's demeanor softened instantly. "Hey, it's just a lunch date...not a death sentence...It'll be fun." Jody walked over and stood along side Amanda.

"I know," the smaller woman stated somewhat guiltily, head dropping slightly. With great effort, Amanda put a halt to her nervous restlessness and tried not to focus on the anticipation that was making her stomach upset. *Jesus, Mandy...what's wrong with you? You don't even know this woman. There's no reason to be so...so...freaked out. If you don't hit it off, you'll never see her again. Nooo, that would be bad. Wouldn't it?*

"Listen, my friend." Jody wrapped a denim-covered arm around Amanda's shoulder and steered her back toward the love seat. "If she's not a perfect gentleman, she'll have to answer to me. I have experience in this area, you know." Plopping back down onto the love seat in unison, both women giggled as they remembered their first meeting nearly 10 years ago.

It was the hottest April in years. At least that's what everyone kept telling her. Not that it made her feel any better. For some reason, Amanda couldn't picture that blazing San Antonio sun not making her curse her fair skin, and it's propensity to burn. But here she was "deep in the heart of Texas."

At the time, it seemed completely logical. Join the Army National Guard. Pay your own way through school. Don't rely on Mom and Dad for every penny, you're an adult now. Time for start making your own way. But at the ripe old age of 19, there were plenty of times she didn't feel like being an adult, and as much she was enjoying this independence, she was a little surprised to find herself homesick.

Amanda sat down heavily on the slightly damp wooden bench in the dressing area of the women showers. For the millionth time she looked around in wonder. *Okay, Fort Sam Houston, I gotta hand it to you. You may be old but you are beyond CLEAN.* A wry smile crossed her lips, *and don't I know EXACTLY how you stay that way.*

With a groan she stood, then bent deep at the waist, stretching the tired muscles her legs, her body gradually cooling from the vigorous five mile run she'd just completed. Slowly, she began to unlace her running shoes. Dead silence filled the air. *Silence? Wow. I'm actually alone, as in nobody but me.* She chuckled to herself and considered that it had been several months since she'd been completely and utterly by herself. She smiled, savoring the moment.

The biggest challenge for most new recruits seemed to be discipline, both mental and physical. But for some reason, Amanda found herself rising to meet both these challenges with little trouble. She was in good shape physically, even before she went through the rigors of boot camp. Now, with the slightly reduced physical demands of advanced training, she felt less soreness as her body was allowed to catch up, and accept the new demands she placed on it.

The mental challenges she encountered were more along the lines of accepting authority from sometimes "unpleasant" sources, rather than an actual intellectual challenge.

She'd been pleased to find out that a local guard unit had positions open in the medical field. While she couldn't exactly take courses in psychology, the field she intended to major in, at least her time in the military wouldn't be spent fixing trucks or shuffling paperwork.

"You have two choices if you insist on staying in the medical field, Miss." The handsome young recruiter had smiled. He knew he had her.

"Um...ok...but, I'm just asking out of curiosity. I haven't made up my mind yet...but...I guess you could explain my choices." She tried to look disinterested but she'd already decided to join and she could tell the recruiter knew it too. *I don't think Hollywood's gonna be calling you any time soon, Mandy*, she mused. *No wonder my cousins were always kicking my butt when we played poker.*

"I think you'd make a bang-up combat medic. And best of all, you'll get to spend a few months of advanced training in beautiful San Antonio, Texas." He smiled, sensing victory, and cruelly played his trump card. "Have you heard of the Riverwalk? It's got the best shopping..."

You forgot to mention that I'd have to drink a bathtub full of water today to keep from melting, and that I would have chigger bites on top of chigger bites! She thought wryly. Not surprisingly, thinking about her chigger bites suddenly made them itch. Scratching a particularly itchy spot slightly above her panty line, she grunted. *God, that cold shower is gonna feel awesome. You know it's bad when you can't even stand your own smell.*

Amanda peeled off the last of her running clothes, stuffing them in a locker, grabbed her purple shower shoes and tolietries, and strolled into the slightly darkened shower room. Flipping on the lights, she walked to the farthest showerhead and began adjusting the temperature of the water. When the water ran lukewarm she stepped underneath, groaning loudly. *Mmmmm. This is HEAVEN. I have soooo been missing, peace and quiet and a perfect shower. Ahhh...* Unsnapping the plastic case that held her soap Amanda began to lather her arms and legs. Leaning back, she wet her hair and allowed the strong spray to ease the tension in her shoulders and neck.

All good things must end, she thought as a husky redheaded woman entered the shower room, flinging her towel over one of the many unused showerheads. "You're Greer aren't you?" the woman asked with a thick Southern accent.

"Um...yes... I'm Amanda." Amanda searched her mind. "You're in 2nd platoon, right?"

The woman smiled broadly and began gathering the shower supplies she had laid out only seconds before. *Looks like she's leaving. Oh well, she must have changed her mind. More quiet time for me*, Amanda mused and gladly shifted her attention back to rinsing the sweat out of her hair. Eyes shut tight, she leaned back until the water cascaded down the back of her hair and across her face. Reaching out in the general direction of soap shelf, she began to feel around for the missing bar. Suddenly, the bar was thrust into her searching hand.

"Wha...Oh...hi...um..."

"Rhonda."

"Right...Rhonda." *Jeesh, this entire place is empty and she decides to take a shower 2 inches away from me.*

"So, what do you think of Fort Sam?" Rhonda inquired, eyes drifting from Amanda's face and traveling down the length of her body.

"Well...I mean...it's okay. It's my first trip to Texas and I haven't..." Amanda stopped speaking when she felt an unexpected cool palm circle her wrist. Instinctively, she pulled her arm back.

"Looks like you got a little sunburned, Amanda." Leaning forward, Rhonda didn't stop until her shoulder was nearly brushing Amanda's. A sly smile crossed her lips.

Amanda's brow creased as she took a step backward in an attempt to regain some of her rapidly diminishing personal space. "You know Rhonda, this is a really big room and there's no need to...uh...feel like you have to be...ah...social or anything," she quickly finished.

"It's okay, Sugar. I'm enjoying the company right here," she drawled, once again closing the small gap between herself and Amanda. "You know, darlin', I'm from the area and I'd be glad to show you some of the finer attractions." Her proper tone contrasted starkly with the plain leer that now graced her face.

The implications of Rhonda's offer were crystal clear, even to Amanda, whose naiveté had been the subject of some rather extreme teasing since her arrival at Fort Sam.

Swallowing hard, Amanda kept her gaze at her feet, suddenly extremely aware of her own nakedness.

"What do you think? We could..." began Rhonda.

"I don't think she's interested Rhonda, are you sweetheart?" interrupted the newest addition to the shower room. A medium sized, naked, brunette swaggered over to Amanda and Rhonda. Turning away from Rhonda, the brunette wriggled her eyes brows and looked pointedly at Amanda. A smile shaped her lips. "Well?"

Suddenly, Amanda, who was standing there in shock, realized she was supposed to say something. *Duh... Mandy.* "Oh...ah...right. I mean... no," she stammered. *Okay, relax Mandy.* Composing herself, she straightened her back, and projected a confidence she didn't feel. "That's right. Sorry, Rhonda, I've already been enjoying the best San Antonio has to offer," she replied suggestively as she leaned closer to the brunette.

The newcomer's eyes widened. She hadn't expected Amanda to be that daring. *She doesn't even look old enough to be out of high school. Go kid!* She bit the inside of her cheek to keep from laughing.

"Far be it from me to interfere. It was nice talking to you..." The redhead looked to Amanda and then to the stranger. "Amanda," she drawled, all the while looking directly at the muscular brunette. "I'll come and shower later," she sweetly added. Turning on her heel, Rhonda quickly gathered her towel and exited the shower, leaving the other two women alone.

As soon as Rhonda was out the door, the newcomer backed away from Amanda, giving her some much-needed breathing room. Amanda's relief was evident as she exhaled loudly.

"Thanks for coming to my rescue...er..."

"Jody. Jody Penbrook. No problem. When I walked in I could tell Rhonda was coming on a little strong. She bunks a few cots from me and apparently thinks her Southern charm is irresistible." Jody smirked. "It didn't look like you were interested. I hope I wasn't butting in too much. I..."

"No, no. That was great," Amanda blurted. "I'm really grateful for the help. She kept trying to lay her hand on me and well...Ew." Amanda wrinkled her nose and made a face. Jody burst into laughter. "Eewww is right. That one's sickly sweet," she added.

After a few minutes of light conversation, Jody turned off her shower and stepped near the entrance where she began to towel off. Turning back towards Amanda she thought for a moment then said, "Listen, I'm heading over to the clubhouse for some beer tonight. Wanna come?"

Amanda turned off the shower nozzle and grabbed her shampoo and soap as she approached Jody. "Sure, but why save me from one wolf just to throw me to another," she teased as she began to dry her hair.

Jody rakishly ran a hand through her short dark locks. "You wish," she snorted. "Too bad for you, I don't lean that way, if you get my drift." She smiled broadly. "I just want some company to help me enjoy my 35 cent Coronas."

"Beer for 35 cents?" Amanda inquired doubtfully.

Brown eyes twinkled. "Why do you think I joined the military in the first place?"

Both women relaxed into laughter. Grinning, they made their way towards their clothes and a solid friendship.

Brown eyes slid sideways. "If I'd know you batted for the other team I wouldn't have interrupted Rhonda's seduction."

"Yes, you would," Amanda replied confidently.

"Ok. Maaaybe," she hedged. Changing the subject, Jody brought them back to the present. "So tell me, where ya goin' on this date?"

Amanda stomach lurched slightly as she looked up at Elvis, noticing it was just a few minutes before noon. "I was thinking D'Amico and Sons. We can walk there from here."

"Good idea. It'll give you a little more time to get to know each other."

Still sensing her friends tension, Jody tried to lighten the mood. "Did she have to be lawyer, though? You know what that shark did to me in the divorce," she grumped.

Bidding Elvis goodbye, Amanda focused on her friend. She sighed. "The lawyer didn't do anything but his job, Jody. You're the one who decided to commit legal suicide by representing yourself." Amanda laughed, remembering the expression on her friend's face when she read the divorce clause entitled "property division."

"How was I supposed to know Chester would go out and hire some slick mouth-piece to take me to the cleaners?" she protested. "Shit, Amanda. I'm paying him alimony for Christ's sake! What kind of man takes alimony?"

Rolling her eyes at her partner Amanda noted, "Well...I don't what kind of man would do that, But... I do know how we can spot the ones that do. They'll be driving their ex-wife's car, living in her house, petting her dog, still hanging out with her friends... and..." she teased.

"Enough already!" Jody lightly punched the smaller woman in the shoulder. "Since when did you get so mean? Why, I remember when you were this sweet, kiiiind-hearted..."

"Ms. Greer, are you here?" A velvety voice called from the waiting room.

Amanda immediately jumped up, straightening her skirt with one hand while smoothing her hair with the other. "Do I look ok? I mean...it's just a casual lunch," Amanda whispered nervously.

"Well, well, well. It looks like princess charming has arrived. Let's go inspect the goods, shall we?" Jody rose and turned towards the door, only to have Amanda grab her arm and stop her from exiting.

"Be nice!" she growled in a whisper.

"Just what are you implying?" Jody eyes went round in her best imitation of a precious moment's figurine. The look failed miserably. Giving up the innocent routine, Jody whispered back, "I just want to make sure her intentions are honorable. You know, freak her out a bit," Jody grinned mischievously.

"No thanks," Amanda whispered firmly. "I already have one father. Soooo I don't need another."

Jody relented. "Ok, I'll be good." Seeing Amanda's disbelief, she hastily added, "I promise."

Satisfied, she released Jody's forearm and nervously straightened her hair once again.

"Okay, let's go. Wait! I'll go first." Jumping in front of Jody, Amanda marched out of her friend's office.

Claire stood in the middle of the waiting area gazing at the eclectic collection of watercolors that peppered the walls. *Nice*. She spun to look at another. *I should get some of these for my new office.*

Exiting Jody's office, Amanda approached Claire from behind. Claire was wearing a deep brown, linen pantsuit and casual leather flats. *She's definitely tall enough to forgo the*

heels, thought Amanda. Her raven hair hung loose and looked slightly wind blown. *That's different from how she wore it at the courthouse. I like this better. Boy...* Amanda sucked in a nervous breath. *Even from the back she's gorgeous!*

Hearing footsteps, Claire turned around to see Amanda and Jody approach. Claire had selected a pale yellow, v-necked silk blouse to wear under her suit. Completing her outfit were a pair of diamond stud earring that sparkled in the light as she turned to meet Amanda and Jody head on. Stopping a few feet from each other, Claire and Amanda stood silently. Pale blue eyes twinkled as they took in Amanda.

The blonde shifted slightly, from one foot to the other, wishing she'd worn anything else, had a different hairstyle, and a different figure and...

Without her permission, a nervous smile graced Claire's lips as she observed Amanda's fidgeting. *She looks a wreck*, Claire thought. *Looks like I'm not the only one who's nervous.* Claire focused on lightly flushed cheeks. *She doesn't hide her nervousness very well, does she? Oh well, if this career has taught me anything, it's never let em' see ya sweat.*

Amanda suddenly stopped all motion and looked directly at Claire. Mossy green eyes met brilliant blue and held them. In response, Amanda felt a smile stretch across her face, mirroring the one on the darker woman. Neither woman spoke a word.

Sensing an impending moment of embarrassment, Jody broke the deadlock by thrusting her hand toward Claire. "Nice to see you again, Ms. Easton. I didn't introduce myself before. I'm Jody Penbrook, Amanda's business partner... and best friend," she added somewhat possessively as she shook the woman's hand.

Claire's eyebrow drifted up as she finally broke eye contact with Amanda and looked at Jody. *She's a psychologist?* Claire starred at Jody's black corduroy pants and faded denim top. *She looks more like someone whose about to work in the garden than a doctor.* Extending her own hand, "I'm Claire Easton." A firm shake. "It's a pleasure to meet you." Amanda came back to her senses and realized she'd been staring again. *Okay. Time to get a grip. Nice save Jody. I owe you one.*

Turning her attention back to Amanda, Claire tried her best to keep a goofy grin off her face. *God, how old am I?* Straightening her back, she spoke softly as she looked down at Amanda. "Are we ready to go? I'll trust you to pick the place. I don't get down here too often."

"You bet. How does Italian deli sound?" Amanda reached into the closet to retrieve her purse. Suddenly, her stomach rumbled loudly.

"I'm thinkin' it sounds pretty good to you," Claire chuckled. *Is she blushing? God, that's adorable! Wait...she's not a puppy. But, damn she is cute.* "Where'd you get the watercolors? They're fantastic," she said, mercifully changing the subject. Claire motioned toward one of the smaller pieces near the entrance to the other office.

"Actually," Amanda smiled, "that one's mine."

Both eyebrows lifted. "Mine as in you own it, or 'mine' as in you painted it?"

"Well, both, I guess."

"You're an artist?" Claire questioned, clearly impressed.

"I don't think I'd go that far. They're just..."

"I keep telling her they're great. Maybe she needs to hear it from somebody besides me," Jody interjected.

"Jody's right. It's really beautiful." *I wonder if I'll see that blush again? Oh...yeah...here it comes.*

"Thanks," Amanda replied as her face began to color. "I guess we should get going. D'Amico's can get kinda busy this time of day."

"Do you want me to drive? I had to park quite a ways down the street but..."

"I was thinking we could walk. It's really nice out today and it's only a couple of blocks. I mean...if that's okay with you?" she hastily added.

"Absolutely. Lead on." Turning back to Jody, Claire extended her hand once again. "It was nice meeting you." A quick shake. Releasing Jody's hand, Claire made her way back along side Amanda. "Ready then?"

A smiling nod. "Let's go."

In two long paces Claire was in front of Amanda, opening the door. She gestured for Amanda to pass through. Amanda glanced back at Jody, both women's eyebrows raising simultaneously, in acknowledgment of the gallant gesture.

"I'll see you at 1:30 for that joint session with Mr. and Mrs. Berger," Amanda called to Jody as she exited the clinic. Without a glance back, Claire stepped out the door behind her.

Well...I don't know about the princess part but she certainly is charming. Amanda deserves that. Jody strolled back to her office thinking about Claire and Amanda and the frozen burrito she would be having for lunch. *They did make kind of a cute couple.*

"So tell me a little about yourself. All I really know is that you're a lawyer." Amanda asked, as she reached up and brushed back a windblown lock of hair. She noticed Claire was slightly behind her so she slowed down her gait. Amanda turned her head to look, waiting for a response. Nothing.

"Claire?" *Is she still in there?*

"Oh, sorry. I was just thinking about where to start," Claire mumbled somewhat defensively. *Uh...oh. That didn't come out the way I wanted.*

Frowning slightly, Amanda stepped down off the curb and onto the street. "This isn't a cross examination, Claire. I was just trying to make conversation. You..."

"No, I'm the one who's sorry," Claire interrupted, worried she had already offended her date. "As if you couldn't tell, I'm just a little nervous," she admitted.

She is? Could've fooled me. "You don't look nervous," Amanda said skeptically, as she looked both ways before crossing the street.

Claire chuckled and jogged a few steps to keep pace. "Well, you'll just have to trust me then. I don't date a lot." She paused. *What the heck.* "And ...I ...well..." A deep breath.

"Sometimes things come out a little jumbled."

A large stagnant puddle stood between Claire and the curb. In one long stride she agilely jumped over it, landing gracefully on the sidewalk beyond. Turning, Claire saw Amanda hesitate before jumping across.

Claire extended her arm towards Amanda. "Here, I'll help you over," she beckoned. Amanda looked at the puddle, her gaze shifting to both sides, as she noted she would have to maneuver around several cars in order to get around it. She looked back at Claire, who was waiting patiently, arm still outstretched.

"Okay. But don't blame me if I ruin that pretty suit." Amanda swayed back then leapt forward extending her right arm out far in front of her. Before Amanda's back foot even left the ground, Claire could see she wasn't going to make it across. She immediately lunged towards Amanda and tightly grasped the outstretched hand. Pulling as she stepped back, Claire saw Amanda's front foot land on the edge of the curb.

"Whoa, whoa!!!" Amanda squealed, arms flailing, as she tried to balance on the edge without toppling backwards. With another quick tug she was propelled forward, directly into Claire's arms.

"I gotcha," Claire muttered as she pulled Amanda to her, twisting slightly she deposited the slightly rattled woman back onto her feet.

Amanda hesitantly cracked open her eyes. *I can't believe I'm not on my butt, in the mud.* Instead, she found herself in a comfortable warm space, wrapped tightly in strong arms. *Hmm. She inhaled. She smells like roses.* Amanda intentionally kept her eyes focused on the pale yellow blouse that was only inches from her face. *I will not blush in front of her again.* "What do you eat for breakfast? You're a lot stronger than you look," she teased.

Looking down, Claire reluctantly opened her arms and began to untangle herself from the smaller woman. Taking a small step backwards, she released Amanda. "Coffee." White teeth flashed. "The breakfast of champions," she bantered back.

The light teasing relaxed both women. Chuckling, they resumed their trek toward the restaurant.

"Well?" Amanda's eyes drifted sideways, watching Claire as they walked.

"Well what? Oh, yeah...right." Claire cleared her throat formally. "My life in less than 30 seconds by Claire Easton."

"I didn't ask for the Cliff Notes version," Amanda protested. A sharply raised eyebrow greeted her comment. "Okay. Sorry. Go on, go on." *Jeesh.*

Claire lowered her arching eyebrow with a slightly smug look. Smiling, she continued. "I'm a Twin Cities native, but I earned my undergraduate degree at Indiana University and my J.D. at University of Chicago. I'm thirty-one years old and I live in Mendota Heights."

A few more steps. Silence... Amanda looked back up at Claire who was strolling along looking quite pleased with her revelations. *Patience...be patient,* Amanda admonished herself. Another two steps.... *Uggh!* She couldn't help herself.

"That's it? That's all you're gonna say?" Amanda asked incredulously. Mentally rolling her eyes, *she'd make a perfect P.O.W.!* "Don't talk my ear off or anything."

Claire knit her brows and scowled. "I'd rather hear about you anyway."

Completely ignoring her companion's statement, Amanda cocked her head slightly to the side. "What's J.D. stand for? I've always wondered."

"Juris Doctor." Claire replied, shifting her body to allow a small group to pass.

"Really?" Amanda questioned. "Then how come attorneys aren't called Doctor? I mean, if you have an M.D. you're called doctor and if you have a Ph.D. you're called doctor, why not people with a J.D.," she reasoned.

Claire's eyebrows disappeared behind dark bangs. "Is this lawyer joke?" She shot a stern look toward Amanda, causing her to gulp. "Cause if it is," her eyes narrowed dangerously.

"I probably already know it," she finished with a grin.

"I can see you've got a twisted sense of humor." Amanda's reply was casual though she was forced to admit she was relieved. Her guts still churned at the thought of truly upsetting her new friend. "Lucky for you I only know one lawyer joke." *And I don't think I'll be telling that one,* she smirked to herself.

Amanda abruptly stopped and motioned to the door on her left. "Here we are," she announced, her mood visibly brightening at the prospect of food. "I hope you like pasta, they've got really great pasta."

The yeasty smell of fresh bread and the tang of ripe olives and vinegar wafted out as Amanda opened the door and they made their way inside. The deli was small and crowded, but not overly so. A line of customers snaked out from the cash register, running along the deli counter and stopping half way to the door.

After only a few moments of waiting and chatting, both women looked into deli case, Amanda's eyes flashing from dish to dish. "I'll have the chicken pasta salad and sliced

tomatoes," the blonde informed the bored looking young woman at the cash register. "And a pop," she quickly added. The cashier looked to Claire. "I'll have a roast beef sandwich and tea." The young woman nodded and started ringing up the orders as Amanda began to open her purse.

"I asked you to lunch, remember?" Claire nudged Amanda. Grabbing the two empty glasses the cashier sat on the counter, she thrust in them into Amanda's hands. "Here, you take care of these and get us a table ok?"

"Okay." Amanda smiled. "But hurry up. I'm starving!"

Claire looked back at the man at the deli counter, who was piling chicken pasta salad onto a shiny white plate. When his hands stopped, Claire leaned forward, gesturing towards his hands. Hey buddy," she glanced back at Amanda and chuckled indulgently, "you might want to keep going."

The early afternoon sun had disappeared behind dark clouds by the time both women emerged from the restaurant. Their conversation was more relaxed, each woman moving past her initial nervousness and easing into an almost familiar sense of camaraderie. The lunch crowds had thinned and traversing the popular street was much easier.

"Wanna see a picture?" Amanda asked excitedly, as she began digging through her purse.

"This one is only a few weeks old, I took it at the park near my townhouse." Her pride evident, she smiled and passed the photograph to Claire.

Claire stopped walking so she could examine the photograph more closely. Pictured was a toddler standing in bright sunlight and perched on a wooden park bench. A laughing smile showed several small teeth along with a few toothless gaps. The child's reddish blonde hair was tussled and her cheeks were a rosy pink. She looked happy.

"It was still kind of chilly for a trip to the park but I couldn't resist. Cabin fever I guess," Amanda admitted, taking back the photograph and neatly zipping it in an inner compartment of her purse.

"She has your eyes." Claire used the neat segue as an opportunity to look directly into Amanda's.

Amanda's smile widened as she spoke. "Everyone says that. I guess...Well...I sorta see it too." She looked down at her watch. "Whoops, we'd better hurry back. My 1:30 p.m. appointment should be here in about 10 minutes."

"How old is she?" Claire continued, curiosity driving her question.

"She's already 19 months. I can't believe how fast time flies. But I think she's got a jump start on the terrible two's," Amanda offered wryly.

After a few more steps Claire abruptly stopped. Several seconds later Amanda realized she was alone. Looking back she saw Claire standing beside a large S.U.V. "Oh...is this yours?" *I can't believe lunch is already over. That sucks!*

"Yep.....listen." A deep breath. "I had a really nice time and...er..." *Crap! She's gotta go, I need to say something...*

"I had fun too." Amanda worked herself a little closer to Claire.

For an instant, Claire felt as though she would panic. Amanda was standing so close and she wanted to see her again but...

"I'd like to see you again," Amanda said, lightly squeezing Claire's arm.

YES!!! "That'd be great." *Thank God.* Claire was hugely relieved. "I'd like to see you again too. Here." Claire reached inside her jacket pocket and withdrew a business card.

Checking her pockets she realized she didn't have a pen. *Shit!* She began to unlock her car door. "I just need to grab a pen and I can give you my home number and..."

"Here." Amanda thrust forward a pen. Claire looked up in surprise. "I was hoping you'd need one," Amanda said impishly. The taller woman smiled and penned her home phone number on the back of the card. Handing back the card, she was surprised when Amanda immediately tore it in half. Taking back her pen, Amanda wrote on the now half card, and handed it back to Claire. "That's my home phone and pager number. But I'll call you tonight and we can set something up, okay?" Her voice suddenly sounded a little insecure. "Not if I call you first," Claire stated confidently. "I should be home after 7:00 p.m. I'll talk to you later then. Goodbye Amanda." Neither woman could keep a goofy grin off her face.

"Bye." *Wow. That voice alone is enough to make me melt.* The therapist watched as Claire got into the Explorer and drove away. After standing there for another moment lost in thought, Amanda looked down at her watch. "Uh...oh," she muttered, and began jogging the last block back to her office.

Pulling around the block, Claire caught a final glimpse of Amanda jogging back towards the clinic. *Great legs!* Opening her glove box Claire pulled out her constant driving companion, Gumby. Bending his flexible green arms and legs she expertly attached him to the top of her steering wheel and began talking.

"Things went ok, Gumby. She wants to see me again. Yeah, I figured I blew it about a million times but either she didn't notice or she was just being nice." Claire nodded as though Gumby had responded. "You're right. She was probably just being nice. I did sound like a real dork. More than once," Claire snickered. "Considering what she does for a living, I think I'd better keep you in the glove box if she's around. Can you imagine what she'd say if she knew I actually talked to you? I'll bet I could be an entire case study all on my own."

Claire amused herself by picturing her tall frame lying on a dark leather couch where a man with a clipboard answered her every observation with thickly accented German. "VERRRRY INNNNTERESTING, Ms. Easton," she mimicked. "Nope Gumby, I think you'll be my little secret."

"When she passed over that picture, you could see in her eyes how much she adores that baby. No mention of the father though. I guess whoever he is, he's out of the picture." *At least I hope so,* she thought grimly. "I like kids...sort of. I mean, I've never really been around many...even when I was one." Claire shrugged.

Her own childhood was normal she supposed. Her parents were kind but were largely preoccupied by with their careers. She was raised mostly by nannies. Being an only child, she grew up in an adult world. Consequently, she found herself not having much in common with her contemporaries. Rather than hanging around kids, with whom she felt uncomfortable, she simply preferred to spend time alone, reading or horse back riding. By the time she was ten she had acquired the necessary skills to "work a party" as her father put it. By the time she was fifteen, she was fully accepted in the same social circles as both of her successful parents. She was one of "them." Though she often wondered if "they" were aliens or some equally strange creatures. More than once she'd had the distinct displeasure of fending off some of her parents more amorous associates. Merging onto the interstate Claire hit the gas hard. *Time to get back to work and figure out what the hell is going on. Please... please, don't let Amanda or her partner be involved.* Claire and Gumby swung into the fast lane.

Expertly steering with one hand, she opened her briefcase and retrieved the ringing cell phone. "Claire Easton," she answered as she adjusted the phone, changing lanes once more.

"Hello Beautiful," the voice smoothly stated.

Recognizing the voice Claire grimaced. "Hello, Mr. Levine." *I can't be disappointed it's not Amanda. I only left her fifteen minutes ago!*

"Please, after everything you've done for me, don't you think you should call me Aaron?"

"Is there something you needed Mr. Levine." Claire only partially hoped she'd kept the irritation out of her voice. *Some guys just can't take a hint.*

"I was hoping you'd agree to have dinner with me tomorrow. I'd love the opportunity to show you how much I appreciate your efforts."

Mommy and Daddy paying the bill was all the thanks I needed, Twerp, Claire thought.

However, she replied, "that won't be necessary Mr. Levine. I was just doing my job."

"I insist. What time can I pick you up?" he persisted.

Claire was just about to tell him where he could shove his dinner when a light bulb popped on inside her head. *This could be the connection I need. Aaron could lead me to information those stale files could never divulge. One dinner with the brat is a small price to pay if it helps me figure out what's going. Right?*

Claire deepened her voice, fairly purring out her next words. "Alright, Aaron. I can see you're not the type of man to take no for an answer." She rolled her eyes and continued.

"You can pick me up at 7:30 p.m., my secretary will fax you directions." A pause. "Oh, and Aaron?"

"Yes."

"I trust a well-connected man such as yourself, knows how to show a lady a good time." It was a statement not a question. *Too subtle for the moron?*

"Count on it, Claire. I'm happy to see we think alike."

She could picture his smug leer. *Yuck!* "I will. Until tomorrow then..." Claire snapped closed the phone as she began pulling into her parking ace. *What have I gotten myself into now?*

Amanda had a lot on her mind as she climbed the stairs of the Cornerstone Clinic. She felt a wave of relief when she saw that Iris' office door was open.

"Iris?" said Amanda as she peeked in.

Iris Park looked up from a stack of papers, her reading glasses still perched on her nose.

"Hi Amanda, how are you?" Iris' smile went right to her gray-blue eyes. Sitting back, she pushed her papers away.

Amanda studied the woman in front of her for a moment. Iris hadn't changed since the first time they met nearly ten years ago. Amanda was a student in her class, and eventually, Iris became her supervisor. What always surprised the young psychologist was how much presence and energy this red haired woman radiated. She exuded confidence in those around her.

"Not too bad," Amanda said, leaning against the doorframe.

Iris peered at Amanda over her glasses, giving her the familiar look that said, "What's really bothering you?"

"I've met someone."

Iris nodded and smiled, taking off her reading glasses.

"She's amazing and it's been such a long time... I don't know how to react anymore," explained Amanda, closing her eyes.

"Sound like a big crush to me," said Iris with a smile.

"A crush after one date? Well, I guess I can't disagree with you," Amanda laughed.

"Some things never change, Dr. Greer," agreed Iris, who started laughing too. Then she sobered. "Amanda, it's okay to want this you know. I'm sure Jody would agree."

"I don't know. It's awfully risky. It's only been one date and I already nearly fell into a puddle. And she hasn't meet Missy yet..."

"So does she like hockey?" interrupted Iris, with a glint in her eyes.

"I'm going to ask her over to watch the playoffs this weekend."

"Not a bad start there, you know. Could do worse."

"It's been a long time since I was in a relationship. This was my first date in months. How can I feel this way so quickly?"

"You know that some things defy explanation. Sometimes things seem like magic."

"Come on Dr. Park, my rational mentor and mother-figure, you're not saying that this is magic?"

"Not in the mainstream sense, no. But how do you explain reasons people get together? I can't explain human nature. It just is. And it just happens when it happens. We can't plan for it."

Amanda shifted against the doorframe. "So you have a sense about this?" she asked hopefully.

"The only thing I have a sense about is that you're ready for a relationship. You deserve to be happy, Amanda."

"What about Missy?"

"Doesn't she seem happy?"

"Yes, as far as I know, she's a very happy baby. She knows how much I love her."

"So why would this make Missy unhappy then? Go with your instinct. Trust it. Missy's mom deserves to be happy," Iris encouraged, as she stood up and walked over to Amanda. Amanda was silent as she stared out the window. Iris laid a hand on her shoulder. "You do deserve to be happy, Amanda," she repeated softly and smiled.

"I think I am beginning to believe that Iris."

Claire sat down her empty wineglass and propped her feet against the coffee table. Fiddling with her sock, she pondered her current predicament. *Should I call her? She said she'd call you, remember? A voice interjected. But it's already 9:00 p.m. I don't wanna wait anymore!*

Maybe she was just trying to let you down easy. She probably has no intention of calling you. It's just easier to blow someone off from long-distance. You've done it yourself, the voice taunted.

RING... RING... Claire jumped over the coffee table and then stood, staring at the phone as it rang. Taking a deep breath she answered. "Hello."

"Hi, Claire. It's Amanda."

Yes!! Thankyouthankyouthankyou. "I was just thinking about calling you." *Fuck! Why did I say that? Could I sound a little more anxious?*

"Really?" A pause. "Are you still interested in getting together again?" Amanda had her fingers crossed on the other end of the line.

"Absolutely." The goofy grin Claire had been sporting off and on all day made a reappearance.

"Great. How about we get together late Saturday afternoon at my place? Are you interested in watching the hockey playoffs on television?"

"That sounds wonderful." *Does Minnesota have a hockey team?* "How about if I show up around 4:00 o'clock."

"4:00 o'clock sounds perfect. Do you need directions?"

"I've got the address. That's all I need. It's a date then?" *Man, I hope my gaydar doesn't need maintenance.*

Amanda could hear Claire's smile through the phone and she didn't miss the implications of the simple question. "It's most definitely a date. I'll see you then. Bye."

"Bye, Amanda." Click. The line went dead. *Well, at least I've got nearly a week to figure out how to stop acting like a hormonal teenager around her. Plus, it'll give me plenty of time for hot showers. Just thinking about going out with Aaron Levine makes me feel dirty.*

"I know. I know. But I still wanted to check to see how she's doing...No, that's okay. I know how much she loves playing in the tub. Just tell her I said hi, and I love her, and that I'll pick her up in the morning.... Okay, Mom.... I love you too...Bye."

Sitting the phone back in its cradle, Amanda returned to her stool and began squinting her eyes, trying to imagine a picture on what was still a clean white canvas. Bringing the paintbrush to her mouth she began chewing the already gnarled wooden tip.

DINGDONG...DINGDONG...DINGDONG.

"Ugh!...Coming!" Laying down the brush Amanda exited her spare bedroom and began unbuttoning her paint smock. Reaching the front door, she stopped, and called out loudly.

"Who is it?"

"Jeffrey Dahmer," replied the decidedly female voice.

"Hmmm." Amanda tapped her chin with her index finger. "I'm very finicky when it comes to the serial killers I let into my house. I might consider Manson, or Son of Sam, but Dahmer is just too creepy. Try again tomorrow."

Amanda immediately stepped back as the front door flew open and Jody marched in. "You really should lock your door. A real lunatic might try to get in one day."

"Apparently."

Jody narrowed her eyes, and plopped down on the couch. "I'm here in a shameless appeal for sympathy," she sighed.

"Men are pigs, right?" Amanda asked.

"I haven't told you what happened yet!" Jody protested.

Amanda brought her hands to her hips, "Okay, tell me."

"I was stood up."

"Men are pigs."

"Are you always this impatient?" Jody asked, slightly irritated.

"Was that a real question? Besides, why did you come over?" Amanda sat down next to her friend, propping her feet up on the coffee table.

Jody looked slightly guilty. "So you could tell me that men are pigs."

"Well then, look how much time I just saved us," Amanda replied reasonably.

"I guess." Craning her neck, Jody scanned the townhouse. "Where's my buddy? It's not past her bedtime already, is it?"

"She's spending the night at my folk's place. It was weird. They just called me out of the blue and asked if she could come over. They said something about not seeing her much lately. Which...is true...I guess. I don't know. I suppose I should bring her over more often." Shrugging, Amanda removed her feet from the coffee and stood up.

"You mean you're free for the evening!" Jody exclaimed with undisguised eagerness.

"Let's have a girls night out."

"Actually, I was hoping to do some painting and..."

"Come on Amanda," Jody interrupted. "When was the last time you got out and cut loose?" Looking down, Jody began rotating the tip of her foot into the carpet. Continuing her adolescent behavior, she pulled out the big guns. Puuuleeeeeease," she beseeched with puppy dog eyes.

"Jody, I really wanted to..." Amanda looked at the pathetic pout her friend was displaying. It was all she could do not to laugh... "go out with you tonight," she finished. "Great. If you insist," Jody grinned smugly. "Besides, maybe I'll get lucky. I could use a change of luck in the man department."

"And just how many times have you gone out already this month?" Amanda inquired, eyebrow arching. Not waiting for an answer she began walking towards her bedroom. "Lemme go change."

"I dunno 4 maybe 5. I don't keep track of exact numbers." Following Amanda into her room, Jody sprawled out across her bed and waited for her friend to pick out an outfit. Emerging from the walk-in closet Amanda held up light blue knee-length dress in one hand and a pair of white bib overalls, which were spotted with yellow daisies, in the other. Pointing at the dress Jody smiled, "That'll work." Nodding, Amanda disappeared back into the closet. "You can't fault me for loving men," Jody called after her.

"And often."

"Ha...Ha."

Amanda poked her head out of the closet. "I would feel sorry for you except I haven't been out that many times in the past year." Her head disappeared back into the closet and Jody could hear her digging for shoes.

"You know, Amanda, sex can be a two-person activity."

"Slut!" rang out the voice in the closet.

"Spinster!" Jody retorted, as she ducked the sneaker that came flying out of the closet. Amanda reemerged wearing the powder blue dress and a pair of gray pumps. "Spinster?" she squealed in mock indignation. Crossing the room, she flipped on the light and entered the attached bathroom. Rolling over on her belly, Jody propped her chin up on a fist and waited.

Stepping out, Amanda held up a tube of red and pink lipstick. "I won't be thirty for another year or so. But I seem to recall your thirtieth birthday party what....six, seven, years ago?" she teased.

Scowling, Jody pointed toward the pink lipstick. "That was uncalled for," she whined. "It was three years ago and you know it!"

"Time drags for us sexually frustrated spinsters...How do I look?" Amanda slid in her second gold hoop earring and stood before her friend.

"Gorgeous as usual. You'll have every guy in the place after you."

"Great," she replied sarcastically.

"It is for me. I'm bound to catch some poor cast off," Jody laughed.

Turning off the lights as they went, the pair made their way to the front door. "By the way," Amanda asked, "where exactly are we going?"

"Who knows where we'll end up? The night is young and so are we."

Amanda was about to offer a smartass comment when Jody growled. "Not another word Amanda." Laughing, the friends made their way into the night.

"Okay, it's almost show time," Claire muttered, as she glanced at her watch. She still had another ten minutes before she was supposed to meet Aaron. *Thank God, I called and arranged for us to meet at the restaurant. I can't stand the thought of Aaron knowing where I live, much less coming inside my home.*

Adjusting her rearview mirror, Claire added a fresh coat of lipstick. "Well, Gumby, I dropped so many hints that he's gotta believe I'm interested him or at the very least a drug score. Yeah, I know...YUCK! And what makes it even worse..." Claire blotted her lips

"... is I get the feeling that when it comes to Aaron, I need to actually connect the dots. But if I can make him work to impress me, maybe he'll let something slip."

Claire looked at her watch again and took in her surroundings. The streets were just beginning to pulse with nightlife. Couples and small groups began passing by Claire's Explorer with increasing frequency. Aaron had instructed her to meet him outside Origami, a place she hadn't visited in years.

Origami was located in the warehouse district of Minneapolis. The once dilapidated brick buildings, now housed some of the hottest nightspots and most elegant eateries in the Twin Cities. The early evening shadows gave the area an aura of mystery and excitement it didn't have in broad daylight. Origami, the popular Asian restaurant and bar, was trendy without being overly exclusive. Its patrons ranged from yuppies trying to remain "fresh," to entertaining businessmen.

So Origami has got more going on inside than sushi? I wonder if Mark knows this is where Aaron's "friends" hang out?

A black Mercedes pulled up along side Claire's Explorer. When the driver exited, Claire took a deep breath and bid farewell to her faithful-driving companion. *I knew I should have paid better attention when I was watching Miami Vice.* "Wish me luck, Gumby. I may need it." Grabbing her purse Claire made her way out to greet Aaron.

Aaron had spared no expense in efforts to impress the lanky brunette. His Mercedes had been detailed and the streetlights reflected brightly off its glassy finish. He wore his dark hair slicked straight back, in an effort to look dangerous and sophisticated. Claire thought it extenuated his prematurely receding hairline. His black Armani suit was impeccably pressed and his new Italian shoes shone. He wanted to bed Claire, plain and simple. And tonight he was willing to do nearly anything to make sure that happened. Why shouldn't Claire want him? So what if she was a few years his senior? He was still a man to be reckoned with. The County Attorney's office couldn't touch him. No one could. Aaron puffed out his chest. He could show a beautiful woman like Claire a good time. He had the right connections, and he'd stretch them to the limits for the chance to touch her...taste her.

Aaron smiled, his eyes traveling up and down Claire's body. "Hello, Claire. I'm glad you decided to take me up on my offer. I wanted the chance to thank you personally. You look lovely." Aaron reached out for Claire's hand and lightly kissed her knuckles. Claire's stomach lurched.

You can do this! "Why, thank you Aaron. I've been looking forward to tonight." Claire intentionally freed her own charismatic force. Both her looks and demeanor demanded attention and oozed raw sexuality. "I hope before the evening is over we'll both get what we want." Claire smiled and let the implication hang in the air. Aaron swallowed hard.

That's right Aaron. Start believing you've got a shot. "Shall we go inside?"

"Of course." Straightening, Aaron offered his arm to Claire.

Slipping her arm around his, Claire wasted no time in her quest for information. "Nice choice Aaron. Do you have the opportunity to come here often?" Claire questioned as they began walking inside.

"It's where I meet with business associates and..." he looked at Claire "I thought it would suit a beautiful woman like you." Aaron held open the door and Claire passed in front of him.

Christ, I think I really am gonna be sick! Does he think that's suave? "Well, I am partial to exotic flavors." Claire deepened her voice and looked at Aaron, "I'm sure I won't be disappointed." Aaron shifted slightly, Claire's words clearly making a physical impression.

After a quick check with the hostess, Aaron returned to Claire and informed her that their table would be ready in a few moments. "Why don't we wait at the bar upstairs? I'm sure some of my associates would be delighted to meet you," Aaron offered pointing to the staircase.

Claire began to make her way upstairs. Trying to hide her surprise she asked, "You mean they know we're coming?"

"No, not exactly. It's just..." Aaron leaned closer to Claire "...I had a little business to attend to tonight anyway so I thought I'd kill two birds with one stone. You don't mind do you?"

Jackpot!!! "Of course not. I'd love to meet some of your associates. You never know, maybe I could end up transacting a little business myself." *You are making this way too easy. But I already knew you were involved with drugs. What I need to find out is how that ties in with criminal cases being tossed out. If you had the cops in your back pocket there wouldn't have been an arrest to begin with. What's the common thread?*

Origami's bar was far too crowded for Claire's tastes. Bodies were pressed tightly against each other as the patrons moved in a mass pilgrimage toward the bar. Finding a relatively empty corner, Claire leaned back against the cool brick and watched as Aaron went to fetch her scotch and soda. Blue eyes scanned the bar and its customers. *What am I even looking for? Shit! What am I gonna do if it actually comes down to me buying drugs? I don't know anything about drugs and there's no way I'm buying or using. I'm not risking my entire career for...*

"Here you go." A drink appeared before her eyes and Claire immediately flinched back.

"Jesus Aaron, don't sneak up on me like that! How'd you get back here so fast? There's no way you could have made up to the bar and back so quickly," Claire observed, taking a large swallow of scotch. The burn of the alcohol reminded her of her recent over indulgence and she winced remembering the resulting hangover.

"Sorry Gorgeous, I didn't know you were so jumpy. I have a friend at the bar." *Oh yeah...she wants me bad. You don't need to be nervous, Babe. I'm a sure thing.*

Smiling at Aaron's arrogance, Claire immediately composed herself, and was back in the game. Stroking a fingertip up and down Aaron's sleeve she whispered in his ear. "Are you always this confident?" She could feel Aaron's shiver. Casually, she took another sip of her drink. "You certainly seemed confident at your trial," Claire observed innocently.

"Let's just say I had a feeling things were going to work out."

"I guess it wouldn't do for an important man like you to end up in prison." Claire stilled her teasing finger and waited for Aaron's reaction.

Aaron began choking on his martini. "P...Prison!" he exclaimed. "I told you there was NO way I was ending up in prison." Aaron's tone turned condescending. "Claire, I belong to a very important and powerful organization. In order for business to continue running smoothly, that organization can't have its executives cooling their heels in jail now, can they?"

Claire's eyebrows shot skyward. *Executive? You wish.* Claire mentally snorted. *It doesn't take Dick Tracy to figure out that you're only one step above an errand boy.* Claire's finger resumed its journey. "Well, it seems I underestimated your status Aaron. I won't make that mistake again."

A small Asian woman waived a hand at Aaron then quickly descended the stairs. "Looks like our table is ready. We can come back up after dinner. My associates should be here by then." Without waiting for Claire's response Aaron began making his way through the crowd and down the stairs.

Claire sat down her empty scotch glass and began to follow. *I'm half way home asshole. I knew your acquittal was no accident! Now all I need is a few names, and a little detail and I can take this to Mark.* Half way down the winding open staircase Claire was assaulted with a pungent odor. *God, I hate pickled ginger.*

"I love pickled ginger!" Amanda squealed.

"I know. Why do you think I picked Origami?" Jody replied, laughing at her friend's enthusiasm.

"Oh, I don't know." Amanda pretended to be considering her options. "Could it be this is the spot where you were stood up earlier and you're hoping to catch a glimpse of the future emergency room patient?"

"Er...should I say no?" Jody looked down sheepishly at her shoes.

"Don't bother. But you do realize I'm not bailing you out." Amanda glanced at her scowling friend and stifled a giggle. "Come on slugger, let's go inside. I'll buy you a beer."

Opening the door, Amanda was surprised by the large mid-week crowd. "Wow, I haven't been here since undergrad. I don't remember it being this busy," Amanda squinted, "or this dark."

"You need to get out more, my friend. This place is always packed. Let me go check with the hostess and see how long wait is. Maybe they're still holding my earlier reservation." Slipping away, Jody moved towards the hostess while the blonde did her best to avoid being squashed by the people coming and going near the door.

A few moments later Amanda saw Jody wave and point toward the stairs leading to the bar area. *I guess we're going to the bar first.*

Amanda placed a hand on the stair railing and looked up preparing to take a step. As her eyes drifted upward her foot stopped mid-motion. Standing at the top of the stairs was the most stunningly beautiful woman she had ever seen. Amanda forgot how to breathe. Claire stood at the top of the steps in a form fitting, blood-red strapless dress, that barely extended below her panty line. Amanda swallowed hard, contemplating the unlikely existence of any panty line at all. Claire's thick dark hair was pulled up on one side by a pearl comb and spike black heels completed the outfit. A man a few steps in front of Claire turned to her and said something that made Claire flash a brilliant smile. *Jesus, she's gorgeous!* A few more steps and Claire looked down to see Amanda. When their eyes met both women smiled in pure reflex.

Amanda... Man, she looks fantastic! Amanda? The smiled dropped from Claire's face.

Ohshitohshitohshit! What's she doing here? I don't want her to see me with Aaron!

Claire was so busy trying to figure out what to say to Amanda that she didn't even notice when Jody stopped along side her.

"Hello, Claire." Silence. "Claire?" Jody tapped her on the shoulder.

Claire turned, slightly startled. "Hi Jody," she pushed out. *Maybe they won't ask what I'm doing here. Please, please, please!*

"What are you doing here tonight?" Jody began looking around to see if Claire was alone.

Fuck! Claire looked at Jody for several seconds trying to decide what to say. "I'm here on a business dinner," Claire offered. *That's truer than you know, Jody.*

Jody stared at Claire's dress. "Business dinner, huh?" Jody's tone made it clear she didn't believe her.

"Yes, and if you'll excuse me..."

At the moment Aaron decided Claire was taking entirely too long descending the stairs.

Turning around, he made his way back up several steps to retrieve Claire. "What's taking you so long, Gorgeous?" Aaron asked gruffly, laying proprietary hand on Claire's shoulder.

Uh...oh. What else could possible go wrong? Claire wondered, as she inconspicuously tried to move out of Aaron's grasp.

"Hello, Aaron. I didn't think we'd be seeing each other again so soon." Jody held out her hand. *She's here with him? He's barely out of his teens. What about Amanda? Bitch!* she seethed.

"Dr. Penbrook? Huh, I guess it is a small world." They shook hands. For a split second Aaron looked a little embarrassed to have run into her. Recovering quickly, he addressed Jody, "I didn't know you knew Claire."

It was all Claire could do not to groan out loud. *Shit, I had to ask?* "Dr. Penbrook and I share a mutual friend," Claire offered. *At least I think she was friend before tonight. You've got three seconds to get your hands off of me, Aaron.*

"And here she is now," Jody added, as Amanda made her way up to the trio.

Amanda looked at Jody, and then back to Claire and Aaron, her smile fading. Her brow knit in confusion, "Hi Claire, I'm sorry...it um...it looks like everyone knows each other here but...I ...but..." She felt her chest constrict as she watched Aaron pull Claire into him and wrap his arm around her waist. Aaron was making clear that the two shared a "personal" relationship.

Mercifully, Jody interrupted her friend's ramblings. "Amanda this is Aaron Levine. He's a new patient. We had our first session yesterday. Aaron, this is my partner, Dr. Amanda Greer."

Aaron hadn't heard a word Jody said. All he knew was that Claire didn't seem to be pulling away from his advances, at least in the presence of these other women. He decided to press his luck. Turning his head he began to nuzzle the soft skin around Claire's ear. Both Amanda and Jody's eyes widened at the display.

Claire couldn't take anymore. *That's it buddy!* "Listen..."

"We should go," Amanda choked out, before turning and pushing her way through the bodies drifting up and down the stairs.

"Crap," Jody muttered. Shooting Claire a deadly look, she took off after her friend.

No!!! "Get the hell off me!" Claire hissed, as she wrenched herself free from Aaron.

"Wait!" she yelled, but the women were already near the bottom of the steps. Not bothering to look back at a stunned Aaron Levine, Claire flew down after Jody, having already lost Amanda's shorter form in the crowd. Claire watched as Jody exited Origami but she was still a good fifteen feet and twenty people from the door.

"Finally," Claire mumbled, as she pushed her way out the front door and felt a blast of cold night air. Frantically looking up and down the street but she couldn't spot Amanda.

"Where the hell is she?" Turning the corner, Claire scanned the parking lot. Spotting two figures near the back of the lot, Claire called out into the shadows as she approached, "Amanda, is that you?" As she got closer she saw Amanda, sitting on the hood of a dark colored Audi with Jody perched along side her.

Claire breathed a sigh of relief. *At least I found you before you left. You must think...*

"Amanda, I need to explain. It's not what it looked like."

Jody stepped directly in between Claire and Amanda, effectively blocking Claire's view of Amanda. "Why don't you just go back to your boyfriend?" Jody taunted as she emphasized the word "boy." Even in dark, Claire could see the anger in her face.

Stepping to the side she tried to look around Jody. "Amanda..." Claire began again, but stopped when Jody mirrored her movements, blocking her view once more. It was Claire's turn to get angry. Pale eyes shifted, focusing completely on Jody. "Move" she growled, her face turning feral.

"Or what?" Jody challenged.

"Jody, what are you doing?" Amanda jumped down off the car, wiping her eyes with an irritated hand.

Claire's gaze never wavered. "Or, I'll move you myself."

Amanda could feel angry waves pouring off both women. "Jody," Amanda grabbed her friend's arm and pulled her away from Claire, "I can talk for myself."

Sensing the finality in her partner's voice, Jody stepped away and slipped into the passenger seat of Amanda's car.

Claire felt a lump in her throat and swallowed hard before speaking. "Amanda," she began softly, "I know what it must have looked like but Aaron is just a client. I need to explain."

"You don't owe me any explanations, Claire. I barely know you. You can have dinner with anyone you like." *That's true*, Amanda told herself. *We've only gone out once. I don't have the right to be jealous or upset. But that's exactly how I feel!* "I'm sorry about Jody, she gets a little protective sometimes." A pause. "I should be going. Goodnight Claire."

"But..."

Without another word, the smaller woman left Claire standing open mouthed, in the parking lot. Claire raised a hand to shield her eyes as bright headlights temporarily blinded her. Then the car simply backed out and drove away.

"That went well," Claire muttered sarcastically. *Fuck!* She mentally screamed. *Could I have screwed this up more? Wait. Don't ask. I might as well see if I can get any more information out of that idiot Aaron.*

Reentering Origami, Claire noticed that although the bar area still appeared to be overflowing, the dinner crowd finally seemed to be thinning. A quick scan of the dining area and Claire had resigned herself to the fact that she'd have to enter the sea of people upstairs to find Aaron.

Twenty minutes later Claire was still looking. *Maybe I missed him and he's in the bathroom or back downstairs.* Thirty more minutes, and Claire was ready to pack it in. *Ahhh...the perfect end to the perfect evening*, she thought as she made her way out of the restaurant and to her car. *Amanda probably won't speak to me again.* Claire closed her eyes at the unexpected pain that prospect presented. *Her partner obviously hates me. And, finally, that little jerk ditches me before I find out anything I can take to Mark.* Claire rummaged for her keys and unlocked her car door. *I wonder if Gumby still loves me?*

CHAPTER 3

CLAIRE PADDED INTO the kitchen in search of her morning coffee. Looking at the clock for the tenth time she decided it was still too early to call Amanda. *That's assuming she'll even talk to me. Why should I feel guilty? Amanda was right. I don't owe her an explanation. Because you like her, that's why.* A pesky voice inserted. *I know...I know...you don't need to remind me!* Claire sighed, and rubbed tired eyes. The mental picture of Amanda's pain was disturbing and... something else. *Familiar?* As she watched the sunrise from her bedroom window, she had thought about everything that had happened. "I hope I can fix this," she spoke to the empty kitchen. *But what am I gonna do to kill the next two or three hours?*

Opening the cabinet she decided to indulge in her favorite food group, Pop Tarts. Sliding two into the toaster, Claire leaned back against the kitchen cabinets and waited. The cool surface felt nice against warm, bare skin. She hadn't bothered slipping on a robe before leaving her room. *Lucky for me this house is pretty secluded.* Mentally shrugging, Claire acknowledged that it wouldn't matter where she lived. Modesty was not an issue.

Snagging the hot pop tarts, she dropped them onto a plate and made her way to the den to watch the early morning news.

Plopping down, she grabbed the remote and began channel surfing. She paused when she saw a live-news crew, ambulance, and police cars, broadcasting from the Mississippi River. An impossibly blonde newswoman stood at the river's edge. Her jacket billowed in the strong wind, but her perfect coif held firm. The camera pulled back, revealing a shot of two men in white jackets hefting a heavy black body bag onto a gurney.

"The body, which has been identified as Aaron Levine, was discovered floating in the Mississippi River by an early morning jogger."

"Holy shit!" Claire dropped the still steaming strawberry Pop Tart on a bare thigh.

"YOWWW!"

"An independent source confirms that local police suspect drug use may be involved." The newswoman smiled what she hoped was a convincingly sad smile. "Aaron Levine was the only son of industrialist and Martha's Butter, Vice President, Sal Levine. We'll keep posted on this late-breaking story. Back to you, Chuck."

The attorney clicked off the television and sat in silence. *Oh, Aaron. What did you get yourself into?*

Claire didn't want to go back to Origami so soon after Aaron's death, however, she realized that she had to strike while the iron was hot. Aaron's criminal file had a photograph of Aaron with some of his "friends." Maybe she would see some familiar faces.

Last night did not make for fond memories. Swallowing, she fought off a wave of nausea as she remembered the look on Amanda's face as she left. She would call her and try to explain it all. She only hoped that Amanda would believe her.

Just lay off and give her a chance to breathe. Maybe it wasn't so bad that I couldn't get a hold of her earlier. I don't want crowd her. I just need to let things settle. I can't let my imagination run away from me. She wasn't trying to avoid me. She just wasn't home. Not everyone sits around waiting for the phone to ring.

Sighing, the lawyer pulled her Explorer into a parking lot next to Origami. She hated this, but if she was going to find anything out, she would have to be here, where the action was. Claire wasn't dressed to kill tonight. Simply outfitted in one of her business suits, she was hoping to keep a low profile.

I look boring enough tonight, she said to herself, as she checked her lipstick in the rearview mirror before getting out of the car. The warehouse district was quiet tonight. It was still a little too early for the regulars. As she approached Origami, the only sounds she heard were the clicking of her own low-heeled shoes on the pavement. Entering the restaurant, she immediately went upstairs to the bar area.

I'll just stay here for an hour and see what I get. Then, I can go home and call Amanda and beg her to see me again.

Taking a deep breath she went towards the bar and ordered a scotch and soda before sitting down on the couch. Taking a sip of her scotch, she sat back, unconsciously tugging on her tan raw silk blazer. Now it was more or less a waiting game and Claire hated to wait. After about twenty minutes of watching unfamiliar faces pass by, she began to get restless. Her mind kept wandering.

What the hell am I doing? I'm sitting here looking for people I know nothing about based on a photo and the word of some unlucky kid who was found in the river this morning.

Trying to firm up her resolve she added, *I know I have to follow this up if I want get anywhere with this whole mess.*

Moodily, she stirred her scotch before taking another sip. She was ready to go home and put another wasted evening behind her.

"Claire?"

Recognizing the voice, she looked up into the familiar face with a smile.

"Zane, what's going on?" she said, putting her drink down and standing up to hug the muscular light haired man.

"When was the last time I saw you? The Christmas party last year?" he replied, as he gave his childhood buddy a bear hug.

"I think that's right. Let me look at you. Have you been working out again? I feel more muscles on you!" Claire pulled back and gave him a soft kiss on the cheek.

His hazel eyes twinkled as he smiled. "Ah Claire, you do wonders for my ego, darling. And you look great as usual. What are you drinking? Let me buy you one and let's chat."

"Actually, one is my limit tonight. Let me buy you a drink and we can catch up." She noticed the bags under his red-rimmed eyes. "You look pretty tired, what's up?"

"Not much." He waived away her hands. "Nah, I'm not in the mood for a drink. I just came here to meet some business associates and I'm a bit early. Come on, let's sit down." Zane gestured toward a chair.

"What time are you supposed to meet your associates?" Claire sat down across from her friend and tugged a coaster from the small rack on the table.

"In about 10 minutes or so. But I can talk to them anytime, how often do I get to see you?" Zane asked with a smile.

"You have regular business meetings here? Must be interesting. How's your father?" The attorney leaned back and closed her eyes for a moment. *God, this day has been long.*

"Dad's been a bit worn out lately, a little cranky. I've been staying out of his way really. How's my favorite corporate lawyer been?"

"I'm actually on an mandatory vacation. It hasn't been too bad. How about you?"

Zane rubbed his throbbing temples. "I gotta get out of this business, Claire. It's killing me, the hours and the stress."

"So sales is getting to you, huh? It used to be so much fun for you, Zane."

"The hours are killing me and it's not as easy as it used to be. Meetings like this all the time. I'm getting too old for this Claire."

"Nah, you're just tired. Your dad is so proud of you, Buddy. When I see him, he always tells me about some big account you've just landed."

Zane laughed but it came out more like a snort. "The novelty wears off quickly. Nah, I gotta stop, but I'm so used to the income..."

Claire nodded with sympathy. Her old friend seemed to be exhausted. She was feeling pretty worn out herself.

After a few more minutes of chit-chat Claire decided it was time to go home. "I'm gonna leave you to your business buddies, Zane. I'm wiped."

"Okay, Claire. You enjoy your rest and I'll see you soon," Zane offered, as he helped her stand up.

She put her forearms on his shoulders and looked at him directly in the eyes.

"Zane, if this is killing you, you need to get out. If you hate your job, that's no way to live. Give me a call if you want to talk about other careers. How about law school?"

Zane laughed heartily. "If it were only that easy, my friend. I don't think any law school would want the likes of me wandering in their hallowed halls. Besides, listening to you and Dad sometimes, I'd be a fool to get into law."

Claire raised an eyebrow and smiled at him. "You have a point, the law is a bit crazy at times. The line between the so-called good and bad guys is blurred a lot of the time. Not like in sales, right?" she winked and walked away.

As Claire exited Origami she looked up at the sky and saw millions of stars. Closing her eyes, she tried to work up the guts to call Amanda and try to explain this whole mess.

"Hi Amanda, it's Claire. I need to talk to you about Aaron and I." The brunette rehearsed as she drove into her garage.

No, that's like admitting that little stooge and I were a couple. Try to sound less guilty, will ya.

Putting down her keys on the kitchen counter, she looked at the phone for a moment before deciding to check her messages. *Come on, call, call. I'm too chicken. Shit, no message from Amanda. I knew there wouldn't be.*

Tossing her jacket down on the kitchen table she sat down. *I have to make the first move. For once, don't let an opportunity slip away. If she yells at me and hangs up, at least I'll know that it wasn't me that gave up.*

Screwing up her courage she picked up the phone and began to dial. Her pulse increased with every ring...

"Hello."

"Amanda, this is Claire..."

"Hi Claire."

Claire immediately launched into an apology. "Look, I'm really sorry about last night. I can explain it all..."

"Wait."

Uh...oh.

"I admit I was angry last night and kind of hurt, and if you have an explanation, I want to hear it, but I want you to know, you don't owe me anything."

"I do owe you an explanation, Amanda. I like you a lot... and I...I would be very upset if what happened last night kept us from getting to know each other. I mean, I'm not trying to push you or anything."

Amanda was silent for several long seconds. Then Claire heard a long exhale on the other end of the line.

"I like you a lot too, Claire. And I feel the same way about the chance at getting to know you better."

Claire couldn't keep the smile out of her voice. "I'm glad Amanda, I really am." *How much do I tell her? All the way?* Deciding to throw caution to the wind, Claire settled on a bare bones version of the truth. "Okay, the reason I was at Origami with Aaron was...well...I was doing some research...trying to find out whether there's some kind of organized drug connection that helped Aaron weasel out of what should have been a guaranteed conviction," she explained.

"Is that the reason you came to the clinic? Claire, Cornerstone has a contract with the court system."

"Yeah, I know. Several other criminal defendants that should be in prison right now, were ordered into counseling, all of whom ended up at your clinic. I have no reason to think any of this involves the clinic other than coincidence." Claire quickly added, not wanting to blunder her reprieve. "I just wanted to check it out."

"I see." Amanda wasn't sure whether she should be angry at Claire's implications or impressed by her deductive reasoning. Before she could make up her mind, Claire continued.

"Now that Aaron's dead. I'm more convinced than ever, that something big is going on."

"Yeah, I heard about his death on the news."

"That was why I was out with him. I was hoping he would let something slip. I may have overdone the seductress thing. But there is no way I would ever have a relationship with him. *Please believe me.* Do you believe me?"

Amanda took a deep breath. "Claire, I do. And I'm more than a bit concerned about this whole corruption thing. But that doesn't change the fact that I like you very much and want to see you again."

Claire suddenly felt very shy. "So do we still have a date?"

"Unless your feelings for me have changed."

"They haven't changed. Are we still on for hockey tomorrow?"

"I expect you to be here, ready to cheer on the Red Wings to another Stanley Cup,"

Amanda replied, her mood brightening as the conversation shifted to a less sinister area. At that moment Claire was sure she was the happiest person alive. "Okay, I'll see you then."

"See you soon, Claire."

Hanging up the phone, she let out a whoop. "YES! She still wants to see me, she still likes me...Oh shit, I'd better find out about these Red Hawks..."

The phone rang just as Claire got out of the shower. She started to panic. *What if its Amanda calling to tell me that she's changed her mind... God, I've got to quit doubting myself. I sound pathetic!*

Nonetheless, her heart started to pound a little faster as she exited the shower and ran dripping to the phone.

"Hello," she said softly.

"Hey Claire!"

"Mark, ah it's you..."

"What's the matter, you sound scared to answer the phone?"

"Long story, Marko, long story. Suffice to say that I'm glad it's you. What's going on?"

Claire began toweling off her wet legs.

"Well, I'm calling to give you fair warning. Since you didn't make it here for dinner, we're bringing dinner to you on Saturday. The kids miss their Aunt Claire."

"That's great Mark, but... well, I have a date on Saturday."

"A date? That's great. Why didn't you say something?"

"Uh, it happened kind of fast... uh, it almost didn't happen."

"So what's she like?"

"Well, she's a psychologist and..."

"Is she a redhead and is it short or long?" *You've never really been interested in brunettes have you?*

"More blonde really and it's medium/long."

"And?"

Claire rolled her eyes knowing her friend wanted a detailed physical description. "I'd say she's about 5'4"."

"Okay, yeah, yeah...I'm starting to get a mental picture...go on. What about her figure?"

"What about it?" Claire shouted exasperated.

"Jesus, Claire, you're such a girl. How can an old bachelor like me live through you if you're so tightlipped with details? Is she model skinny, or athletic or..."

"Petite but athletic," Claire answered quickly, wanting to put an end to her friends AT&T voyeurism.

"Nice. Okay, what about her..."

"Mark," Claire growled.

"Okay, Okay," he laughed. "Go ahead and give me the other details."

Claire sighed and lay down on her bed. "I'll cut to the chase, her name is Amanda and she's a psychologist. And she's great. She's gorgeous and has a sweet personality. I don't think I've ever felt this way about anyone, especially so quickly."

Mark laughed again. "She must be something else, I've never heard you be so excited about anyone before? A psychologist?"

"Yep. She's got a daughter too, really cute. We went to lunch and hit it off."

"Where are you going on your second date?"

"I'm going over to her house to watch the hockey playoffs."

"Hockey? Are you serious? "

"Yeah, I know. I was going to call you to ask about it. Does Minnesota have a hockey team? And where are the Red Hawks from?"

Mark laughed. "Oh boy, you have really fallen hard if you want to hear me talk about hockey... "

"Missy, hold still while I finish putting your shoe on." Amanda exhaled loudly and projected a small puff of air that sent her bangs into disarray. Finally after several more seconds of struggling she had the shoe adjusted properly and fastened the small Velcro strap.

"I know you don't like them but you might as well get used to wearing them. You can't go barefoot your entire life." For a second Amanda spared a wistful thought as to how nice that would really be. "Just wait until you've got to wear panty hose, a bra, and heels. You think you've got it bad now?" Amanda smiled down at her pouting daughter and almost gave in and removed the offending shoes. Taking a breath she firmed her resolve.

"You look really pretty, you know that," she stated proudly as she began tickling Missy's belly, eliciting a fit of giggles. "That's better," Amanda grinned. "Let's go downstairs. I have a new friend I'd like you to meet. She should be here soon." Amanda stood and extended a hand toward the toddler. Excitedly, Missy latched onto a finger and began to run toward the bedroom door, pulling along her mother along behind her.

"Hold on, Kiddo, I'm coming," Amanda chuckled as she stumbled after the toddler. When they reached the stairs the young doctor bent to pick up the little girl.

"No. Stairs!!" Missy squealed, looking down the stairs.

"Missy," Amanda warned.

"No, no, no, stairs!" Missy repeated, as she let go of Amanda's hand and reached up, grabbing the bottom edge of the railing.

"You're too little to go down the stairs by yourself," her mother protested.

Missy looked down the steps again, but didn't move. Turning moist eyes on Amanda, the little girl begged, "peeeasse."

God, I swear Jody taught her how to do that. "Okay..." Amanda relented reluctantly, "but you have to hold Mama's hand. Deal?"

"Otay!" Missy practically screamed, her smile returning full force. With one hand on the railing, and the other tightly gripping Amanda's index finger, she began a torturously slow decent down the stairs.

When two small feet jumped off the last step and wobbly landed on soft carpet, Missy began clapping her hands wildly. "Yaaaaaaaaa," she giggled.

Scooping up her daughter, Amanda planted a sloppy kiss on a pink cheek. "That was pretty fun, huh?"

"Phunn" the little blonde repeated.

"I'm so proud of you. You are getting to be such a big girl," Amanda praised, hugging the child tightly. Her tone turned serious, "never alone Missy, you can only go up or down with Mama. Alright?"

"Otay, Mama," the girl replied happily.

"Come on. You can watch a movie while I finish getting ready." Picking up the tiny blonde, Amanda moved to video cabinet and opened the door. "Which one do you want to see?"

Missy immediately reached out and selected a tattered orange box. Hugging the video to her chest the girl exclaimed, "Elmo, Boo, Elmo, Boo."

Rolling her eyes, Amanda smiled indulgently. "Elmo Says Boo, huh? Why am I not surprised?"

Depositing the child on the couch, Amanda started the movie. After a few seconds, Missy became totally absorbed in the film and Amanda slipped away into the kitchen. Rummaging through a drawer she pulled out a handful of well-worn take-out menus. *I hope she's not expecting me to be able to cook. After a moment's indecision, Amanda simply left the menus on the counter. She can help me decide later.*

Earlier that afternoon Mrs. Fisher had phoned and regretfully informed Amanda she wouldn't be able to baby-sit. Her grandson had the flu and she wanted to offer her daughter some much-needed assistance. Amanda considered calling Jody, who clearly adored the toddler, but felt awkward. After leaving Origami they had argued bitterly. Jody apologized but Amanda knew they were both still angry and needed some time apart to cool off.

Poking her head out of the kitchen, she saw Missy sitting quietly on the couch, watching Elmo scare Julia Roberts. Heading for her bedroom, her stomach twitched nervously. *I hope she likes Missy and that Missy likes her. She didn't seem to mind the fact that I had a daughter when I told her about Missy. Still, I wasn't expecting to introduce them to each other today. But, I guess I'd rather find out right up front, if she can't deal with children.* Amanda frowned, hoping that wouldn't be the case, and began rummaging through her drawers. Smiling impishly, she pulled out two hockey jerseys. After running a quick brush through her hair she made her way back into the den.

Checking on Missy again, the psychologist noticed that green eyes were beginning to droop and glaze. Sitting down next to her daughter, she clicked off the video and pulled Missy into her lap. Pale hair mingled together, making it nearly impossible to tell where Amanda's ended and Missy's began. "I think it's gonna be an early night for you tonight, Kiddo. I knew you shouldn't have skipped your nap. Do you want to take a rest now?"

Amanda inquired gently.

"No, no, no," the sleepy toddler protested as she burrowed deeper into her mother's arms and closed her eyes.

"That's what I thought," Amanda whispered, tightening her hug.

DING-DONG...DING-DONG...

A small blonde head snapped to attention and Missy jumped off her mother's lap in a dead run toward front door, tiredness all but forgotten in the wake of the doorbell.

"Hewwo" a small voice called out.

A smile unconsciously tugged at Claire's lips. Leaning closer to the door, she cocked her ear and listened. *That must be Missy. I guess she will be here tonight.* Shifting nervously, Claire was glad she decided to make a small detour before coming to Amanda's.

Wow, I should really come here more often. Claire grinned, as she felt the familiar sense of excitement well up within her. *Thank goodness at least Mark has kids. It's a lot more*

fun to have someone to buy for. She snorted, thinking of the many purchases she'd picked up for her best friend's children, and the few she'd secretly bought for herself. Claire's eyes affectionately scanned the small toy store that hadn't changed a bit in the past thirty years. Poppy's Toyland was a bright spot in a speckled childhood. Every shelf seemed to hold a memory. It was only a few years ago, that Claire abandoned her own self-consciousness, and began periodically visiting the shop just because she loved it...and the toys... and Poppy.

"Claire, it's been a long time. I don't think I've seen you since before Christmas," cracked an old voice.

Claire turned and smiled at toy store's small proprietor. "Hiya Poppy. I know...I've just been really busy lately. How's Sophia?"

"Fine...fine. She'll be pleased to hear you stopped by. What can I get for you today? Or, are you just here to browse?" Dark eyes twinkled gently, and Claire bashfully acknowledged the knowing look.

Leaning in toward Poppy, Claire spoke formally. "I'm here on a mission, Poppy."

Poppy stood a little taller, stretching out his 5'4" frame. The man simply loved a mission.

"Boy or girl?" he inquired.

"Girl."

"Age?"

"Nineteen months."

"Does she watch TV or videos."

"I dunno."

"Occasion?"

"No occasion. I just want her to like me." Claire shifted, and lowered her voice, "I REALLY want her to like me."

"Hmm...I see." Wrinkled black eyes narrowed as Poppy considered.

"Traditional or trendy."

"Don't care."

"Come with me." Poppy led Claire to the back of the store, which paid homage Jim Henson and Sesame Street. "I recommend this." Poppy pointed to an item on the middle shelf. Claire smiled broadly. "I'll take it, Poppy. Thanks. Wrap it up with a balloon okay?" Blue eyes glanced around wistfully.

"You bet Claire. Do you have to leave so soon?" Poppy slowly ambling back toward the cash register.

"I'm afraid so. But with any luck I'll have a good reason to come back here more often." The small man handed back a bright pink package with a small yellow balloon tied to the top. "You never need a reason, Claire." He smiled and handed back her credit card. "Ok, then. I'll expect to see you again soon. Sophia will want to say hello next time."

"Thanks again, Poppy. Wish me luck." Claire turned and exited the shop. Opening her umbrella, she tried to avoid being soaked by the heavy spring rain."

Now for her mother... Claire remembered Amanda's enthusiasm over the lunch they had shared the week before. *Didn't there used to be a candy store around here somewhere?*

"Hewwo," the small voice cried out again.

"Hew..." Claire cleared her throat. "I mean hello, it's..." Before she could finish the door swung open and two pair of smiling green eyes greeted her.

"Boy that was great!" Amanda patted her stomach appreciatively.

Claire sat down her iced tea glass, glancing at her new friend with growing affection. "I'm always in the mood for Mexican food," she assured. "For some reason it seems to survive

delivery better than a lot of other food." Claire's eyes drifted down to Missy, who was happily playing on the floor. She cringed when the toddler pushed on Elmo's stomach and he began to laugh and vibrate...AGAIN.

Amanda shot Claire a look and raised an eyebrow that said, "You brought it. Live with it." When Missy pushed on Elmo's tummy for the millionth time, Amanda noticed Claire was staring guiltily at her sneakers. After a few seconds Claire finally looked up at Amanda, whose eyebrow had yet to descend, and both women burst out laughing. After a moment Claire spoke.

"How long do the batteries usually last in those things," she chuckled.

"Too long," Amanda deadpanned. Looking at the clock she realized it was almost 7:30 p.m. The last few hours had practically flown by. To Amanda's relief and Claire's surprise, Missy and Claire seemed to hit it off immediately.

Throughout the early evening each woman shared bits of information about themselves, each listening eagerly as the other discussed her interests and career. Claire had been a great sport about playing with Missy, albeit a little awkwardly. And Amanda was especially thrilled that Claire didn't seem at all miffed when she took time out to read Missy a short story. But "baby time" was coming to a close and Amanda was more than ready to have her guest all to herself.

Standing, Amanda garnered Missy's attention. "Time for bed, sweetheart," Amanda shook her head, knowing what was coming.

"No, no, no!" the girl protested. But an untimely yawn didn't help her case.

"Yes," her mother said firmly. "Say goodnight to Claire."

Trying to help, Claire reached down and ruffled the child's hair. "Goodnight Missy, it was a pleasure to meet you."

"Night. No. No. Dans, dans, peeeeasssse!" the tiny blonde whined beseechingly.

Amanda looked over at the stereo, then back to Claire, finally resting her eyes on her daughter. *Come on, Missy! Cut me some slack here. I know we do this every night before bed. But...* Biting her lip, she shook her head and laughed. "Okay, Missy. But in your room."

"Otay!" the child squealed, holding her arms out for Amanda lift her up. "Bye bye...

Cwwaire."

Sweeping the child up in her arms, Amanda headed for the stairs. Glancing back, she spoke as she climbed, "I should be back down in just a few minutes. Help yourself to another drink."

Claire gave the little girl a playful wave and got a sleepy semi-toothless smile in return. *Kids aren't so bad*, she mused. *But no more toys that make noise.* Grinning to herself, she thought of the drum set she bought Mark's oldest son last year for Christmas. *I wonder how many times Mark cursed me for that one?*

Deciding to take Amanda up on her offer, Claire moved into the kitchen and poured herself the last of the tea. *Dans? What could that mean?* While the lawyer suspected Missy spoke quite well for her age, she still needed Amanda to translate most of what the child said.

While in the kitchen, Claire took a moment to enjoy the clean, but slightly disorganized, surroundings. Photos of Missy and Amanda were posted liberally throughout the room. On the corner of the cabinet sat a small-framed photo of Jody and Amanda in fatigues. *She was in the military? Interesting.* Actually, she shook her head a little as if to clear it, *I'm finding most everything about her interesting.*

Maroon and white tiles gave the kitchen a modern but homey appearance. The phone sat on a tall uneven stack of magazines and newspapers. It was clear Amanda was a voracious

reader. Glancing over some of the titles Claire wasn't surprised to find covers ranging from "Psychology Today" to "Parenthood."

As she poked around, Claire found her mind drifting upstairs. She wondered how long it would take to put Missy to bed. *She didn't look like she wanted to go to sleep to me. Kids...Go figure. What I wouldn't give to be able to sleep in and take naps... and have Amanda hand feed me,* she added evilly.

As her mind gleefully occupied itself with its latest lascivious thought, she meandered back toward the living room. Passing by the steps, she faintly heard a base guitar, drums and raspy vocals. *Rock and roll?* Giving her natural curiosity free reign, she followed the music. At the top of the stairs she could make out John Mellancamp begging to make it "Hurt so Good." *He'll always be John Cougar to me.* A few paces more down the second story hallway, and she could hear the rustle of movement from a bedroom. Quietly, she peaked into what she realized was Missy's bedroom, and instantly figured out exactly what dans meant.

The blinds were pulled partially shut, allowing only the thinnest rays of the golden sunlight to enter the room. In what Claire was sure was the smallest, and cutest lavender nightgown she had ever seen, a laughing Missy was spinning and clapping to the music, stopping every few turns when she got too dizzy to continue. Panting and laughing, she looked worn-out and ecstatic at the same time. *Dans means dance. Got it. Smart, Amanda. Is this how you tire her out?*

When Claire's eyes shifted up to Missy's dancing partner and her body responded without thought or warning. Claire's felt a surge of attraction wash over her as she watched Amanda gently grind snug fitting, jean-covered, hips to the music. Lifting her arms over head the counselor turned and dipped in perfect time, exposing a lean well-defined belly. Claire unconsciously moistened her lips. *Jesus! How can she make something so innocent look so damn sexy?*

When Amanda began giggling right along with her daughter, Claire was startled by the manic swing of her emotions. Her eyes misted over at the happy, familial sight. *So that's what love looks like. I've always wondered.* Two pale heads, gone reddish gold in the twilight, twirled and swayed until the taller of the two noticed Claire in the doorway. Amanda looked up at Claire, and her face began to color. She paused...but rather than stopping, she simply swallowed her embarrassment, and continued to dance until the music faded away. Seeing a strange look on Claire's face she wanted to ask what she was thinking. But that would have to wait until later. Drawing a finger to her lips, she motioned for Claire to remain silent. When the child's movements finally slowed, Amanda sat down in a large oak rocker, and waited until Missy stood panting at her knees.

"Did you have a good dance, sweetheart?"

"Ya, Mama" the little girl breathed as she held her arms out to her mother.

Lifting Missy onto her lap, Amanda snuggled the child into her until the short breaths lengthened, and the fair head began to sag. Seeing the mother and daughter needed a few more moments together, Claire silently slipped down stairs.

Amanda placed the lightly snoring child to bed, laying Elmo beside her. "Goodnight, baby" she whispered.

Well, if that didn't scare Claire off, nothing will. I take that back. Thank God, she didn't hear me sing. As she made her way back to her guest, Amanda marveled at how easy Claire was to talk to. It didn't hurt that she more than did justice to the white jeans and the black denim shirt she wore... but still...there was something more than that. Amanda found herself easing into a friendly camaraderie, that thus far in her life, she found exceedingly rare. She had it with Jody. She knew their friendship would endure, and that

they shared a deep sisterly affection. But no matter how close they were, the relationship would always lack the element of 'romantic love' that Amanda found herself craving.

Nearing the bottom of the stairs, the counselor stopped and observed Claire unnoticed. Sweeping her eyes up from Nike covered feet, to raven colored hair, Amanda sighed. *No, it's definitely not sisterly feelings I have when I'm with Claire.*

"Thanks for being so patient. That took a little longer than I expected."

Claire turned toward the bright voice. "No, problem. She seems like a sweet little girl. She sure has a lot of energy."

"True," Amanda laughed, "but it's not everyday she has someone new to entertain her. She's mostly used to me, and Mrs. Fisher and Jody."

At the mention of Jody's name, Claire's features darkened.

Whoa, I wonder what caused that look? She must still be angry with Jody over the stunt she pulled outside of Origami. "Claire, Jody didn't mean anything the other day." Amanda couldn't help but defend her long time pal. "She was trying to be a friend. Sometimes she just goes too far." Her voice softened, "Don't stay angry...please."

Claire felt her anger melt away under Amanda's gentle plea. The lawyer stood silent for several seconds...thinking. When she finally spoke, her demeanor had completely shifted, throwing Amanda slightly off balance.

"She hates me, right?" Her voice was steady but her eyes belied inner distress.

Her feelings are hurt? Wow, that game face must really pay off in the courtroom. Anger seems to be her first reaction. She's a lot like Jody, volatile, but more bark than bite. Studying the clinched jaw and Claire's powerful frame, Amanda quickly reassessed her characterization. *Okay, I definitely see bite potential here.*

Claire quietly sat back in her chair, feeling mildly defeated. Amanda noticed the slight slumping of her shoulders and realized that Claire had taken her silence as an affirmation. *Snap out of it, Mandy.*

"No, no," she reassured. "She doesn't hate you," *at least I don't think she does.* "She just...well...um..."

"She just thought I was a jerk who was dating her much younger, drug abusing client, while trying to make time with you on the side," Claire stated flatly.

Amanda winced at the blunt but accurate assessment. Not knowing what to say she settled on an equally blunt and simple truth. "That is what she thought," Amanda saw Claire try to hide a flinch but she continued. "I love Jody and what she thinks is important to me." Green eyes snagged and held blue. "But you explained the situation to me. And I choose to believe you. I can't control what Jody thinks." Her voice took on a slightly resentful quality. "She doesn't decide who I see and who I don't. I make my own decisions."

Claire couldn't help but be impressed by the determined nature of the smaller woman. She found herself admiring more and more things about this enigmatic young psychologist. But she also recognized the quick temper hiding behind kind, youthful features. *Boy, am I glad she's not upset with me. Somehow I think Jody got an earful this week.*

Ready for a change to more pleasant subjects, Amanda marched over to a small table and retrieved two well-worn jerseys. Green eyes twinkled. "The game will be on a few minutes which do you want, the white or the red?"

We're dressing up? "Um...you can pick. But I don't think you're clothes will fit me."

Amanda held up the oversized shirts. "I'm not worried. I'll choose." Amanda took the opportunity to critically study the taller woman, holding up each jersey to Claire, and

gauging its probable appeal. With a smile, she remembered Claire in a form fitting red dress. "Here, I think this one would look the better on you. Besides," she added mischievously, "red clashes with my hair."

Handing Claire the jersey, Amanda added, "I hope you're a Red Wing fan."

"You bet," Claire responded confidently. *Not that I know squat about hockey. What was the name of the team Mark told me about?* Claire held up the red jersey. *What in hell is a Yzerman?* Eyeing the heavy cloth, Claire weighed it in her hands. Glancing at the blonde, she raised an eyebrow in question.

Amanda smirked and turned her back to Claire, knowing she'd be broiling if she wore the jersey over her heavy weight denim shirt. *I wonder if she'll have the nerve to take it off right here?* Amanda stood, hands on her hips, and waited.

Claire's other eyebrow shot skyward at Amanda's implied challenge. *She wants me to change here?* An internal chuckle. *Ah, Amanda, you're playing this game with the wrong woman.*

A few seconds passed with no sound, and Amanda decided to stop teasing her new friend. Dropping her hands from her hips she began to turn.

"I'm not finished yet," a low voice rumbled.

Amanda's head snapped forward and she began to hear the scraping of denim as Claire began pulling the shirt out of her jeans. Amanda nervously started to clench and unclench her fists. "Uhh...sure...take your time... no rush." *Stop babbling*, she berated herself. *I can't believe she's doing that!* Amanda suddenly looked to her patio doors, hoping to catch a glimpse of the muscular form in the reflection. Looking at the closed curtains, she let out a small sigh of disappointment. Rolling her eyes, she chastised herself. *I'm worse than a sixteen-year old boy. A deep breath. What's taking her so long, anyway? It's getting really hot in here.* Amanda lifted a slightly shaky hand and wiped her brow. When she heard the muffled popping sounds of Claire's buttons her heart rate began to speed up. *Wow, she suddenly realized, I've had full-blown love affairs that don't hold a candle to the sheer eroticism of her undressing behind me.*

Then, for a few seconds the only sound that filled the room was Amanda's breathing. Finally, Amanda saw Claire's shirt land lightly on the couch next to her. Looking down at the shirt, she tried pushing the image of Claire standing behind her, in only a bra, out of her mind. She swallowed.

"Okay, all done."

Amanda waited a bit before turning around. She hoped her face wasn't as flush as it felt. Counting to ten, she turned to see Claire dressed in the red jersey, and holding the other. As the lawyer began walking toward Amanda, a slow sexy grin crossed her face.

Stopping far closer to Amanda than was customary, Claire held up the white jersey.

Looking down into Amanda's eyes she leaned forward until her lips were only inches away from the smaller woman's face. Hot breath caressed Amanda's cheek. Lowering her voice, Claire whispered "your turn."

It was all Amanda could do not to moan out loud. *Oh... God.* Amanda closed eyes, absorbing the deep voice, and not trusting herself to speak. After a few seconds she opened her eyes but couldn't meet Claire's. "Thanks...b...but..." A pause and another hard swallow. Grabbing the jersey Amanda practically ran for the bathroom. "I'll be right back," she croaked.

Claire laughed softly as Amanda bolted out of the room. *She's gonna make a great playmate.*

"NO. NO. NO!" Amanda jumped up off the couch for the third time in the last five minutes. Her team was not doing well. "Did you see that?" She wagged her finger at the television. "That was ILLEGAL!" Suddenly dejected, she flopped back down onto the sofa next to Claire.

Claire was having a great time. She couldn't care less about watching the game. But watching Amanda watch the game, was another story. The small psychologist cheered and hissed and cursed the officials with unrestrained passion. *I wonder what she'd be like if she were actually at the game? We'd probably be tossed out on our butts*, she thought wryly.

After a particularly vicious check, Amanda began to rise again. This time Claire acted. "Oh no, you don't." Claire quickly grabbed Amanda's hand, tugging her back down into cushions. "Stay. You're making me dizzy." Claire's grip was firm but her voice was teasing. Surprised, Amanda looked down at their joined hands.

Nodding, she spoke calmly, though the dozing butterflies in her stomach, awakened at Claire's touch. "Sure, no problem."

When it was clear Amanda wasn't going anywhere, Claire loosened her grip but didn't let go. It was a baby step, and she knew it. But the lawyer had wanted to make some sort of physical contact with her companion from the first moment she saw her. After several hours of aborted attempts, she was relieved to have the smaller palm finally resting in hers. What a nice fit, she thought, looking down at their entwined hands. This evening was definitely looking up. The rest of the game was spent in sweet companionship, each woman pleased with the way evening was shaping up.

The game had long since ended and Claire had tried her best to console Amanda, who was sulking over the Red Wings elimination from the playoffs. The blonde had realized early on that the lawyer didn't know the first thing about hockey. But she was trying so hard, Amanda didn't have the heart to let her know she'd been found out.

With the television off, only a small brass lamp lit the den. Shadows danced off Amanda's hands as she gestured. Once again Claire was struck by how much she simply enjoyed being in the smaller woman's presence. When she was with Amanda, somehow, she felt connected. It was unsettling and invigorating at the same time.

"You're kidding?" Amanda exclaimed.

"No seriously, that's what I really believed. At least when I was really little."

"Well, I hope I didn't kill your fantasy." The blonde groaned with satisfaction as she bit into a thick cluster of chocolate covered nuts. "Mmm. This is thsoo guud."

"Somehow, I suspected you might like it," Claire smirked, snagging another piece for herself.

"Hey," Amanda protested as she lightly slapped Claire's hand away. "I'm not forcing you to eat any, you know."

Popping the confiscated chocolate covered cherry into her mouth, Claire grinned. "Now what kind of date would I be if I sat back and allowed my lovely hostess to eat so much candy that she got a stomach ache?"

"Humph...Good luck. I have no will power when it comes to chocolate."

"You sure don't look it," Claire replied, gazing appreciatively at the blonde's lean, compact physique.

"You've met my daughter, right?" she teased. "Chasing around after her is just about all the exercise I need. But I like to bike ride when the weather allows and I have a well-worn treadmill in the spare bedroom."

Mirroring Claire's appreciative look, Amanda eyes traveled down to well-muscled thighs.

"Now I know nobody looks like you, without working out."

Claire could feel her skin growing warm at her friend's compliment. "Umm...Thanks."

Ha! It's about time the shoe was on the other foot! Amanda gently traced a flushed cheek. "You look pretty in pink," she teased.

Embarrassed, Claire quickly changed the subject. *How did our conversation get derailed? And now I'm blushing?* Claire cleared her throat. "It wasn't until I was about eight that I finally figured all moms didn't know how to cook."

"What clued you in?" Amanda gracefully accepted the shift in conversation back to its previous topic.

"Well, it was my birthday and I was all excited to get my birthday dessert. Every year I would get some great pastry or cake or something like that, and we'd eat it together, in our pajamas in front of the fireplace."

A slight note of sadness tinged Claire's voice. "My folks worked really long hours and entertained a lot. We didn't spend a lot of time together so I really looked forward to that special time every year." Remembering this wasn't supposed to be a serious story, Claire intentionally lightened her voice. "Anyway, I guess I just figured my mom made the desserts. I mean, that's what moms do, right?"

Amanda nodded, a little concerned with her friend's tone, but caught up in the story enough to want her to continue.

"I practically ran home from school and hurried through my homework, so I could sit and wait for my folks to come home." Claire shifted slightly, enjoying the warm comforting touch of Amanda's thigh nestled up against hers. "Right before dinner, Margaret, she was my nanny that year, came into my room and told me that my parents had an unexpected social function they needed to attend that night and that they wished me a happy birthday."

Amanda remained silent but lightly squeezed Claire's hand in a supportive gesture.

"Then she handed me an address book and a credit card and said that Mrs. Easton had instructed her to give them to me so that I could call Bartholomew's Bakery and have my birthday dessert delivered, and to remind me how much I liked the cheesecake last year."

A pause. "I don't think my parents ever realized how much thought birthday desserts meant to me. Not the actual dessert..."

"But the time you spent together," Amanda finished.

Claire sighed and returned the light pressure to Amanda's hand. "Exactly."

What can I say to that? Amanda wondered. "Claire...I'm sorr..." She stopped when she saw Claire smiling, with what could only describe as a deviously evil grin.

"What's so funny?" *That must have felt awful. What could possible be funny about that?*

"Margaret told me my mother said that I could get anything I wanted. And I did."

Still not comprehending Amanda waited for an explanation. When she could tell Claire wasn't going to offer one, she simply asked. "So, what did you get?"

Claire's grinned broadened. "Oh, I got the cheesecake...and the pecan pie...and the apple strudel..."

Amanda's eyes widened.

"...and the raisin bars...and the white chocolate cookies...and..." Claire continued.

"Oh, no," Amanda laughed, as she finally figured out what the mischievous child had done.

"You ordered one of everything?"

Claire nodded, a grin still firmly plastered on her face. "Ooh yeah, the bill came to \$442.00."

Amanda put a finger to her temple and spoke out loud, "Mental note to Mandy, never ever, under any circumstances, cross Claire."

The attorney shrugged sheepishly, but didn't disagree. Realizing what her friend just said, Claire's natural inquisitiveness returned. "I haven't heard anyone refer to you as 'Mandy' before."

Surprised she had used the name out loud, Amanda elaborated. "That's because no one does. Well...no one but me, I suppose. My family isn't much for nicknames so I just got used to introducing myself as Amanda. My dad still won't call Melissa "Missy," although I think he's the last one."

Claire considered for a moment. "I like 'Amanda,' but Mandy is nice too. It suits you."

"Thanks." Amanda could feel herself grinning stupidly. "You can call me either one then."

"Okay, I will."

Claire looked at the clock regretfully, mentally cursing Father Time and his relentless pace. *We've been talking for hours. I can't believe it. I think I've talked, and listened,* she admitted to herself, *more tonight, than I have in the past six-months combined.* Looking back up at the clock again, she stifled a sigh. *Time to bite the bullet.* Claire couldn't quite hide her frown as she shifted her position until she was completely facing Amanda.

Sounding very much like she didn't want to, Claire began saying goodnight. "I guess I should be going, it's after midnight."

Amanda squeezed the hand that hadn't left hers for the past several hours. Looking at the clock, she knew her friend was right. *Now I know how Cinderella felt... yuck.* The psychologist's mind raced for a legitimate reason to ask Claire to stay longer. *Somehow, I don't think I should come out and say "Gee Claire, I'm having a great time, and you're so gorgeous you make me forget how to breathe, and I was just wondering if I could have you imbedded in my couch, so I could sit and stare at you and drool."* Though for a brief moment, she was sorely tempted. *Being polite sucks.*

"Thanks for coming, Claire. I had a lot of fun."

Claire shifted a little closer and flashed a dazzling smile. "Me too."

Who needs to breathe? Amanda found herself willingly drowning in deep azure blue. An answering smile played on her own lips, and crinkled the corners of her eyes.

Now it was Claire's turn to remember to breathe. As their eyes locked, the surroundings faded, and each woman felt herself surrendering to an almost physical pull, a deep craving to connect with the other.

Growing bolder, Claire leaned forward and began to delicately trail her fingers along Amanda's neck, pausing to feel the pounding pulse beneath her fingertips. Moving her hand upward she cupped a soft cheek.

Amanda's eyes closed reflexively, an involuntary sigh escaping her lips as Claire's gentle touch moved from her neck to her cheekbones, sliding across pale eyebrows, and finally tangling in soft hair. She felt her head being slowly guided forward and upward as a warm palm was placed on her other cheek. Hot breath tickled her face as all forward movement suddenly stopped.

A half a second felt like forever, as Amanda leaned forward closing the minute gap between them. Their lips brushed together softly. Then slowly, the contact began to increase.

Amanda felt as though she were on sensory overload. Her hands firmly gripped the silky skin on Claire's forearms. Her palate delighted in a sweetness that was part Claire and

part chocolate. As her body fell further into Claire's, she inhaled the light scent of roses. It felt more than good. It felt right.

The kiss deepened naturally, Claire didn't bother to swallow the low moan that echoed from her throat as she drew even closer to the young therapist. It was, Claire decided, perfectly delicious. Intense attraction combined with a blossoming affection and the result...was simply exquisite.

The kiss tapered off as each woman reluctantly withdrew from the other. Amanda opened her eyes first, to see Claire still leaning slightly toward her, eyes closed, with the most curious expression on her face.

Claire slowly opened her eyes and exhaled deeply. The look of startled amazement painted on each woman's face caused other to smile, then laugh. The easy laughter cut through the haze of sexual tension that permeated the air. Claire and Amanda were both relieved at the drop in intensity. Each needed a moment to process the unexpected emotion that accompanied the kiss.

Claire shifted, her focus naturally drawn to warm green eyes. *WOW! What the hell just happened?* "M..Ma..." Claire stopped. Gathering her scattered wits, she tried again.

"Mandy, that..."

Claire paused as her attention was forced outside. *Voices?*

BOOM!! The front door swung open violently, crashing loudly against the wall.

"Honey, I'm home!" screeched a slurred voice.

Claire and Amanda flew off the couch, Claire instinctively placing herself between Amanda and the door, as a short, excessively freckled, red-haired man staggered in, and stood laughing hysterically before the women.

"Who in the hell are you?" Amanda yelled, anger already beginning to replace shock.

"J.J., you shithead! What do you think your doing?" called a hollow sounding voice from the doorway.

Claire and Amanda's attention shifted to a woman who was standing in the shadows just inside Amanda's doorway.

"Come on Baby," the man whined "You know I always wanted to say that." J.J. started to say something else, but burst out laughing instead.

"Oh right...sorry...I forgot." The woman swayed slightly, leaning against the wall, then joined J.J. in an equally inappropriate fit of hysterical laughter.

"I'm calling the police, these people are crazy." Claire stepped toward the phone.

Amanda continued to stare at the woman, her face paling with each passing second.

"Wait," she said, holding up a hand, stopping Claire. Taking several steps forward, she roughly pushed past J.J. Flipping on the light she continued to stare at the woman in silence. Suddenly her eyes welled with tears. Claire watched as tremors racked Amanda's small frame. It looked like fear or anger or sadness. Claire couldn't tell which. Alarmed, she rushed to join her friend, stopping slightly behind and to the side of Amanda.

Pointing a finger at Claire, J.J. began to yell again. "Slow down, bitch! This is none of your business," he slurred.

"Shut up you demented little gnome!" Claire hissed, as she reached out and viscously snapped the offending finger.

"FUCK!" J.J. dropped to his knees and began to cry. "Ahhhh...you...bitch! You broke my finger!" J.J.'s words were an eerie mix of pain and amusement and disbelief.

"That's right asshole! And if you don't drag your sorry ass outta here I'm gonna break more than..." Claire stopped at the sound of Amanda's anguished voice.

"Monica?" Her voice cracked. A long moment passed. "God... is that really you?"

The woman looked up and smiled with glassy, dilated eyes. "Long time no see."

"Jesus Christ," Amanda whispered. Stepping closer to filthy emaciated woman, she smelled garbage. Grimacing, she continued. "What have you done to yourself?" Reaching out the therapist gently tugged the wild hair as though she'd never seen it before. The woman before her was bone thin. She wore ragged blue jeans and a dirty short-sleeved sweatshirt that were ill fitting. Taking in the threadbare clothes, Amanda assumed them to be in too poor a condition to have come from the Salvation Army or a shelter. Haunted hazel eyes were framed with tired, black circles and the short, dirty blonde hair was greasy and uncombed.

"Nice to see you again too," Monica added sarcastically. Closing sunken eyes, she wrapped her arms tightly around her bony frame and began to quake, sliding down the wall that had been supporting her.

Amanda reached for Monica, who flailed out, knocking her hands away. "Don't touch me, Amanda. I'm fine."

"Fine, huh?" Amanda's hand shot out, grabbing Monica's chin. Jerking her head upward, she looked directly into stoned eyes. Monica weakly pulled away causing Amanda to release her grasp. "You're coming down aren't you?"

Claire stood awkwardly behind Amanda. It was obvious that the women knew each other. And based on Amanda's reactions, this was no patient or casual friend. *An old girlfriend?* Claire kept watching. *I don't think so.* She couldn't help but wince. *I hope not.* Out of the corner of her eye the attorney kept tabs on a writhing, blubbing, J.J. The other women were all but oblivious to his presence.

"What do you care?" Monica hissed, as she tried to gather enough balance to stand without the assistance of the wall.

"You know I care!" Amanda answered defensively.

J.J. slowly stood and approached Claire with a raised fist. "You'll be sorry you..."

Patience gone, Claire swiftly kicked J.J.'s feet out from under him. Rolling on his stomach, he immediately started laughing and crying again. Claire shook her head. *Stay down idiot.* Stupidly, as Claire shifted back toward Amanda, J.J. reached out and grabbed her ankle.

"That's it. I've had enough of you, "Chucky!" Claire brought her foot up with viscous force, slamming it straight down on J.J.'s hand. The man howled and choked, saliva dripped from the corners of his mouth, as his body registered that several more fingers were crushed. "Time to go," Claire muttered, secretly glad the fool had tried put his hands on her, giving her the excuse she needed. Grabbing J.J. by the back of the collar the lawyer literally threw him out the open front door. Monica's reaction was not what she expected.

"CHUCKY!!" Her bizarre laughter echoed in the otherwise quiet house. "I hope that doesn't make me Chucky's bride." Her laughter turned to sobs and then abruptly stopped. Claire resumed her position near her friend. Amanda felt Claire's reassuring presence at her side but didn't acknowledge it. For the moment, all she could do was stare at pathetic spectacle in front of her. *She's married to that?* Amanda's eyes drifted to the front lawn where J.J. was sitting clutching his hand. *Why didn't anyone let me know she'd been released, or checked out?* "You need help Monica. Why aren't you in St. Benedicts?"

She snorted. "That was voluntary, Amanda, they couldn't keep me there. Besides I don't want that kind of help."

"You need that kind of help."

"Shut the fuck up with that psycho-babble bullshit!" Monica screamed.

Strangely, Monica's anger was immediately replaced by a different look. Claire felt her hackles rise but fought to remain still. *She can see I'm right here if she needs me, she*

chided. But even as she admonished herself, a protective urge surged from deep within. *One look, one word, one gesture towards Amanda, and friend or no, that crazy bitch is gonna end up on her ass in the yard with J.J.* The lawyer could feel the adrenaline coursing through her. The need to do something, anything, was overwhelming. Claire never did do "passive" well.

"You could help me if you really wanted to," the dirty blonde pouted self-servingly.

"I won't give you any money."

Monica looked around desperately.

"If you want, I'll call and get you a non-refundable room at the Motel 6 on Orchard Street. And this time I'll tell them to take out the television and clocks." An expensive lesson learned.

"Fuck you, Amanda. I knew you wouldn't help me. That's not why I came here anyway."

Monica looked up stairs as her body began to tremble again. "Where is she?"

Amanda's eyes followed Monica's. "Don't even think it, Monica," she warned.

"I'll more than think it. She's my daughter! I have a right to see her!"

Claire's eyes widened. *Her daughter?* She looked at Amanda. *What?*

Amanda's temper flared. "You have the right to nothing! You're high and you're filthy and you're not getting anywhere near her!" she growled, blocking Monica's path to the stairway.

Monica was laughing again, "You don't understand Amanda, I don't want to see her I want to take her. J.J.'s gonna get a job and we're all gonna live together and be a family."

"WHAT?" The anger in Amanda's voice was rich with disbelief. "Are you truly insane?"

YOU ARE NOT TAKING MY DAUGHTER ANYWHERE!" She boomed.

"Come on Mandy," she sneered. "She already likes me."

"What do mean she likes you? There is no way she could even remember you. It's been months since she's seen you." Amanda dismissed the woman's ramblings.

J.J. finally reappeared in the doorway. Claire's icy stare stopped him from entering the house but not the conversation. "Now, I know I'm fucked up and all," J.J. conceded, "Claire's raised an eyebrow at his sudden flash of self-awareness. "But wasn't that just last week we took that little piggy to McDonalds? That little thing can sure put away the food." His grating laugh returned, and Claire found herself wanting to break his other hand.

Amanda's eyes flashed. "What do you mean last week? This is the first time I've seen you in months!"

Monica's head was down and she was snickering like a child who had been caught with her hand in the cookie jar so Amanda shifted her focus to J.J. "Well?" she demanded impatiently.

J.J. looked at Monica who looked back sheepishly. They both burst out laughing.

Thinking back over the week, Amanda closed her eyes in realization, asking the question although she was certain of the answer. "They let you see her didn't they?" *How could they? What if you had just taken off with Missy?* Amanda's thoughts were interrupted by J.J.

"The Greer house is sure nice, huh, baby?" J.J. slurred, wiping the spit from the corners of his mouth with his good hand.

"You betcha," Monica agreed.

"Get out," Amanda demanded flatly. Before the words were even out she felt Claire move closer to her. A strong hand lightly touched the small of her back, encouraging her.

"What?" Monica struggled to bring Amanda back into focus.

"You heard me. I want you out now. And don't come back like this ever again. There's no way you're getting Missy, so do yourself a favor and focus your energy on getting your life together instead of messing with my daughter."

J.J. looked as though he might object until Claire flashed him a bone-chilling smile. Even in his current condition, J.J. shuddered, unconsciously protecting his injured hand.

Cautiously, he approached Monica, whose attention was inexplicably focused on one of Amanda's plants. Grabbing a bony wrist he began pulling his bride out the door. "Come on baby, let's go."

As she passed through the doorway Monica appeared to spark to life. "I'll be back...Amanda... you..." Claire slammed the door in the babbling woman's face.

Amanda was still mutely staring at the closed, damaged door, when Claire gently took her hand and led her to the couch. Amanda looked up the staircase but remained silent for a long while before she spoke.

"I can't believe Missy didn't wake up with all that noise." Amanda's voice trailed off as her breathing hitched and she began to cry.

Claire was at a loss. She didn't understand what had happened or who Monica was but she could clearly see Amanda's pain. She simply held her arms out in offering to the smaller woman. Amanda gasped with relief as she lunged forward into Claire's waiting arms.

Gladly accepting all the warmth she found there, Amanda held on for dear life.

Claire murmured nonsense reassurances and stroked the soft blonde hair until finally, Amanda quieted. Reluctantly, Claire pulled back so she could see her friend's face, which was red, and puffy, and tear stained, and beautiful. It nearly broke Claire's heart.

Grabbing a wad of tissues from a box on the coffee table Claire offered them to the smaller woman, who faintly smiled, then wiped her eyes and blew her nose.

"Mandy, are you okay?" she asked softly.

"No...I...I don't think so." Looking up into confused blue eyes she continued. "I bet you're wondering what's going on just about now?"

Claire nodded.

"It's a really long, complicated story and I promise to tell you all of it...just not right this second okay?"

Claire nodded again.

"But, I guess the whole thing can be boiled down to a few sentences." Amanda stopped and wiped her cheeks again. When she found her voice, she continued. "Monica is Missy's birth mother. I guess it's pretty obvious that she's in no position to raise a child, although, she did straighten out a bit near the end of her pregnancy. I think she finally figured out what all those drugs could do to the baby." Claire passed over several more tissues. "I adopted Missy. I brought her home from the hospital, Claire." Amanda's eyes started to welling up again. "She's my daughter in every way, just because I didn't give birth to her doesn't mean..."

"Shh... I understand," Claire reassured. "I can see how much you love each other. And that you belong together," she added. Pulling Amanda back into a hug she spoke into her hair. "Don't worry, I'll help you."

"She...she couldn't get her back could she?" Amanda's voice cracked as she begged for reassurance.

Claire wanted to say "NO" and be done with it. But the lawyer in her refused to allow her to escape with the more comforting half-truth. "If everything was done legally to begin with...then no, it's not likely." She could feel Amanda's relieved sigh as the body against hers went limp. Claire closed her eyes. *Yes. Thank God, she didn't get the baby illegally.*

"I'll contact a friend of mine at the firm who specializes in adoptions. He'll know what to

do." Unsure how Amanda would take this she pressed on. "Amanda maybe we should call the police. Those two might come back and they did break into your house."

"No...Maybe...No...I don't know."

"What is it?" *Doesn't she see how dangerous something like this could be?* "Why the hesitation?" Claire loosened her hold and backed away until she was looking into sad green eyes.

"Because...she's my sister."

CHAPTER 4

"S I...SI.. SISTER?" CLAIRE sputtered. "That woman is your sister?" Claire pointed toward the closed door in disbelief. *Man, she was right. This is complicated.*

Amanda nodded sadly, her mind drifting to the baby sleeping upstairs. Standing, she began walking toward the stairs, stuffing her hands in her pockets. The therapist looked down at the carpet as she spoke. "Claire, I need to go and check on Missy...um...and...you should probably go. I'm sorry you had to see that. I don't know what to say. I just..."

"I'm not...sorry I was here, that is," Claire offered gently, as she made her way to the retreating blonde. Not wanting to leave, especially after the scene she'd just witnessed, the attorney reached up and laid a hand on her throat, indicating she was thirsty. "How about you go and check on Missy and I'll make us some tea. Okay?"

Amanda visibly relaxed, relieved beyond reason that Claire wasn't leaving just yet.

Mustering a faint smile, she nodded. "Okay. That would be great. Everything is in the first cabinet. I'll be back down in a few minutes." But she didn't move.

Both women stood facing each other at the bottom of the stairs, each hesitant to leave the other. Finally, Amanda leaned forward and on tipped-toes planted a delicate kiss on Claire's lips. "I'll be right back," she said as she turned and jogged up the stairs.

As she watched Amanda retreat upstairs, Claire placed a fingertip on her still tingling lips, her mood inexplicably brightened by the simple gesture. *Wow!* She thought for the hundredth time that night. *If that's how she makes me feel with one kiss, I don't know if I could handle anything more.* Claire let out a giddy chuckle at her own expense, the word "smitten" popping into the forefront of her mind. After a few seconds, she realized she was supposed to do something. *Oh, yeah...tea.*

Claire pushed off from the stairs, an uneasy knot growing in her stomach. *What if they do come back and try to take that baby?* *Simple,* her mind answered. *You won't let them.* Detouring from her route to the kitchen, the tall brunette made her way over to the front window. Pulling back the soft green curtains, she peered out into the inky darkness. Scanning the yard, there was no sign of anything. No Monica, no "Chucky", no cars. *No cars?* "FUCK!" she yelled.

Muttering a long string of colorful expletives, Claire bolted out the front door and into the cold night air. Standing in the front yard, she stared dumbly at the spot where her Explorer used to be parked. A gust of wind blew strands of dark hair across her shocked face. *Those assholes stole Gumby!*

"What? What is it?" Amanda panted, her eyes darting wildly, looking for whatever had caused her friend explode through the front door. "Are you okay?" the shorter woman asked nervously, as her hands began instinctively roaming Claire's body, searching for injuries.

Both eyebrows shot skyward at her friend's physical examination and Claire opened her mouth to speak. For a split second she considered allowing her to continue but Amanda was obviously frightened. "I'm fine," Claire assured.

When Amanda appeared not to notice Claire's words, the lawyer spoke more firmly. "Mandy," she grabbed the roaming hands, forcing Amanda to look at her face, "I'm okay." Staring into tear filled eyes, she softened her voice. "I promise, Mandy."

"What...What?" Amanda ran a shaky hand through her hair. "Jesus Christ, Claire!"

Amanda exhaled raggedly, and lightly bumped Claire with her hip. "You scared the crap out of me!" Claire released Amanda's wrists but Amanda didn't back away. "I...ah...do you think I'm a little on edge tonight?" she joked, a wry smile twitching at her lips.

Claire laughed and wrapped her arm around the therapist's waist, the physical contact seeming comfortable and appropriate after the wild emotional ride both women had taken. "You and me both," she agreed, after a deep exhale of her own.

"Are you gonna tell me what's up with your 'bat out of hell' imitation? As I was coming downstairs I heard you yell and saw you race out the front door."

"Oh...sorry, I hope I didn't wake Missy. I didn't mean..."

"It's okay," Amanda reassured. "Fortunately, the child can sleep through a hurricane. If Monica and her friend didn't wake her I don't think you need to worry."

"Good," Claire answered, relieved her profane outburst hadn't disturbed the little girl.

"Well?" Amanda rolled her eyes at she what was learning was Claire's closed-mouthed nature.

"Oops...sorry." Claire pointed to the curb at the end of Amanda's driveway.

Amanda looked around. Her eyebrows knit in confusion. "I don't see anything."

"I know."

"I'm sorry Claire but I still don't get..." Amanda paused and refocused her attention along the empty street. Closing her eyes, her fists balled of their own accord. *Shit! Monica, I'm gonna kill you!* Amanda winced thinking of the immaculate, new Explorer, and it's rich leather interior. Amanda crossed her fingers. *PleasePleasePlease...* "Claire, please tell me that you parked your car around the corner." Claire shook her head.

"Oh, Claire...I am sooo sorry." Amanda's voice was equal parts sadness, anger and embarrassment.

"We don't know for sure it was them." Claire offered lamely.

"Thanks. But, yes we do." Amanda began to steer Claire back into the house. "Come on inside. You need to call the police."

Claire sat down heavily on the sofa as Amanda examined what was left of her front door. After a little maneuvering she was able to push it closed enough to attach the chain lock.

"Mandy, I have really good insurance I could wait and call tomorrow."

In answer, the blonde simply walked over and handed Claire the phone. "I'm going to get that tea. Do you like honey?" Claire nodded. "Okay, then." Amanda looked pointedly at the phone. "Call."

"You didn't have to do that." Amanda sat her empty mug on the coffee table.

"It's alright. The police only needed to know it was stolen, telling them about your sister would just make things more difficult for you. Besides, all I really care about is getting Gu...err..my car back," Claire quickly added.

The smaller woman raised a questioning brow, but ignored the deepening color of Claire's cheeks. The darker woman stifled a yawn, making Amanda smile. *She fights it just like Missy.* The yawn and the light chiming of the clock reminded Amanda of exactly how late it was. Regretfully, the therapist remembered her manners. "I know you must be exhausted. I could wake Missy and drive you home or I could call you a cab?"

"Well...er...I was thinking that I should stay here tonight." Hopeful, steel blue eyes looked up through dark thick lashes and focused intently on open round green. "On the couch, of course," she quickly amended. Slightly embarrassed, the attorney was unable to maintain eye contact with the surprised blonde. Focusing on a watercolor landscape over Amanda's shoulder, Claire tried to explain. "I'm worried they may come back. And your door won't shut properly, at least partially due to me. And...well...I wouldn't sleep at my place anyway. All I'd be doing is worrying about you and Missy," she admitted. *Why do I keep doing that? I'm babbling and I sound desperate! Why don't I just throw myself at her feet and beg to sleep on her floor?*

"Are you sure?" For some unearthly reason Amanda felt the need to question Claire's decision, even though she wholeheartedly agreed with her.

Claire grinned, her confidence slightly restored. "Sure, I'm sure. As long as it won't be any trouble for you."

"Nope, no trouble for me. I'd love for you to stay." Standing, she reached out for Claire.

"Up," she directed.

Claire complied, but shot a questioning look toward her hostess as she grasped the smaller hand and stood.

"Come on," Amanda urged. "I'm taking you upstairs to find you something to sleep in."

They climbed the stairs hand-in-hand. "Then I'm tucking you into the guest room."

"But..."

"No buts. It'll be too cold to sleep on the couch with the door like it is." When she heard Claire draw a breath as if to protest, she expertly executed a preemptive strike.

"Besides, if you're intent on keeping an eye on me and Missy, it's best you stay close by. Right?"

"Humph." Claire couldn't argue.

Amanda led the taller woman into her bedroom, motioning for her to sit down on the bed.

"Have a seat. I think I have something that will fit you."

"You don't need to go to any trouble. I don't mind sleeping in this although I don't usually bother sleeping in anything at..." Claire suddenly stopped as she realized what she was going say.

Amanda literally had to bite her tongue to avoid blurting out the comment that was on its tip. *Now how am I supposed to sleep with that picture in my head?* The young doctor couldn't help herself as her eyes traveled down Claire's long legs. *She really is gorgeous. And smart. And funny. And...*

"Mandy?"

"Oops, sorry," the smaller woman giggled, embarrassed at being caught mid-fantasy. "Give me a minute."

Claire watched as Amanda disappeared into the walk-in closet. *I wonder if she's finding me as distracting as I find her?* Claire immediately dismissed the possibility. *Nah.*

Claire could hear Amanda milling around the closet and wondered what the petite woman could possibly own that would cover everything that needed covering. Claire smirked.

There are some advantages to living in a secluded house.

Amanda stood on a small stool and carefully pulled a box down from the highest shelf.

Prying open the lid, she began digging through various items until she eventually pulled out a new package of men's sized extra-large, turquoise, cotton pajamas. *These should be perfect.*

Flicking off the closet light, Amanda found Claire sitting on the bed looking at small-framed photograph on the nightstand. Amanda sat down next to Claire, their thighs and shoulders touching. Laying down the package, Amanda reached across Claire and picked up

the photograph. "That was taken about seven years ago when we were both still in college. It was before the drugs."

Claire's eyes widened. "That was Monica?"

Sighing, Amanda gently traced the faces on the photograph. "I know. It took me a few seconds to recognize her myself tonight. I've never seen her so bad."

Amanda handed Claire the photograph so she could examine it more closely. Making a quick decision, she scooted up to the head of the bed and pulled the pillows out from under the comforter. Positioning a pillow behind her back, she leaned up against the headboard and patted the space next to her. Smiling, Claire used her feet to push off her sneakers, and reclined along side her friend.

Claire took her time examining the photo. The two women within the frame looked to be the about same age, and bore a striking resemblance to each other. Each was a fresh faced, smiling, reddish blonde. And both appeared to be the very picture of youthful health and enthusiasm. How different one of those women looked today.

Gently returning the photograph to the nightstand, Claire shifted her position drawing herself even closer to her companion. Reaching down between their bodies Claire found Amanda's hand. Pulling it to her, she wrapped the smaller fingers with her own.

Green eyes fluttered shut in contentment, as the young mother eagerly soaked up the simple affection Claire was offering. For a few moments the women sat in comfortable silence, each lost in their own thoughts.

"She looked so thin and pale. I hope she's not sick." A soft and anguished voice broke the silence.

Amanda didn't have to spell out what she was wondering. Track marks on nearly translucent skin told their own story, and spoke of a danger beyond the drugs themselves. Claire squeezed the hand resting in hers.

"We used to be real sisters, friends who swapped stories and dreams," Amanda continued. "She's only 10 months older than I am. We were even in the same grade in school." Amada let out a shaky breath. "But...we...well...I guess we started drifting apart in college. I knew I wanted to go to grad school, so I spent a lot of time studying and keeping my grades up. It was the first time in our lives that we couldn't spend a lot of time together."

Amanda's eyes grew misty. "I guess she needed that...more than I realized. She started hanging around with these...these...I dunno. They were just trouble. By the time I finished my B.A. and was ready to move on, our relationship was reduced to visits at family gatherings and the holidays. We didn't really talk anymore. Not like we used to. And it was about that time that I accepted my sexuality...we had talked about it before. I wanted her to accept it... to accept me as I am. But...well...she just couldn't."

Claire's own chest ached as recognized the self-loathing and disgust in her friend's voice but didn't interrupt. Blue eyes closed in empathy.

"That picture was taken during my last spring break before graduation. But even then, she was starting to get in trouble. She had already dropped out of school and a few weeks after that picture was taken she moved in with one of the men she met, only God knows how or where."

"Over the next few years things just got worse. She was arrested a couple of times. She stole things from our parents, from me. Once she and Jody really got into it, and had to be physically separated. Somewhere along the line she went from a drug user to an addict." Amanda pulled back their joint hands examining the differences in size and color and shape, as she spoke.

"Anyway...about two years ago...I hadn't seen her for a while, although I always knew she kept with touch with our parents, even if it was just for money...she showed up pregnant. She said she didn't know who the father was." Amanda shrugged. "I suppose considering the men Monica always seemed to be with, none of us really wanted to know, so we didn't ask anymore about it. For a while she wanted to keep the baby, and raise it on her own. She even tried to get her act together...stop the partying and drugs and constant stream of men...but it didn't last long."

"About a month before Missy was born she finally decided that she wasn't in a position to be a mother. She knew she couldn't even take care of herself."

A faint smile graced Amanda's lips. "Then one day she asked me if I had considered adopting the baby." The smile turned wry. "Which I had...but I hadn't mentioned it because I knew how Monica felt about my 'lifestyle'...and I guess I didn't think she'd want the baby to be with me." Amanda's brow knit in confusion. "It was really weird." She turned to face Claire. "One day, out of the blue, she said love was the most important thing and that she was sure the baby would have that with me."

Claire didn't try to stop the affectionate smile that transformed her worried features.

"She was right about that, Mandy."

Returning the look, Amanda sighed again. "After Missy was born things went downhill again for Monica. She started disappearing for days, then weeks at a time. Everyone tried to help...again. But she...well...nothing worked. Tonight was the first time I've seen her in over a year. She must have checked herself out of the rehab clinic my parents talked her into." Sad eyes pinned Claire. "She looked really bad didn't she?"

Claire nodded. "I'm sorry, Mandy." *Shit! I don't want to make her feel worse! But I'm not going to lie to her either.* "Even without comparing her to the kid in that photograph," she pointed toward the nightstand, "yeah, I'd say she looked pretty bad."

Amanda sensed her friend's distress. "It's okay. You're not telling me anything I don't already know," she assured. "I should have done more to help her, spent the time she needed, I...I...I don't know how things every got this far out of control. I should..."

"Stop it."

Amanda looked up in surprise. "But..."

"Just stop it," Claire interrupted. "This isn't your fault. None of it." Claire quelled her rising anger and consciously gentled her voice. "Mandy, your sister isn't a drug addict because you wanted to do well in college or because you're gay. She made her own choices."

"You don't understand, Claire." When the lawyer opened her mouth to speak Amanda silenced her by pressing two fingers against her lips. Looking up into determined azure eyes, she pressed on. "Even though she's older I've always sort of taken care of her. She's always been a little...reckless, I guess. Even as little kids my Mom expected me to watch out for her, to keep her out of trouble. She was depending on me and I let her down. I let everyone down." When she finished she pulled back her fingers, her eyes unconsciously drifting the room next door that held her sleeping daughter.

"Amanda." The low, solemn timber of Claire's voice drew back Amanda's attention. "It doesn't matter what everyone expected. That wasn't your job. It's not right to put that responsibility on a child or even a young woman. You're not your sister's keeper." A large hand comfortingly stroked Amanda's thigh. "You must know that."

Nodding, Amanda reached up and lightly rubbed her temple in an effort to forestall her impending headache. "I do know that...I mean...my head knows what you're saying is true but...for some reason my heart just can't seem to accept it."

"I know," Claire softly replied.

The compassion and understanding Claire offered were more than Amanda could bear. It was overwhelming. The tears that had been threatening to fall throughout Amanda's story finally spilled over. "What am I gonna do?" Tears turned to sobs. "She's my sister but I'm...I'm not just going to tu...turn over my daughter as though I was babysitting these past two years," she fiercely choked.

Jesus, I am so bad at this. Once again at a loss for words the attorney simply held her crying friend. *You don't have to deal with this alone, Mandy, not if you don't want to.* Claire gently stroked the pale head tucked under her chin until the sobbing slowly receded. Claire inhaled deeply, committing to memory the faint scent of strawberry shampoo and light musk perfume. Snuggling closer, Amanda found herself exhausted and craving sleep, but unwilling to break the physical and emotion connection that had been so quickly forged.

In an exercise of sheer will power, Claire eased away from her companion.

"Mandy, we should really get some sleep." Claire reached up with warm palms and cupped wet cheeks, using her thumbs, she gently wiped away the last of Amanda's tears. *God, I hate it when she cries.*

"You're right," Amanda acknowledged with a snuffle, already missing the contact. Arching her back, she stretched strained, tired, muscles. Leaning forward, she scooted down to the foot of the bed and retrieved the forgotten package. "I found these, they'll be a little big, but they should work."

Claire curiously fingered the new package of men's pajamas. A dark eyebrow lifted in question.

Amanda snorted at the look of jealousy that flickered behind beautiful eyes. "I bought them for my Dad's birthday next week."

"Then I can't..."

"Of course you can. I was thinking about getting him something else anyway. Besides," she weakly teased "I have a sneaky suspicion they'll you'll look a lot better on you."

Claire grinned at smaller woman's improving mood. "Why Amanda, are you flirting with me?"

Amanda pushed herself off the bed and held out a hand to her friend. "Claire, I'm way too tired to flirt. I'm sure you'd look fantastic in anything." Amanda's eyes naturally raked over Claire body. "Or nothing...for that matter." *Uh..oh. Did I just say that last part out loud?*

Claire's eyebrows shot straight up and were lost behind dark bangs. This time both women blushed.

Swallowing her embarrassment Amanda wiggled the fingers on her outstretched hand.

"Come on, counselor." Grasping the strong hand, Claire allowed herself to be hauled to her feet. "I need to introduce you to my futon."

Amanda shifted as she tried to control her breathing. After several rapid blinks, her eyes began to adjust to the darkness of the room. She glanced over at the large glowing numbers on her alarm clock. *4:48 a.m.... God, did all that happen just a few hours ago?* With a groan, she flopped back down on her pillow, exhaling loudly as her shoulders hit the bed, noting that the sheets were damp with perspiration. She turned away from the glaring numbers wondering why the old but familiar nightmare had returned. *I don't need to wonder. I know exactly why. Is unbelievable stress a good enough reason? Someone else's problems I can handle. My own... a snort... that's a whole other ballgame.* Closing her eyes, the familiar images played for an audience of one.

"Move your ass, Tubby! You too Greer. I expect both you at the next obstacle pronto!"

"Yessss Drill Sergeant!" both women barked in unison.

The rest of the platoon was at least one or two obstacles ahead, leaving the stragglers alone. Amanda, was in the unfortunate position of squad leader, and was forced to stay behind until the last man was over the wall. Although, she acknowledged, she was in no hurry to tackle the next obstacle. The last man was Pvt. Jordowski, or Tubby, as she was cruelly nicknamed.

"Come on Jordowski, we've gotta move it," Amanda impatiently urged. Her breath creating small puffs of smoke in the cold pre-dawn air.

"I know, I know," grunted Jordowski. "I'm trying."

Amanda hit the wall full stride, grabbing the rope and swallowing down her own nervousness. The "wall" was a tall wooden frame with roped netting on two sides. At the top was a 4-foot wide wooden platform you had to throw yourself onto and crawl across to begin the 20-foot descent down the other side.

"Confidence course my ass. This sucks!" Amanda mumbled. Her gloved hands were slipping on the icy ropes. She squeezed harder, feeling her moist palms begin to blister under the cold leather gloves. After a several strong tugs, and a conscience effort not to think about what she was doing, Amanda was near the top.

"Don't look down... don't look down," she silently chanted, her chest slightly burning from the cold February air.

"Jordowski, where are you?" Amanda yelled as she felt Jordowski hit the ropes hard beneath her. The netting jerked and slightly swayed. "That's it, we're almost there," she encouraged.

The sun was just peaking over the horizon and through the trees that surrounded the course. The thin layer ice that coated the top platform was starting to melt, increasing its slickness. And the sand that had been sprinkled over the platform had long since been knocked away by the struggling bodies crawling over the top.

A sense of relief flooded through her as she reached the top of the wall. "Thank God, I can't go any higher." Slowly, she leaned forward as far as possible and reached across the slick, sun-streaked platform. "Damn it. I can't reach," she panted. Not for the first time, Amanda cursed her lineage, which had thoughtlessly failed to provide long arms.

I can do this. I have to. There's no other way down, she mused. Knees and elbows scraped against cold wood, until...finally...she was able to reach the rope that lined the edge of the other side of the platform. "Yes!!!" She hissed in victory.

Amanda grabbed the rope so tightly, that the ice crystals on the surrounding platform cracked away. "The hard part's almost over, Jordowski," she shouted she slid her body over the edge to the opposite side. "You're almost there!"

Logically, Amanda knew that this "confidence builder" wasn't intended as torture.

Everyone else had managed it with only a few mumbled curses. But her fear of heights had turned this simple exercise, into a nearly nauseating experience.

Two more arms lengths and Amanda was now facing Jordowski through the net. Amanda saw Jordowski glance down. Panic-stricken murky brown eyes met and held green. Amanda could see the pounding of Jordowski pulse in her neck. She was panting heavily and looked slightly dazed. *I can't believe it. She's even more afraid than I am.* The sight of this panic stricken young woman forced Amanda to forget her own fears.

"It'll be okay. I'll help you. You won't fall," Amanda encouraged.

"I..I..I don't think I can move," stuttered Jordowski.

Amanda was now back at the top of the platform reaching across. "See? Look. You can grab my hand," she soothed. "Robin, I know you can do this." Amanda's voice was soft but commanding.

The unusual use of Jordowski's first name and Amanda's confident tone seemed to snap Jordowski out her fear-induced trance. Once again, she focused on Amanda.

"Ok Amanda, I'm coming." With a deep breath, and one more pull, Jordowski was reaching across platform towards Amanda. Amanda's smaller gloved hand tightly clasped Jordowski's. Bathed in bright sunlight, both women's eyes met again. This time conveying relief and accomplishment.

"I'm sorry Amanda. I should have known I could trust..."

Before she could react Amanda felt the glove pull off her hand. Jordowski's boot slipped off the edge of the platform, as she frantically tried to grab hold.

"AMANDAAAAA!!!!"

"HOLD ON!"

Amanda lunged back across the platform trying to regrab Jordowski's hand. In a panic, Jordowski reached back towards her, but she was already slipping. She watched helplessly as Jordowski began to fall.

"NOOOO!!!," choked Amanda, eyes wide with disbelief.

Immediately, Jordowski's boot caught on the netting. She felt the strong jerk of the netting as Jordowski's body fell back, below the level of the tangled boot. For a brief instant Jordowski hung head down, suspended by her boot. Muddy, panic filled eyes met equally terrified green, one final time.

Almost instantly, Jordowski's boot slipped from the netting. Now she was free-falling... without a sound. Amanda watched in horror as Jordowski dropped 20 feet, headfirst.

Turning her head, she closed her eyes tightly as she heard the sickening crunch of Jordowski's body on the wood chips below. *No..no..noooooo. She's gotta be okay, right?*

Despite not really wanting to know the truth, Amanda looked down to see Robin. Her body was twisted at an unnatural angle, Amanda's black leather glove still gripped tightly in her hand.

A warm tear trailed its way down Amanda's cheek onto the cool blue pillowcase. "I'm so sorry Robin," she whispered in an anguished voice. And for a moment, Amanda allowed the anguish of past mistakes, and the fear of future pain to engulf her.

The therapist felt an almost overwhelming urge to join Claire, and surround herself with the strong comforting arms that had kept her from falling apart after her sister's traumatic visit. Not wanting to disturb her friend, she ruthlessly pushed away the urge. Closing her eyes, her thoughts began to wander and become fuzzy.

In the stage where the mind is equal parts awake and asleep, the past began merging with the present, and old insecurities blended with new worries. She wanted to run, to hide from the crushing responsibility she had for a small, pale haired child. But her spirit rallied, and Amanda told herself this time she wouldn't fail. She couldn't. She would do whatever was necessary to keep Missy safe and happy, and her family intact. *Besides*, her heart softly reminded, *you don't have to this alone, not anymore.* Her resolve firmed, Amanda began to relax.

Her consciousness drifted to a more recent occurrence where an outstretched hand pulled her to safety and comfort and warmth, and she allowed the sweet memory to wash over her and lull her to back to sleep. A tall, blue-eyed attorney, and a perfect kiss, consumed her last waking thoughts.

"Wow, this is your house? I knew I should have gone to law school," Amanda joked as she slowly pulled the car up the long secluded driveway. Claire had wanted to call a cab. But after what had happened the night before, at the very least she owed the woman a ride home.

"That's a laugh. I didn't get this because of law school. That rich lawyer perception is a just myth. I guarantee you're doing better than the average attorney our age." *Our age? She must be around my age to have gone through all that school. But she doesn't look like she's out of her early twenties. I'll have to ask about that.*

Claire looked out at the property and tried to remember how she felt the first time she saw it. "I received a modest trust when I turned twenty-five. But it was some extremely lucky investments that allowed me to buy this place a few years ago. I guess it is kind of big for one person."

Amanda looked out with admiration. "Remind me to get the name of your stock broker." Pale green eyes traveled over the beautifully sculpted bushes and beds of colorful tulips. "It's really beautiful, Claire."

Noticing where Amanda was looking, Claire smiled. "Thanks. I did those myself."

"You're a gardener?" The therapist asked, clearly delighted. "That's great! Maybe sometime you could give me a few pointers. I think I have a black thumb. I've already killed a Chia Pet and several, supposedly indestructible, cacti."

The larger woman chuckled and nodded eagerly. "Any time, Mandy."

Claire unbuckled her seatbelt and slid out of the Audi, enjoying the fresh scent of pine that always greeted her when she came home. Looking down, she saw that Amanda and Missy were still buckled in the car. Sticking her head into open passenger window, she smiled at Missy, who was tightly clutching an already bedraggled looking Elmo. "How about a tour?"

Amanda smiled and looked back at her daughter. "Wadda you say Missy, you wanna see Claire's house?"

"No!" the child exclaimed.

Claire stepped back, clearly disappointed. She shuffled uncomfortably. "Well okay, no problem. If you don't want to...I mean you don't have to come..."

"Claire, wait!" Amanda quickly exited the car and walked over to the taller woman. "She didn't mean it like that," Amanda explained.

"But she said no."

Amanda rolled her eyes. "Come on, I'll show you." Grabbing Claire's hand she dragged her back to the car. Both women poked their heads through the passenger window to observe the happily playing little girl. Amanda shook her head and sighed. "Watch." Snaking out her hand, she tickled the tiny blonde's foot to get her attention. In a cheerful voice she began to question her daughter.

"Missy would you like to come outside and play?"

"No!" the child grunted.

"Would you like to stay in the car?"

"No!" she repeated.

Claire stared at the child, and Amanda, in wide-eyed fascination.

"Are you being a bad girl?"

"No!"

"Are you being a good girl?"

"No!"

"Would you like a delicious hot fudge sundae?"

"N..." the child hesitated, and Claire wondered what Amanda was going to do if the answer was yes. But after a second of hesitation, the child predictably decided to maintain her willful course. "No!" she proclaimed.

Both women ducked their heads out the car. Amanda turned, hands on her hips, and looked at Claire. "Satisfied?"

"Uhh...does she always do that?" Claire inquired.

"No!" Amanda imitated, and both women burst out laughing. "I was only partially joking about the terrible two's coming early. She doesn't really mean it. But I'm quite sure she's enjoying herself saying it." Poking out her bottom lip, Amanda stepped forward and laid her palms flat against Claire's stomach. She batted round, innocent eyes. "But I'd like a tour, nice lady."

"Okay, okay." Claire threw her hands up in mock surrender. "I can't resist that very sad..." cocking her head to the side, she arched an eyebrow, "very manipulative," the eyebrow dropped and she smiled warmly, "very pretty face."

Amanda grinned broadly. "Why even try?" she impishly replied. "Self denial starves the soul." Opening Missy's door, she began unbuckling the car seat.

Claire shrugged. *You're right about that, Mandy. And what I can't bear to deny myself is you.* "Well, since it's already been established that I can't resist you, would you like to go car shopping with me on Tuesday?"

Amanda frowned at the reminder of Claire's stolen car. "I am so sorry about that, Claire. Maybe the police will find your car and you won't need to get another?" she offered hopefully.

"You're an actual optimist aren't you?" Claire watched as Amanda continued to struggle with the car seat.

"I try," Amanda growled, as she finally tugged the buckle free.

"Well, I don't feel like waiting around to see if the cops find my car. And as much as I like the idea of you and Missy chauffeuring me around town, I might as well take advantage of my time off and look for a replacement. Wadda ya say?"

Amanda chewed her bottom lip trying to remember her schedule for Tuesday. "I don't have any appointments after lunch, so how about you pick me up at the clinic at noon?"

With Missy in her arms, Amanda turned to face Claire.

Claire slipped off her mirrored Ray Bans so Amanda could see the narrowing of her eyes.

"Verrrry funny Amanda," she purred.

"Oops, sorry, I forgot." Green eyes twinkled, and Claire found herself mesmerized by tiny gold flecks that were amplified by the bright morning sun. "Why don't I pick you up around 12:30 p.m.?"

How far away is Tuesday? "Deal."

As soon as two tiny feet hit the ground, Missy squealed with delight and bolted toward the wooded area that surrounded Claire's home. "Missy's right," Claire announced.

Looking up into the clear blue sky, she took a deep breath and extended her arms as if trying to absorb the light itself. "It's too beautiful to be inside this morning. I'll show you the outside first."

Amanda laughed softly and nodded, silently acknowledging that the darker woman's exuberant mood was downright infectious. In spite of herself, and knowing that most likely trouble lay ahead, the young therapist was looking forward to the days to come in a way she never had. Donning her own Ray Bans, she happily grasped Claire's hand as they trekked after the giggling toddler.

Claire smiled to herself, feeling a little giddy as the scent of Amanda's perfume still clung to her clothes. *This feels great, she marveled. It's like a high, but without the booze. I haven't felt this happy in...a really long time.* Claire sat down on her bed and began undressing. As she slipped off her blouse, her mind traveled back more than ten years, to college.

The experience of first love was both exhilarating and heartbreaking. It was one of the few times Claire had truly felt connected to another human being.

Claire, by nature, was a loner. She had very few friends and wasn't close to her parents. In the Easton household your career came first. She learned to accept the lack of attention. And despite it, she appeared to thrive, almost not noticing the loss... almost. College was the young woman's first time away from the security of the nest, but still, she was excited. Although her first two years of school were largely unremarkable, it was during this time that she became aware of her own sexual preferences. It was a discovery that she accepted with remarkable ease. It was, however, a revelation she chose not to share with her parents. Surely they wouldn't notice. Claire wasn't even sure they would care.

Claire met Sarah in an accounting course. They were both business majors and wading their way through Indiana University's infamous semester known as "A Core," an advanced set of classes designed to weed out the last of the weak business majors in the University's well-known business school.

The cheerful blond Sarah took an interest in the somewhat broody Claire. After classes, they began walking around the campus together and talking. Soon, they started going to lunch and dinner together. Claire felt wanted. Someone actually sought her out and wanted to be her friend.

The two young women began confiding in each other. Aside from Mark, Claire never really had a friend. And other than the odd nanny, Sarah was her first female friend. This experience was groundbreaking in a way. The friendship began to deepen as the students spent increasing amounts of time together. It became a nightly ritual for she and Sarah to talk on the phone before bed. When they were together, they read each other stories out loud.

Claire realized that she was falling in with love Sarah, although she wasn't quite sure what that would mean. It was obvious that Sarah was interested in men, but she gave mixed signals to a confused Claire. Claire embraced her own feelings and found a happy medium in her mind between a friendship and a romance. It didn't matter to Claire that Sarah didn't return her feelings outright. Finally, she felt like she belonged to something and someone. She told Sarah she loved her and didn't qualify it or label it as platonic or romantic love. For now, love was simply enough and Claire basked in its happiness for nearly a year.

Gradually, however, the young brunette found herself wanting more. But the more she wanted the more Sarah appeared to pull away. Finally, the young woman's nagging fears of loss started to become a reality. The relationship was suffering.

Sarah told Claire that she was suffocating her and began a long string of romances that left Claire feeling excluded and jealous. She blamed the men in Sarah's life for keeping them apart. The almost pathetic attempts Claire made to hang on to the relationship backfired badly. She desperately wanted to keep Sarah as a friend, but even that seemed impossible now.

One night, in a devastating moment of clarity, the reality of the situation hit her, and Claire found herself in almost unbearable pain. She saw her own jealousy for what it was...a waste. The problem wasn't the men in her friend's life but her own feelings for her friend, feelings that couldn't be reciprocated. She was hurt and embarrassed and decided to salvage what was left of her pride.

She and Sarah never discussed it and Claire cut off all contact with her for the sake of her own sanity. But would be years before Claire would reconcile herself with her own loss of control.

In the years following college, Claire had a few discreet and decidedly impersonal flings. Oddly, it was her relationship with Mark that finally allowed her to push beyond painful

memories and begin looking toward the future. Mark truly accepted and understood Claire. In his eyes, Claire saw her own relationship with Sarah mirrored. She knew Mark's affection for her went beyond friendship. But while Sarah had pushed her away, Claire made sure Mark knew she loved him. And although the relationship wasn't everything Mark wanted, it was still satisfying...for both of them. Mark accepted the level of intimacy Claire could offer with an amount of grace and dignity that Claire couldn't help but admire.

Marko...I should call you tonight, she mused. Claire's frown disappeared as her thoughts left the past and firmly planted themselves in the present.

Amanda turned off the ignition and sat staring at her parent's white, two-story Tudor home. *I can do this! I won't let her make me feel guilty. Claire's right. This is NOT my fault. I'm tired of taking the blame for something I had no control over. She's gone too far this time. I can't...no, I won't just let it slide.*

The determined blonde marched up the front sidewalk and lifted her hand to knock. She paused. Lowering her hand, she opened the door and entered her childhood home. The familiar, almost comforting scent of wood polish and cinnamon did nothing to quell her anger.

The house was immaculately kept, as always. Great detail was paid to assuring that all the furnishing maintained the 'proper' look. Nothing out of theme was permitted, no family photographs, no mementos, nothing. It was only after several years of begging that two young girls talked their mother into allowing a small black and white television in the den. It was, of course, hidden behind the doors of a cherry wood cabinet.

"MOTHER!!" she bellowed. "I need to see you!"

An elderly, slightly husky man slowly made his way out the den. Standing in the doorway slightly behind Amanda, he removed his bifocals. Leaning against the wooden frame, he stood for a moment, silently watching his youngest daughter's rage.

"MOTHER I KNOW YOU'RE HOME! YOUR CAR IS PARKED IN THE DRIVEWAY!"

After he'd seen enough, he gently cleared his throat. Amanda spun toward the sound, her demeanor instantly softening as she recognized its source.

"Hello, Pumpkin," greeted the rich voice.

She looked up into her own eyes. "Hello Daddy," she whispered. Amanda stepped back trying to hold onto her anger in her father's presence, something she never quite managed to accomplish. "Were you part of this?"

The old man didn't need further explanation. He had expected to see his fiery child sooner. "You know better than that, honey. I was working late that evening. I had stayed at school to grade some exams." His voice echoed with regret. "I..I'm sorry. I wouldn't have let anyone take her."

Amanda dropped her eyes. "I know, Daddy." Looking around, she let her anger build again. "Where is she?" She began to pace.

"Don't be too hard on her, Pumpkin. Monica called her at work and made arrangements to come by and pick up Melissa. But your mother was upstairs when she actually arrived. Monica had Gretchen get her the baby. Mom didn't even see Monica until she and...and... that little troll of hers came back a couple of hours later. By that time I was home." The gray haired man sighed. "Amanda, she nearly had a heart attack when she saw your sister. I don't think she would have let her take Melissa if she'd seen her first."

"Are you telling me that Monica and "Chucky" waltzed in here and simply took Missy from the housekeeper...with Mother's permission?" she asked incredulously.

"Yes, Amanda. That is exactly what your father is saying." The icy voice caused chills to run down Amanda's spine, as she turned to face her mother.

"Violet..." the old man's voice beseeched.

"Hush Harold," the strawberry-blonde scolded. "Go back to the study and finish working on your papers. I'll continue this discussion with Amanda." Though nearly twenty years his junior, Amanda's mother commanded her father with negligent ease. As always, he obeyed.

Regretful green eyes flashed over his daughter. Frowning, he turned on his heel and ambled back into the study.

"Now dear, I take it you're not pleased with my decision concerning Missy."

Amanda's temper was at its breaking point. "Not pleased doesn't quite cover it, Mother. What in the HELL do you think you were doing?" she challenged.

"Don't swear Amanda," the older woman chided. "It's so unlady like."

With that final censure, the young blonde's temper snapped. "Are you insane?" she yelled. Marching up until she was nose to nose with her mother, she continued. "Do you know what could have happened when you turned over Missy to Monica and that little pig of a man she married?"

Her mother gasped. "Are you certain she actually married him, dear. I was hoping..."

"MOTHER! Aren't you paying attention?" Amanda's hands gestured wildly. "For once this is not about Monica. This is about Missy and how I trusted you to look after her. I should have known something was up when you asked her to spend the night."

Violet brought her hand to her hips in a gesture so familiar Amanda winced. "And just what would you have me do, young lady. Monica wanted to see the child. How could I deny her that? After all, she is her mother."

Amanda closed her eyes and counted to ten, regaining some measure of control before speaking. "How many times are we going to have this same discussion? Monica is Missy's Aunt, not her mother. Why can't you just accept that?"

"You may want to believe that Amanda, but no judge can make it true. Monica may have problems but she is still Missy's mother and..."

"This is not about what some judge did. It's about who loves Missy, and cares for her, and is raising her, while Monica is off shooting up dope. I AM that child's mother. The fact that I didn't give birth to her, has very little to do with it." Amanda tried to control her shaking hands while trying to reason with her mother. "Mother, Monica shouldn't even be around her. You saw her, she's..."

"And just what are you doing around her?" Violet's voice was laced with accusation.

Amanda paused, wondering how conversations with her mother always got derailed. "What are you talking about?" she asked confused.

Violet crossed her arms and turned her back on her daughter. "Nothing."

Amanda walked around her mother, forcing her to face her. "It's not nothing. I want to know what you meant by that." Tears were brimming in her mother's brown eyes. *She's crying? I've never seen her cry, not even when Grandma or Grandpa died, never...*

"It's not right, Amanda," the older woman whispered.

"What's not right?" The younger woman's mind was reeling. She had no idea what her mother was talking about and she was on the verge of tears herself.

"With you, Missy has no chance at having a father or a normal life."

Amanda sat down, stunned. It took a moment for her to find her voice. "You're suddenly upset that I'm raising Missy and I'm gay?"

"I've accepted your choices, Amanda. But I've come to realize that Missy is too young to be subjected to them."

The younger woman closed her eyes and angrily wiped away tears of frustration. *Why is my life going backwards?* Rising, she faced her mother again. "My 'choice' as you call it, was no choice at all. I've always been this way; it just took me a while to get the nerve up to tell you. I can't imagine why," she added sarcastically. "I...I thought we worked this out years ago. You never said anything during the adoption proceedings and now I'm supposed to be some sort of perverted influence over my daughter? Is Monica the one who helped you with this new revelation?"

Violet didn't respond, but Amanda could tell from the look on her face she'd guessed correctly. "What exactly do you think I'm doing in front of Missy?"

"That's none of my business, Amanda. I shouldn't have asked you that."

"That much is true. But let me put your mind at ease. I'm not picking up biker chicks in dike bars and having sex with them in front of Missy's crib."

SMACK!! The sound of the vicious slap echoed through the large room. Amanda stood in shocked silence. Lifting a hand she touched her stinging cheek.

Violet's voice quivered and her tears flowed freely. "That's enough, Amanda." The older woman was shaking. "No matter what mistakes I've made, I'm still your mother and I will not have you speak to me that way again." Without a backward glance, she turned and walked up the stairs. "This discussion is over."

Amanda watched her mother until she disappeared behind the curving banister. Digging her keys out of her jean pockets she left the house in a haze of tears. Slamming the front door behind her, she practically ran to her car. *FUCK!* "That went well," she mumbled as she started the ignition. "Now I get to go have it out with Jody." She pushed hard on the accelerator and the car smoothly shifted into second gear. "No wonder I hate Mondays."

"See you soon," Amanda called after the teenager who was already furiously searching his pockets for his cigarettes. It was 4:30 p.m. and she had just finished with her last appointment for the day. After the conversation with her mother, she'd nearly cancelled the remainder of her appointments. But she'd promised herself long ago that her patients would never suffer because of her personal life. Besides, she couldn't put off talking with Jody any longer. The two best friends had been little more than civil with each other, since their argument the week before. *This ridiculous tension has gone on long enough.* Amanda couldn't fathom why Jody was still so upset. Over the years the friends had argued many times. But never had the harsh words or hurt feelings dragged out this long. Amanda gently knocked on her partner's office door.

"Come in."

She entered the office and closed the door behind her. Jody was pounding away on her laptop and glanced up to see her friend sitting in the chair in front of her desk. "Just a second, Amanda. I'm almost finished." A few more furious keystrokes and Jody ejected her disk, and snapped shut the cover.

"Elvis is running out of juice again," Amanda remarked, as she watched the lethargic swaying of leather covered hips and blue suede shoes.

"I know. Damn thing goes through batteries like you can't believe. Did you need something?"

Amanda scrunched her eyebrows together. "I didn't know I needed a reason to talk to you."

Jody tossed down the pencil she had been twirling between her fingers. "That's not what I meant and you know it, Amanda."

"I know, I'm sorry. I guess today...no this weekend and today have been a real bitch."

Jody leaned forward, eager to cast blame on Claire. "Did Claire do something?"

"No." Amanda shook her head. "Actually, she was the best thing about this weekend. She was terrific, actually."

Annoyed, Jody leaned back in her chair. "What happened then?"

"Do you have a while?" Amanda asked wryly.

"You, my friend, can have all the time you like. I'm finished for the day."

Amanda took a deep breath. "You asked for it." And she proceeded to relate the events surrounding her sister's reemergence and her confrontation with her mother.

Jody remained largely silent except for an inappropriate snort when Amanda revealed that Monica had stolen Claire's car, and a concerned "are you okay?" when she detailed her mother's physical reaction to her admittedly crass declarations. When Amanda finished, Jody got up out of her chair and leaned forward over the desk, offering her friend a heart-felt hug.

"Shit, Amanda, why are you here at all? If I were you I'd be home licking my wounds."

"I didn't want to go home until I'd had a chance to talk with you first. Are we okay?" the blonde asked hopefully.

Jody ruffled her own unruly brown locks and focused serious dark eyes on Amanda. "I don't like her Amanda. And I won't pretend otherwise. I think a pair of pretty, long legs has turned your head and you're not seeing her for what she is."

Amanda's temper flared. "And just what is she?"

"She's an obsessed attorney who thinks she's Jane Friggin' Bond! You said yourself she came here looking for information. She thinks we're somehow involved with those cases being tossed out of court...and probably Aaron's death too. Doesn't that even bother you! What makes you think she's not just trying to worm some 'top secret' information out of you?" Jody taunted.

"She's not," Amanda stated firmly. *Don't ask me how I'm sure, Jody. I just know that I am.*

"How can you be so sure?"

Figures. "I just am." Amanda growled. The smaller woman ignored her friend's other questions and went on the offensive. "Look, I don't appreciate you screening my dates!" The volume of her voice increased with each word. "I wouldn't expect you to live with that!"

"You wouldn't, huh?" Jody smirked. "I seem to recall a certain young blonde psychologist who told me Chester was a self-centered pig that would cheat on me and break my heart...AND THAT WAS ON MY WEDDING DAY!"

"Oh yeah...I forgot about that." Amanda couldn't stop the tiny smile that edged its way across her lips. But she was, just barely, able to stop herself from saying 'I told you so.' The dark haired woman crossed her arms. "I'll bet you forgot, you little shit. And don't even think about saying I told you so."

Amanda innocently looked up at Jody as though the idea had never entered her mind. And she almost...almost pulled it off...

Both women had just begun laughing when Iris burst into Jody's office, leaving the door swinging back and forth in her wake. Before Amanda or Jody could speak Iris held up a hand in warning.

"I have had enough of you two!" The small redhead pointed a finger at Jody. "I want to see in my office in two minutes!" Jody's eyes widened. As abruptly as Iris entered, she turned and began marching out. When she reached the door she turned back and pointed at Amanda. "And when I finish with Jody, you're next." With that, the older therapist shut the door behind her.

Jody and Amanda looked at each other. "Uh...oh," they muttered simultaneously. Jody gulped and slowly made her way out from behind her desk.

"Goodbye, Jody." Amanda winked.

"Bye." Jody said weakly. The muscular brunette walked out of her office looking very much like a schoolgirl that had been sent to the principal's office. Amanda would have laughed, if it weren't for the fact that she felt the exact same way.

The young doctor plopped down on Jody's loveseat and awaited her fate. "Elvis," she closed her eyes, "is it still just Monday?"

Jody took a deep breath before she knocked on Iris' closed door.

"Come in, Jody," came the muffled voice.

Jody slinked in with a contrite expression and closed the door before she leaned against the wall and waited for Iris.

"What's going on with you two?" asked Iris, her voice gentler than before.

Jody shifted and looked at the ground for a moment. "Amanda is having some problems," she replied.

"Just Amanda?" Iris raised an eyebrow.

"Well, yeah. Her sister paid a visit and wants Missy back. She's understandably upset," continued Jody, not ready to share any blame.

Iris looked at her in the eye for a long moment. Jody just sighed and looked away.

"I don't like this Claire person, Iris," the younger woman finally admitted.

"Now, let's talk about that. Is she causing you two a lot of friction?"

Jody told Iris about the incident at Origami and about their conversation today. "...so I'm not too pleased with Jane Bond, attorney at law," concluded Jody.

"Don't you think Amanda can take care of herself?" Iris shifted in her chair.

Jody slowly nodded her head and leaned back against the wall again. "Of course she can. Amanda is perfectly capable of taking care of herself, it's just this Claire ...well... She's dazzled by this lawyer's good looks... she's been charmed."

The younger woman stared at Iris for a moment, waiting for her to say something. Iris was silent, but blue gray eyes meet Jody's. "So you approve of the relationship, Iris?" she asked confused.

Iris smiled. "It's not for me to approve or disapprove of Amanda's romantic relationships."

Jody felt some anger surfacing. "Don't therapize me, Iris, I'm not one of your damn clients. What are you getting at?" she snapped.

"I don't think I am giving you therapy, Jody. You know me better than that. I'm talking to you colleague to colleague and friend to friend. What is really bothering you?"

Jody closed her eyes and rubbed them with irritation. "I'm sorry I snapped. You're right. It's just, well, I don't like the lawyer," Jody said sheepishly.

"Why don't you like her?"

"The investigation thing for one, she thought we were somehow involved in some sort of scheme," Jody persisted.

Iris nodded. "Didn't she explain why?"

"Yeah, she did. And...well...quite honestly, it made sense. I would be suspicious too, I suppose..." Jody admitted as she nervously began pacing along the shiny wood floor.

"Amanda really likes her. I've never seen her this way before. It's just that..." she abruptly stopped when she finally realized what was happening. Closing her eyes with realization, Jody expelled a tortured groan. "I'm jealous of Claire, aren't I. Shit! I didn't realize until now. I've never felt this way when she was with other women. But this one is

different. What if she's the 'one' for Amanda?" Jody looked up with anguished eyes. "I don't want to lose my best friend," she spoke quietly.

Iris nodded in understanding. "Yeah, it's a scary thought. It hit me too. I don't want any changes in our set up or routine. But there's no evidence that Amanda is going to drop everything. She's not the type to give up her identity, even for something as important as love. Maybe you're overreacting just a bit?" Iris queried gently.

"And here I am giving her more grief when she has this whole thing with her sister. I need to apologize."

"She needs some time off. This thing with her sister won't go away easily. She isn't doing herself or her clients any favor when she's in this state. We can help her out by doing all her incoming assessments and testing," suggested Iris.

"Yeah, that should help out since she'll only see her regular clients. I'm gonna go and apologize to her."

"When you're done, why don't you both come up so I can let her know about our proposal?"

"Are you gonna bust her chops too?" Jody inquired wryly.

"Nope. I have a feeling you've been doing enough of that lately." The younger woman blanched at the unflattering but accurate assessment of her behavior.

Shaking her head in agreement Jody left the office. "We'll be back in a few, Iris," she called over her shoulder.

Jody entered her office expecting to see Amanda milling around among her treasures. The blonde seemed to have a never-ending fascination with her 'junk' as she called it. Instead, she saw a pale head slumped against the tall back of the love seat. Jody approached Amanda quietly and stood over her sleeping friend. *Poor thing. I'd like to wring Monica's neck. She always was a brat!* Jody smiled affectionately at her partner.

"Well, Amanda, I guess I'm gonna have to get used to sharing your time. That is, unless that stupid lawyer finds a way to mess up a good thing," she murmured.

"Who's stupid?" came the sleepy response, as Amanda shifted around, tipping her head back into a ferocious yawn.

"Nobody." A pause. "Yet," she added. Amanda was too tired to even try to understand Jody's cryptic statement. She shifted over as the larger woman plopped down next to her.

Amanda laid her hand on her Jody's knee. "Was Iris mad?" she asked, hoping it wasn't true. She hated the idea of disappointing the older woman.

"Naaah." Jody drew out the word. "She just wondered what was up with us lately."

"What did you tell her?" Amanda asked, curious herself as to why she and Jody couldn't seem to move past their latest argument.

"Well...errr..." she exhaled loudly. "I should start with an apology, Amanda. It wasn't right for me to give you such a hard time about Claire. I guess...I don't know...I'm just a little worried."

Amanda drew her eyebrows together. "About me?"

Jody nodded. "Mostly. You seem to really like her. I've never seen you so excited about anyone before. I guess I'm just not handling it very well." Jody paused and began to fidget with the button on her shirt.

Amanda shifted her position. Snuggling deeply into the corner of the loveseat, she threw her legs across Jody lap. Jody smiled at the familiar 'let's talk' gesture.

"Okay, Buddy. Spill it. And I mean all of it," Amanda encouraged as she lightly slapped Jody's shoulder.

"You know this past year hasn't been the greatest for me."

Amanda cocked her head to the side and smiled sympathetically.

"I really relied on you a lot after the divorce, maybe too much. I guess..." A deep breath.

"I'm a little jealous of Claire. I got sort of used to it being just you, me, and Missy," she rushed out.

Amanda's eyes widened slightly but she remained silent.

"I've acted like a real bitch, Amanda. I'm sorry. I'll try my best to be civil to her and respect the fact that you like her."

Amanda's eyes widened further. This was an unprecedented apology and concession from her old friend. When Jody turned to face her, Amanda could see the regret written all over her friend's face.

Smiling, she put her friend at ease with an admission of her own. "It's okay, Jody. I know just how you feel. I felt the same way when you married Chester. And I seriously considered hiring a hit man when the fool ran off with his secretary."

Both women laughed. "Apology accepted then?" Jody asked as she flashed Amanda her sad face.

Amanda rolled her eyes. "Of course, ya duffus."

The older woman patted her legs. "Time to get up ya bum, Iris wants to see us both now."

Amanda swung her legs back down to the floor and stood up with a groan.

"God, this has been the longest day. I think I need a vacation." Jody shut off the lights as she and Amanda left the office.

"Funny you should say that..."

"Iris, I appreciate the thought, I truly do, but I'm capable of doing my job," Amanda sat on Iris' leather couch and tucked her legs up underneath her.

"This isn't about whether you can do your job. You're under a great amount of pressure right now. You need a break. Take care of the situation with Monica and come back. Jody and I can pick up your assessments and testing. You can still see your clients. There's no harm done," persisted Iris.

Amanda wanted to argue, but realized her mentor was right. The thought of Monica trying to take Missy back made her stomach twist. Some time off would give her a chance to get centered again and spend more time with Claire. She felt a momentary pang of guilt at wanting to spend time with Claire in the middle of this mess with her sister. *But I'd love every minute it*, her heart added.

"I've never been so afraid of losing Missy to Monica before," admitted Amanda softly.

For the second time that day, the blonde poured out the story of the past few days.

"I feel so defeated." Amanda rubbed tired green eyes again. "Or, maybe it's just that I'm worn out. I don't think I slept more than a couple hours these past two nights combined," Amanda finished tiredly.

"I've never known you to be defeated in any way shape or form, no matter what the circumstances. Things haven't been all bad the past few days, right?" said Iris.

"You mean Claire?"

"You, Missy, and Claire."

Missy, Claire and I. I could get used to that, Amanda thought with a shy smile.

CHAPTER 5

WITH A FINAL twist Claire adjusted the leather band at the end her braid. Stepping out of the bathroom, she padded over to her bed where she carefully inspected the small, but essential stack of items she'd weeded out of her purse and briefcase. Today

she felt like traveling light. Claire fumbled through the pile until she ended up with a single check, her driver's license and several twenty-dollar bills. Grunting with satisfaction, she stuffed the items deep into soft denim pockets. *Now that's what I call light. Okay, shirt next.*

Claire frowned as she looked at the nearly knee deep pile of clothes on the floor. *How come I have a double wide closet full of clothes, but every time I wanna wear something it's in that pile?* Delaying her shirt selection, she reached into her drawer and pulled out a nude colored lace bra. Looking at the device, she grimaced again. *I'd love to cold-cock the bastard that invented this.* After a moment's indecision, she simply stuffed the much-hated item back in its drawer. *I'm on vacation!* She told herself defiantly. Selecting a bright green tie-dyed T-shirt, Claire pulled on her sneakers, grabbed her sunglasses, and went to wait for Amanda near the front door.

As she impatiently waited for her companion, Claire's mind began replaying Monica and "Chucky's" visit. Her hands twitched nervously as she began to brood. *How could they treat Amanda that way? Bursting into her home, wanting money? I should have tossed her dead-assed sister out on her ear before she got a chance to demand back "her" daughter. Heartless bitch!*

Claire tried to stop the steady decline of her mood. She knew it was a slippery slope, but despite herself, she continued to silently seethe. *She made her cry. I can't stand seeing her cry!* Her mind whined. *I don't want her to be upset. She should be happy, Dammit. I want that.* Claire stopped dead in her tracks. *Wow!* She marveled. *I really do want that...and not just a little.* Claire sat down on the couch as she tried to wrap her mind around what was basically a foreign concept. Her eyes widened with realization. *When did I start caring?* No. *From the first moment I saw her I cared. When did I REALLY start caring?*

KNOCK...KNOCK...KNOCK

Claire jumped up, slightly startled, as the light tapping pulled her from her thoughts. "Coming," she called out. Grabbing her cell phone off the coffee table, she neatly clipped it to her belt. Claire grabbed the cool doorknob then hesitated. Pulling back her hand, she noticed its dampness. Claire wiped her palms on her thighs and opened the door, smiling at her own nervousness and excited sense of anticipation. *Boy, if this is the UPS guy I'm gonna be really disappointed.* She wasn't disappointed.

The attorney gazed affectionately at her smaller companion. Dressed in faded jeans, a navy polo shirt, and topsiders, Amanda looked comfortable and relaxed. *She looks so cute and clean cut, like something out of L.L. Bean,* Claire mused. "Hi."

"Hi." Amanda shifted her weight onto her heels, a little nervous at the prospect of spending the afternoon with her friend even after only a couple days apart. It was, she decided, a good sort of nervous. The kind that made your pulse race, just a little...and your stomach flutter. "Umm...are you ready to go?"

"You bet." Claire stepped out of the front door and pulled it shut. Slipping on her sunglasses, she turned and punched several buttons on the security keypad.

Amanda peeked around Claire's shoulder and stared at the device. "Keys are too low tech for you, huh?"

Claire flashed her companion a lop-sided grin as they walked back to the Audi. "Not really, I just can't seem to keep from losing them. After I had the locksmith out here 4 times last year, I figured this would be a lot cheaper in the long run."

As the women buckled their seatbelts, Amanda looked over at Claire. Lifting a pale brow, she inquired, "Did you forget something?"

Claire wrinkled her forehead in confusion. "Well...um..." She looked back toward the house. "Oh, I decided not to bring a purse. Is that what you mean?"

Amanda smiled and turned on the ignition. Laying her hand on the side of Claire's headrest, she twisted, craning her neck, and began backing down the long winding driveway. "Not really," she laughed. "You know...when I bought this car, I checked out all the magazine and online ratings articles. I showed up at the dealership with a pile of reviews, a highlighter, and clipboard." Amanda noticed Claire's eyes had widened. "Jody said I was being..."

"Anal retentive?" Claire helpfully supplied.

"No!...Well...yes, actually," the blonde admitted. "Only I think her description involved some minor profanity and lump of coal."

Claire turned her head and clamped her hand over her mouth. Schooling her face to remain neutral, she tried to think of something to say.

Smirking at Claire's poorly hidden internal struggle, Amanda let out a small laugh of her own. "It's not that funny!" But the smaller woman's smile conveyed the opposite of her words.

"Of course not," Claire said seriously.

Exiting onto the street, Amanda slid the car into drive and donned on her own sunglasses.

"Besides, I was going to buy. You're just looking."

"Not," Claire immediately shot back. "Car shopping sucks," she snorted. "I'm only doing this once."

Amanda looked over at Claire like she was crazy. "But...but..." she stammered.

"Relax, Mandy. I know exactly what I want," the darker woman reassured.

Amanda exhaled, relived. "Well, that's great Claire. You had me a little worried. I would hate for you to rush into something and then be unhappy about it later. I mean it's not like you've had any time to think about this. And I do feel responsible because..."

Claire shot her friend a warning look, which Amanda acknowledged sheepishly.

"Okay, but this is at least partially my fault," she insisted. Before Claire could respond, she changed the subject. "So what kind of car are you going to get?"

"A red one," Claire responded happily.

Amanda waited few seconds for Claire to finish but her companion remained silent.

Amanda rolled her eyes impatiently. "God, Claire, a red what!" the blonde exclaimed.

"Car?" Claire offered lamely. But Amanda caught the playful grin she was trying to hide.

"Are you having fun yanking my chain, Counselor?"

Tilting her head, Claire pulled her glasses down until dark lashes could be seen fluttering over the frame and pale blue eyes laughed silently. "Umm...Hmm."

"Do I at least get to know where I'm driving you?" Amanda slowed down slightly as she passed a bicyclist.

Claire pushed her glasses back into place and snuggled into her seat. "I guess where we go will depend on how long we have."

Amanda pulled the car to a stop just as the light turned red. "Well, I need to pick Missy up by 6:00 o'clock."

"You mean you don't have to go back to work this afternoon?" Claire asked delightedly.

"Nope." She grinned. "I'm all yours."

"Really?" Claire whispered her voice suddenly serious.

Amanda sucked in a quick breath, wishing her she could see the blue eyes hidden behind the glasses. Claire's jaw was clenched and her breathing had stilled. "W...what do mean?"
HONK...HOOOONK!!!!

"Oh shit...Sorry." The young therapist lifted a hand in apology as she moved through the intersection while the car behind her angrily sped by. She turned back to Claire. "Claire, what..."

RING...RING... RING.

Amanda exhaled loudly in frustration. *Jesus Christ! Is there some sort of conspiracy I don't know about!*

Claire shot her an apologetic look as she unclipped her cell phone. "Hello."

"Hi Claire, it's me."

"Hiya Mark, what's up?" Claire mentally sighed with relief. *Great timing, Buddy. Thanks.*

"You're not gonna believe this but we found your car." The phone crackled.

"You're kidding me?" Claire exclaimed, clearly surprised.

"What's going on?" Amanda whispered curiously.

Claire pulled the phone from her ear and placed a hand over the receiver. "They found my car."

"You're not alone are you? Is that pretty blonde you were telling me about with you?"

Mark queried.

"Nope." Claire answered the first part of Mark's question, ignoring the rest. "As a matter of fact, I'm off to go shopping with a friend but I guess..."

"Well, don't change those plans, my friend." Claire looked at the phone in confusion. "I should have been more specific," Mark apologized. "We found what's left of your car."

"Ahhh. I see." Claire frowned and saw Amanda raise her eyebrows in question. Before she could answer her friend's unspoken question, Amanda grimaced as she guessed what Mark was saying.

"Why don't you come by and take a look, Claire," Mark suggested. "You can pick up a few personal items that were still in the car and sign the police report."

Claire nearly said no, not wanting to spoil her afternoon with Amanda, but she relented, knowing it would save time in the long run. "Okay, Mark. I guess we can stop over now.

Thanks for keeping an eye out for me. I really appreciate it." Claire motioned her fingers as though she was writing on an imaginary piece of paper and Amanda pointed to the glove box. After a few quick scribbles on a Taco Bell napkin, Claire clicked the phone shut.

Amanda silently pulled over, expecting Claire to be angry. Her friend's response was a pleasant relief.

"Looks like I'll get my insurance money a little faster," Claire said with a smile. "They found my car in St. Paul." This was the part she didn't want to tell Amanda. "It's...um..."

"Trashed," Amanda guessed, embarrassment coloring her voice.

Claire shifted in her seat. "Basically, yeah. I'll still need to get something else. Would it be okay if we went over there so I could sign the police report? Mark's there now." Claire turned sympathetic eyes on the younger woman. "Don't worry about the car, Mandy. I'm not." She spoke softly.

Swallowing down her own embarrassment and the nearly overwhelming urge to strangle her sister, Amanda smiled weakly. "I'll try." *Time to change the subject before I start crying again.* "Is this the same Mark you were telling me about?"

"Yep. He's got a ton of friends at the cop shop and they let him know as soon as it turned up." Claire showed Amanda the napkin and green eyes widened. A slow nod and Amanda merged back into the traffic.

"I...um...know the general area, but I may need a little help with the exact location." *God, I hope Monica isn't staying in that neighborhood.*

"Sure. No problem. I don't think it will be hard to find." Claire fiddled with her cell phone, having trouble clipping it to her belt while seated. *What was I thinking asking*

Amanda to go into that part of the city? Duh! The lawyer mentally scolded herself. For several minutes the only sound in the car was the gentle breathing of its occupants. As they crossed the bridge into St. Paul, Claire began to wonder how a date that started off so well had turned so depressing.

"Have you eaten lunch yet?" *I know she loves to eat.*

A blonde slowly shook her head 'no'.

"Do you want to grab something after I deal with the police?"

The red-gold head nodded vigorously. "Sure! I'll do whatever you want." Amanda couldn't help but smile at the thought of food. She'd missed breakfast that morning.

"Anything?" the contralto voice purred.

Amanda's head snapped to the side. "Well...I...um....I...."

Claire laughed as the smaller woman turned beet red. "Oooh, you are so cute when you do that," she chuckled as her companions flush deepened.

Amanda's eyes narrowed. "Aren't you the funny one, smarty pants. I'll get you for that Claire," she threatened, but giggled herself as Claire's face twisted in mock fear. The rest of the drive was spent in pleasant conversation.

"Bastards!" Amanda growled. "Why would they anyone do that?"

Claire and Amanda stood alongside Mark and several uniformed police officers that were leaning against their cruisers. The alleyway smelled like urine and burning oil. The fire engine had already pulled away, but the Explorer's interior was still smoking, spreading a pungent odor for several blocks. It had taken several minutes for Claire's stomach to stop churning.

The hood of the Explorer had been torn off and laid strewn aside a nearby dumpster. Its wheels were completely missing, as was the stereo system and most of the engine. The leather seats had been sloppily skinned and the cab's interior was littered with charred stuffing. Mark had been generous when he described it as a 'car.'

Claire looked up at her friend who had just waved 'goodbye' to one of his firefighter buddies. "Amanda's right. Why completely destroy it? Wouldn't you get more money for it intact? For Christ's sake it wasn't even six months old!"

Mark nodded then sighed. "That's true, but that would take a little time if you weren't well connected. It's a lot quicker to sell it to the local scavengers for a few hundred dollars and be done with it. They just strip it and sell off the parts making it nearly impossible to trace. It's small time and messy, but it gets the job done. My guess is whoever sold it got less than a thousand dollars."

Claire quickly forgot about the car and grabbed Mark's forearm, twisting him away from Amanda. Whispering, she spoke quickly. "You didn't happen to find...you know." She wiggled her eyebrows and tilted her head toward the smoldering vehicle.

Mark smiled wickedly and made no attempt to lower his voice. "Why Claire, whatever are you talking about?"

"Jerk!" Claire hissed under her breath. "You know damn well what I'm talking about. Did you find him or not?" she fumed.

Mark chuckled as Amanda stepped alongside he and Claire. "Oooh," he drew out the word. "You mean your little green buddy?"

Amanda gazed from the handsome prosecutor to her friend. Claire's neck and cheeks were beginning to turn a lovely shade of pink and she was practically oozing frustration and something else. The therapist looked on curiously, trying to figure out what had Claire rattled. She could tell it wasn't the car.

SHIT! You are so dead Mark! Claire leaned into Mark, trying to speak so that an obviously interested Amanda wouldn't hear. "Never mind, Mark," she ground through gritted teeth. "Never mind?" Mark exclaimed. "I feared for my life until I issued an A.P.B. on you're friend." Mark smile broadened. "You did insist," he added.

"Mark," Claire growled.

The prosecutor couldn't miss the brunette's menacing tone. He swallowed convulsively. *Uh...oh. She's really pissed. Oh well, if I'm gonna be in the doghouse with Claire I might as well make it pay. Man! She's beautiful when she's angry.* He sighed over the lost cause. Knowing Mark was in the mood to play, Claire tried to escape with as little embarrassment as possible. Turning away from him, she nearly collided with an avidly watching Amanda.

"Let's go, Amanda. I'm done here. I know you're hungry."

"Aren't you forgetting something, Claire?" Mark asked evilly.

Claire closed her eyes as her childhood pal moved in for the kill. The tall blonde walked around in front the woman and held out a happy, green, and still very bendable, Gumby. "I don't think he sustained any life threatening injuries. But I was prepared to do CPR for your sake," he teased.

"Thanks a lot, Buddy. I won't forget this," Claire promised. Mark knew he was in deep trouble, but laughed anyway. Grabbing her ever faithful driving companion, Claire couldn't suppress the quick smile that flickered across her face. She carefully stuffed Gumby into her pocket only to look up to see Mark shaking with silent laughter and Amanda staring at her in a combination of wide-eyed shock and amusement. Turning her back on her friends, Claire called out as she grumped back to Amanda's car. "I'll be in the car!" Before she reached the Audi she heard both the blondes burst into laughter. *Oh, great! Now they're a team.*

"That was pretty mean," Amanda remarked as she looked up at the still laughing man. *I can't help but like this guy.*

"I know," Mark chuckled, as he wiped the tears from eyes. "But she deserved it. I've been waiting for years to get her that good." He looked down at the smiling face of the woman who had clearly captured his friend's heart. *I can't help but like her.* "Just ask her about the bra she accidentally left in the back seat of my truck when I was dating my ex-wife."

Pale eyebrows shot skyward. "You guys are dangerous when you're together aren't you?"

"She's my best friend," he offered in explanation.

Thinking about some of the stunts she and Jody had pulled over the years Amanda nodded. She understood completely. "It was nice meeting you, Mark." She held out a small hand.

"Same here, Amanda." Mark returned the handshake, surprised by its strength. "Take good care of my friend."

Impulsively, Amanda stood on tipped-toes and planted a kiss on the large man's cheek. "I will," she replied seriously, before turning and jogging back to the car.

Mark laid a palm on his cheek where he could still feel the light kiss. He watched the women until the car drove out of sight. They looked about as physically different as two women could. Even their personalities appeared to land on opposite sides of the spectrum. But in just few moments they'd spent together, he could tell each complemented the other perfectly. *Looks like they've both have good taste,* he mused. The big man's mind began to wonder as he walked to his own car. He let out a tortured groan. "God, Mark. Don't go there!" he laughed as unlocked his door.

"No, I don't think you're a wacko." Amanda rolled her eyes. "It's normal for people to transfer human emotions to inanimate objects. Besides..." green eyes twinkled, "...I was taught to avoid the term 'wacko'."

"Great. Now you're shrinking my head," Claire complained as they strolled past another shiny new car.

Oops. She's sensitive about that. I'd better watch it. "No. I'm not." Amanda looked at Claire's bright green shirt and grinned. "Come on Gumby, I think I see a red one at the end of this row." Grabbing the taller woman's hand, Amanda began pulling her along toward the red SUV at the end of the row.

Gumby! "You're not really gonna call me that are you?" Claire whined.

Amanda stopped dead in her tracks, making a show of appraising her friend's green shirt, her eyes obviously lingering over Claire's bulging pocket where Gumby's smiling head was poking out. Meeting Claire's eyes, her face went serious.

"Why yes, Claire. In my professional opinion, it's an absolute necessary for the sake of both our mental well-beings that I call you that." *So much for not teasing.* Amanda recaptured Claire's hand and turned her gaze upward. Rain clouds had moved in and were threatening to spill over and cut their shopping trip short. The sky had darkened with the weather and Amanda could tell Claire would never be able to shop for cars inside the building. The fawning salesman would prevent that.

At least I didn't wear my grateful dead T-shirt, Claire smirked, allowing Amanda's gentle tugging to pull her along. *Mandy can call me damn near anything she likes...as long as she calls me.*

The tall woman glanced around empty car lot as they walked, glad they'd lost their salesman early on. She'd originally intended to purchase another Explorer, until the smarmy salesman practically drooled all over Amanda. Claire felt a nearly blinding surge of jealousy and developed a sudden taste for foreign cars.

"Hey, not bad." Claire stopped, then slowly stepped around the Nissan Pathfinder SE limited.

Amanda admired the vehicle's bright candy apple finish. "Well, you don't get much redder than this."

"True," Claire agreed, as she continued to appraise the car. "Let's test it out."

"Okay, do you want me to go get the salesman?" Amanda tilted her head toward the dealership building, as a strong gust of moist air tussled her hair.

"Nah. I wanna see how comfortable it is. Come on." Claire opened the back door and slid across the soft leather seat allowing Amanda to pile in next to her. The smaller woman shut the door and deeply inhaled the new car smell and the rich scent of leather. Claire scooted closer and the faint smell of sweet roses was added to the mix. "It's nice, Claire," Amanda exhaled with satisfaction.

"It is," Claire agreed, without ever tearing her gaze from her younger companion. Amanda blushed and Claire reached up and gently touched the warm cheek. The heavy clouds finally opened up and a gentle rain began falling, its pitter-patter amplified by the silence in the car.

Amanda found herself willingly drawn into deep azure eyes. She felt herself tumbling helplessly under their spell and smiled an open honest smile that lit up her face and crinkled the corners of her own eyes. Claire leaned in closer and Amanda felt her warm breath tickling her face. She was completely surrounded by the smell of leather and roses and Claire. It was intoxicating.

"You are so beautiful," a deep voice purred in her ear, but Amanda was so absorbed in her own body's reactions to Claire's closeness, she barely made out the words.

Amanda closed her eyes and swallowed, her breathing began to increase. "What?" she whispered, her mind whirling amidst the sensory barrage.

A sure hand easily swept aside her hair and soft lips lightly kissed the skin around her ear. "I said you're beautiful," the voice gently repeated, as a hot tongue snaked out and trailed its way from the back of her ear, along her pulse point to the base of her neck. Amanda moaned loudly, unable to control her body's immediate reaction. Her stomach clinched and her hands convulsively clutched Claire's shirt. *Jesus! What is she doing?* The intensity of the rain increased. Its pounding rhythm matched Amanda's heartbeat, as smooth warm lips kissed their way back up the other side of her neck, stopping near her ear. She could hear Claire's own breathing become ragged, as white teeth gently tugged her earlobe and strong hands caressed her. The interior of the car had darkened slightly as the windows fogged over.

Suddenly, Claire pulled back and looked into green eyes dilated with desire. Sliding a hand around the small of Amanda's back, she forcefully pulled the smaller woman into a searing kiss. Thunder boomed loudly, swallowing the approving whispers of both women, as hot tongues clashed and their bodies surged forward. This kiss wasn't like the tentative, gently affectionate kiss the women shared in Amanda's den. This kiss was insistent. It was raw want and need and passion.

Claire shifted back into the seat and pulled Amanda onto her lap, causing the smaller woman to straddle her. Forgetting her surroundings completely, Amanda untucked a corner of her companion's shirt and slid her hands across a trembling soft skin on Claire's stomach. Claire sucked in a quick breath as she felt small hands run across her belly. With another swift tug, more of Claire's shirt was pulled free as the hands slid up and cupped firm bare breasts.

"Oh...God," Claire murmured in satisfaction, as she tore her lips away from Amanda's and began kissing along her jawbone and neck. Claire could taste the delicious saltiness of Amanda's skin and threaded her fingers through soft pale locks as Amanda threw her head back allowing Claire greater access to her throat.

Amanda continued to lightly caress Claire's breasts until she felt sharp teeth gently graze her pulse point. Her body jerked at the erotic touch and her fingers clamped down on already painfully erect nipples. Claire gasped, feeling each tug on her breast deep in her groin, flooding her with wetness.

I've got to have more, Amanda thought, as she roughly jerked up Claire's shirt and ducked her head down to taste soft skin. Lightening flashed as wet lips clamped onto a dark ridged nipple. "Mmm...," Amanda purred. *She tastes as good as she looks.* Her own nipples tightened in empathy. *God, there is no way she could be enjoying this as much as I am.*

The woman below her lips was panting and writhing. Amanda was surprised when her wrists were grabbed and she was pushed away from Claire's body. Her back was thrust against the cool leather of the front seat as wild blue eyes lifted to meet hers. Claire was beyond caring where she was or who might find them. Things had gotten out of hand and it didn't bother her one bit. She had to have this woman. Now!

Claire leaned forward in her seat, bringing her own mouth within inches of Amanda's lips. Not relinquishing the grip on the therapist's wrist, the women's eyes were locked. She felt no shame in expressing her own need when she saw matching desire mirrored in warm green eyes. "I've wanted you since moment I first saw you." Claire licked full moist lips and continued. "Mandy, I want you so badly right now I think I'll die if I don't have you. Please?" Claire's voice was raspy and low, rumbling deep into Amanda's soul. Her need for Amanda was so great she wasn't above begging. This fabulous woman was worth

anything...everything. Lightening flashed and the electric spark that had been passing between the women for days burst into flame.

Immediately and without conscious thought, Amanda agreed to Claire's request. She'd barely nodded her assent when she was pulled back into to strong arms. *I love this car*, she thought, as Claire turned and pushed her down into the seat, melding her body to the smaller one beneath her. "Yeesss!" Amanda hissed, as warm hands grasped her buttocks, crushing their hips together.

Claire's hands stroked moist silky skin, and Amanda arched into the touch. A bright light appeared in the window that she assumed was more lightening. But curiously, the light didn't fade away. Through a haze of kisses and mummings she heard a faint rumbling that gradually got louder.

"Cl...Claire," she breathed, trying to focus her scattered thoughts. No response. "Claire." Amanda's voice was weak but insistent.

"Mmm....Hmm," came the faint reply as Claire swirled her tongue around the ridge of Amanda's navel, causing a loud moan to erupt from the younger woman.

"Mmmm...God...ah...I...I...I think someone is coming."

Claire tore her eyes away from Amanda for the first time since she'd entered the car. Looking up, she squinted as bright headlights streamed through the fog-covered windows, reflecting off the raindrops. "Shit!" she cursed under her breath. "It's that idiot salesman I told to leave us alone. He must have come looking for us when we didn't come back after the storm started."

Claire closed her eyes and marshaled her willpower. *I could lock the doors and pretend we're not in here*, her mind tempted. Sighing, she crawled back up Amanda who had a slightly shaking arm thrown over her eyes. "Mandy, I'm sorry. Things got out of hand. We'd better get up." Blue eyes conveyed apology. "I...uh... don't know what came over me. I..." A car door slammed shut.

Two soft fingers pressed against Claire's lips. "Shh. No reason to apologize. I know exactly what came over you." Amanda smiled wryly and sat up, smoothing out her shirt.

"It was the same thing that came over me. It must be catchy," she added impishly.

Claire flashed her companion a brilliant smile and pulled away, flicking her bangs into place. Scooting over a couple of feet, she reached out and grabbed Amanda's hand.

A voice called out. "Hey, anyone here?" A dark shadow approached the SUV and lightly rapped on the glass of the driver's side window.

"Amanda we're going to finish this conversation later." It wasn't a question. A dark eyebrow arched as Claire looked around briefly. "In a more appropriate place."

A pale head nodded. "Yes. We are."

The front door opened and a sandy haired middle aged man peeked in, shaking the rain out of his eyes. "There you are." He looked at the smiling women who were sitting a respectable distance apart but were still holding hands. "Good way to get out the rain," he commented. "Done it myself a few times." The man spread his hands. "Wadda think? She's a real beauty. The SE model is..."

"Absolutely perfect," Claire finished as she looked at the younger woman. Amanda blushed and the salesman looked predictably puzzled. Leaning forward, Claire snatched a ballpoint pen from the salesman's breast pocket. Shifting up, she dug through her blue jean pocket until she pulled out an incredibly rumpled check. Scratching her name to the bottom, Claire handed it to the salesman. "I'll take it. It seems I've become very attached to her."

Mark ran his hand along the gleaming hood of Claire's new car with an approving whistle.

"Claire, this is excellent. This is a total babe mobile if I ever saw one," he said as he walked around the car.

"Thanks Marko, just what I need," snorted Claire as she looked on with pride at her new toy. Her gaze wandered to the two children playing on her front lawn. The boys were chasing each other, playing their version of Batman and yelling enthusiastically.

Mark continued his inspection and opened the back door and peered inside. "There's a lot of room back here and the leather is really nice. Hey, they didn't detail this car very well. There are palm and fingerprints against the window here. Didn't you have the dealer clean and detail it before you took it home?"

Claire snorted again and actually blushed. "Yeah, it's roomy back there. Ah, I took it home that same day, I couldn't wait," she replied.

Mark closed the door and looked at Claire with a smile before he turned and addressed his two sons.

"Keith, don't pull on Bobby's shirt. It's brand new. Come on," he motioned toward the car, "we're gonna go out to eat and ride in Aunt Claire's new car."

Claire laughed at her friends attempt to control his children. "Mark, you get the car seat for Bobby and I'll get Keith set up." After a few minutes of chasing down children and getting them tucked in the car, the buzzing group drove off toward the city.

"I haven't heard anything from my buddies at Hennepin County about Aaron. Looks very professional though," Mark remarked as he looked over the edge of the bridge and into the Mississippi River.

"Well, I told you what I found so far, but I didn't tell you about Origami, did I?" Claire moved into the right lane.

"What about Origami?" Mark turned and glared. "Bobby, don't hit your brother!"

"The night before Aaron bought it, we met at Origami. He told me that he and his business associates like to meet there. He didn't seem particularly shy about it." Claire shifted in her seat. Even the remembrance of hurt green eyes made her sick. "And then... you know... I ran into Jody and everything went downhill from there."

"His 'business' associates are how he ended up in the river, Claire. Why didn't you tell me about this sooner?" Mark's voice held an angry edge. "What else did you find out?"

"I had some suspicions about the Cornerstone Clinic, but it turns out that they just have a contract with the corrections department. It was just a coincidence."

"Are you sure those pretty green eyes haven't made up your mind for you?"

Claire looked at him briefly, her own piercing eyes peeking over the edge of her Ray-Bans in a familiar gesture.

"I know, I'm really pushing it, aren't I," He laughed. "You said that Amanda's sister came over?"

Claire sighed silently and recounted Monica and Chucky's visit, finishing as she pulled up in front of the Grand Shanghai. Luckily, they found a parking space only a few doors down from the popular Chinese restaurant.

"Well, it sounds like you two have become closer, and that's good as far as I'm concerned. I haven't seen that sparkle in your baby blues in a long time, buddy."

"You're nothing but big blond mushball, Marko," Claire said as she leaned over and kissed his cheek, "despite your macho act."

Mark smiled and touched his cheek where she kissed him. Although he had accepted the non-romantic nature of their relationship, he occasionally felt the twinge of unrequited feelings. *Be mature about this, she's your best friend and that's all she'll ever be for you. Give it a rest.*

"So she doesn't know where Monica is now?" Mark said, snapping back into reality.

"No, and she's really worried, especially given her bitch sister's current desire to get Missy back."

Claire got out of the car and went to unhook Keith while Mark freed Bobby.

"Now I don't want you to order a combination plate, this ain't a chop suey house, Mark."

"Ah, come on, we have this argument every time. You are such a snob about Chinese food."

"Hey, I didn't spend three years in Chicago just going to law school, I sampled a lot of cuisine too!" Claire patted her belly. "Just feel lucky there isn't a Polish restaurant around here or I'd be eating tripe and grossing you out, you Nordic wimp," Claire teased as they walked towards the restaurant.

"Well, Claire Alexandra Easton, WASP if I ever saw one, you're not exactly soul sister number one, if you know what I mean," Mark chided back.

"At least I didn't grow up on hotdish and plain meatloaf because the tomato sauce was just too spicy for my delicate stomach."

"Hey, I'm a child of the Midwest..."

"That you are, and so am I, but you gotta expand those taste buds. I know you go home every night and cook mac and cheese for these kids." Claire motioned to the two fair-haired children. "Your kids need to know that food comes in colors other than yellow and white."

"For someone who can't cook macaroni and cheese for themselves, you're sure uppity." Claire raised a dark eyebrow as she opened the restaurant door. "Cooking and eating are two different things."

Zane sat on the cool wooden park bench nervously scratching the stubble on his cheeks. Glancing at his watch he wondered if he'd be late for his 8:00 a.m. sales presentation. An early morning phone call had roused him out of bed and beckoned him to a downtown park whose clientele was mostly bums and local gang members. Loosening his tie, his eyes scanned the park. Not only did he feel out of place in his business suit and expensive shoes, he felt a little frightened. *Why would she want to meet here?*

"Hey, Baby," a girlish voice called out.

Zane sprang to his feet and turned to see a smiling blonde standing behind the park bench. She was wearing faded Levi's and black T-shirt that contrasted sharply against her pale, sallow skin.

"You look like shit," the salesman offered coldly.

"I missed you too."

"What do you want?"

The blonde rolled her eyes and circled around the bench, perching on its corner. "Cut the crap Zane. I'm sure you can tell what I want just by looking at me."

Zane eyed the woman for a moment before joining her on the bench. His hand unconsciously moved to his chin where he began to scratch. "I'm not your pimp, Monica."

"Since when," she snorted.

"Since you look like a strung out two-dollar whore," Zane replied viciously. "What the fuck have you done to yourself?"

Tired, hazel eyes bored into his. He shifted nervously under their weight. "Nothing you didn't help me with, old friend." Monica squinted as she looked out to the street beyond.

"Where's Junior?"

"Where do you think he is? Shit, did you think he would actually show up at a place like this?" Zane spread his arms indicating their decrepit surroundings, glad to have those haunting eyes focused elsewhere.

Monica sighed. "It doesn't matter. I need money." Her eyes fixed on Zane again. "And I don't care who I get it from or what I have to do to get it."

Zane brow creased. He hadn't expected her to be so blatant. Their phone conversation had been brief and terse. "Meet me at the park on Franklin and 10th in an hour," was all she'd said. It was a voice out of his nightmares. He knew it well.

"Don't look so shocked, Zane. Or have you conveniently forgotten some of our," a thin hand reached up and tangled itself into Zane's hair, "previous personal arrangements." Zane jerked back in revulsion. "Don't touch me," he hissed. Sliding down the bench and away from Monica, he ran a shaky hand through his hair as if to wipe away the blonde's touch.

Monica laughed at the gesture. "Don't worry. I don't have anything catchy...that I know about." She smiled cruelly.

Zane's stomach twisted, remembering the variety of 'business transactions' he and Monica had engaged in. Sex for drugs. It was a simple enough equation. But even then, he'd had to indulge in his product before he could get up the nerve to follow through... At least the first time, anyway. After that, things seemed to get so much easier.

He'd wanted her since they'd met in college, before the needles and the money and the irrevocable decisions. And so when the opportunity presented itself, he took it. *At least that was before she looked like the walking dead*, his mind added. He closed his eyes. *Pretty co-ed gone junky...successful football player turned pusher. NO! I'm more than that.*

Looking at Monica reminded him of his meager beginnings in the Chow organization and of people that didn't exist anymore. He didn't like it. He'd moved onward and upward, even if she hadn't. His eyes lingered over the track marks running nearly the length of Monica's arms, then moved to the soft swell of breasts that were still full, despite her painful thinness. He closed his eyes again and with a shiver of disgust, pushed away the beginning of strains of desire. Things had always been exceptionally good between them, even when they were bad.

"Earth to Zane...Zane?" Monica loudly snapped her fingers in front of his eyes.

His hand darted out and tightly gripped hers. "What are you doing back here? I didn't think I'd ever see you again." *At least I was hoping that would be the case.*

"That's none of your business. Are you going to help me or do I skip over you and go directly to Junior?" she challenged, apparently tired of waiting for Zane to respond.

"That won't be necessary," he snarled. "I'll talk to Junior this morning." Recovering some of his composure, he reached under the park bench and grabbed a paper sack. Standing, he thrust the bag into Monica's hands. A smile lit up red rimmed eyes as she traced the familiar outline of a syringe through the paper sack. Zane reached into his pocket and withdrew a long leather wallet. He tossed out couple of one hundred-dollar bills, which Monica eagerly grabbed. "Don't this piss away Monica. Get something to eat and some decent clothes." He sniffed in her direction. "And a bath." Turning, he stuffed his wallet back into his jacket. "I'll be back to pick you up at 7:00 o'clock tonight. Don't be late." His hand moved to his face. *I hope my travel razor is charged.*

Monica gazed lifelessly at the elevator doors as they closed. Leaning back against the railing she tried to marshal her thoughts. As the floors silently slipped by, she smoothed her dress. How she looked was important, and she'd wished she had a few more days to pull herself together. Zane's gift had helped, but not nearly enough. "Just enough to take the edge off," he yelled as he practically ran to his car. *Cheap prick!* She seethed.

Fiddling with her dress again, she smiled as she remembered the sales woman at Sears who had picked it out. She'd marched into the store and walked over the small section containing eveningwear.

Motioning over the nearest sales lady, she'd crammed \$40.00 in her hand. "I need something to wear...in black." The saleswoman stepped back, and Monica recognized the look of fear and disgust. Laughing, she simply plopped down in the middle of the aisle and waited. Deciding that the young woman didn't actually look dangerous, the elderly woman slid the money into a draw next to the register and wiped off her hands. *Why the hell does everyone keep doing that?* Monica wondered.

"Did you want a dress?" the woman inquired.

"I'm in the dress section aren't I?" Monica answered sarcastically.

"Well...yes. Fine. What size do you wear, dear?" the old woman asked in a voice more kind than Monica was accustomed to hearing.

Monica stood up and spread her arms. Looking down at her body, she spoke acidly "I'd say I wear size 'skinny and fucked up,' wouldn't you?"

The old woman flinched and began digging through the dresses. Monica felt a pang of guilt that was almost immediately swept away as her mind refocused on her own problems.

"And make it one with long sleeves," she called after the woman.

DING. The elevator obediently chimed as its doors opened to the 20th floor. Quickly leaving the elevator, Monica looked in each direction down the long hallway and cursed Zane for dropping her off outside the building. *Chickenshit! You never could handle Junior.* She ran a hand through short clean locks. *Okayokayokayokay. Get in. Get out. Do what I have to do,* she chanted. With great effort, she pushed down the ever-present craving that was beginning to call to her... loudly.

Monica had reluctantly parted with enough of the money Zane had given her to get a motel room, dress, shoes, and some toiletries. She idly ran her tongue over clean teeth and admitted to herself that she at least, did feel better. Somehow, lately, she'd always manage to misplace little things like a toothbrush or comb or her husband.

She paused outside of Junior's door. *I wonder what did happen to J.J.?* She hadn't seen him since they'd pawned off Claire's car. *He's probably still passed out in that alley.*

What sort of fool only gets \$500.00 for a car like that? What was I thinking when I married him? Monica tried to force her muddled mind to remember the blessed event, but couldn't. Shrugging, she quickly forgot about her husband and resolved herself to the fact that she'd have to earn her way back into Junior's favor. Their last parting had been bitter. She knocked on the door, her body already tingling with anticipation. *When Junior is happy he's very generous,* she nearly giggled.

The door swung open and Monica let herself in. The large apartment was a vision of black and white and was mostly dark except for the dim lighting of a single lamp and the evening sun streaming through wide bay windows. Black and white floor tiles where overlaid with black and white area rugs. A shiny black piano stood regally in the corner atop a soft white fur rug. She looked closer. The rug was a polar bear with the head still attached. *Yuck!* Her eyes took in the entire room. *You could loose all 101 fucking Dalmatians in this place.* A large black leather couch sat between two strange pieces of furniture that Monica assumed were chairs. The stark room was cold and the blonde shivered, wrapping her bare arms around herself. Apparently, Sears didn't have any long sleeves dresses in size 'skinny and fucked up' this spring.

"Hello, Monica. How nice of you to come for a visit," the deep familiar voice burred.

Monica turned to see Junior leaning against the closed door, cigarette in hand. His white linen trousers and black silk shirt looked out of place with his almost boyish good looks,

but fit in perfectly with the décor of the room. *Visit? You know exactly why I'm here, Junior. Why do I always come?* A wafting cloud of smoke followed Junior as he pushed off the door and stepped closer to the blonde.

"You look," the tall man glanced down, surveying her slender form as his lips pursing slightly, "adequate."

Thank God for dim lighting, Monica silently praised, as she breathed a sigh of relief.

"Hello Junior. I've missed you." She closed the remaining distance between them and gently pulled the cigarette from his lips. Taking a deep drag, she murmured appreciatively as she exhaled. Removing the cigarette from her own mouth, she smoothly traced Junior's lip with the tip of a thin finger before replacing it with the cigarette.

Junior felt himself growing hard as the small finger lingered at his lips then drifted down to his chest where it remained. The cool silk of his shirt contrasted sharply with the heat of his skin. *Ahh...Monica. You haven't forgotten how to play the game, have you?* In a whirlwind of motion Junior viciously backhanded the blonde, sending her sprawling across the cold tiles.

In an instant, Monica's world went black and for a few seconds the only sensation she experienced was a loud ringing in her ears. Raising a shaking hand to her mouth, she couldn't suppress the small smile that crept its way across her lips. With the back of her hand, she wiped away a warm trickle of blood. *That's it, Junior,* her mind crooned. *Now we're getting someplace. That's the beautiful monster I remember.*

After a final deep drag from the cigarette, Junior silently walked over to the low ivory coffee table and snuffed it out in a thin dark ashtray. He straightened to his full height and spoke with his back to his guest. "Didn't anyone ever tell you it's rude to take things that aren't yours, Monica?" An eyebrow raised unseen by Monica. "At least until they've been offered to you."

As he stood admiring his penthouse view, he felt small hands began to caress his back.

"Of course, Junior. How could I forget?" Purred a voice that was part seductive part sarcastic. Neither element was lost on the man.

"It's been a long time." He leaned back into the touch.

"A bit more than two years," came the softly spoken response.

"And what have you been doing all this time? I would have known if you'd stayed in town."

Broad shoulders loosened slightly as small strong hands began to knead.

"I've been around." Monica shook her head slightly as the ringing in her ears finally disappeared. "I guess...I couldn't stay away."

Junior exhaled loudly and dropped his head as the massage worked its way up to his hairline. Monica heard a low chuckle. "No, I guess you couldn't."

Stepping away from the roving hands, Junior moved closer to the bay window and looked out at the city painted in red sunlight. "Do I need to ask what you're here for?" His voice had lost its informal tone and was all business.

Monica stepped along side him, her head only level with his shoulder. Two sets of hazel green eyes were locked forward. She willed her body not to shake. *How long had it been since Zane's little present? Was that only this morning?*

Monica deliberately didn't answer Junior's question. "It looks like business is going well. Weren't you only on the 8th floor last time I was here?"

The man slowly nodded. His facial expression remained neutral but the slight quiver in his voice betrayed his growing rage. "If I'm not mistaken, I asked you a question, little girl."

Monica's eyes drifted toward the shiny piano in the corner. "Do you actually play that thing? Or do you just use it to hold down the bear so it won't get up one day and walk away?"

Junior turned to face her, his eyes raging. She saw the slap coming long before it hit her, but did nothing to avoid it. Its force was enough to send her reeling against the glass of the bay window. Her knees buckled, but before she could slide down, a meaty hand gripped her throat and pushed her back up against the cold unyielding surface. Monica was on her tipped toes but Junior continued to increase his grip. She felt herself being lifted off her feet.

"You never did know when to shut up. Did you, whore?" he hissed as he brought his face within inches of hers. His tongue snaked out and tasted the blood smeared across her cheek.

For a split second the woman wished the glass behind her would give way, releasing her from the nightmares and misery. *But then, she reminded herself, you wouldn't feel the rush that's coming.... just a little while longer....it'll all be worth it... remember?*

Monica gasped as she struggled for air. Tiny black dots began to invade her peripheral vision. She knew she was only seconds from passing out. Reaching up, she pushed her hand between the buttons of Junior's silk shirt, snapping off two buttons the process. Her fingers tangled themselves in short curly hair and she felt the iron grip on her throat began to release as she was slowly lowered to the ground.

"Bitch!" Junior yelled as slapped her once again, sending a spray of blood and saliva across the hard tiles. This time, however, although she stumbled sideways a few steps, she remained on her feet. "This shirt's worth more than you are."

Straightening, Monica stepped forward, back-lit by the evening sun. The wet black liquid on her face turned crimson as she passed out of the shadows and into a beam of violet golden rays. Junior felt his pulse increase at the sight. *I'd forgotten how much I enjoy you, Monica. That's it.* The woman moved forward seductively. *Feed me.*

Monica dragged a finger across her bloody lips and trailed their contents along Junior's bare chest and into his waiting mouth. The coppery tang of her blood intensified his need and fueled his anger. He growled and brought his hands up, tightly gripping her hair. Pushing her body away from his, he tightened his grip again, closing his eyes as she cried out in pain. He was now throbbing as his body remembered the delicious thrill of pain....blood...submission...and unadulterated power. He groaned with satisfaction as tears coursed down the small blonde's cheeks and she began to violently thrash against his grasp. "Yes!" he praised, as the woman redoubled her efforts.

With a savage jerk Monica was sent crashing to her knees. She screamed as twin bolts of pain shot through her legs and into her lower back. Junior moaned again, twisting his fingers deeper into short honey hair. Suddenly, his eyes lifted off the kneeling form. They were calm now, devoid of any emotion, and they scanned the horizon once again. Roughly, he pulled her mouth to his swollen groin and Monica performed the rest of her task by rote.

As she unzipped his trousers, she was surprised to feel little of the revulsion she'd remembered from her similar encounters with Junior. The large hands that had been so brutal seconds before began stroking her hair with a disconcerting gentleness. She didn't have to look. She knew his eyes would be focused on the buildings beyond and his face would be eerily blank. There are some things that time just doesn't seem to change. She flinched as he thrust into her, making her gag, but she didn't stop. Her mind wandered from Junior to Zane. Both men had called her a whore today. She supposed she was a whore. But in truth, she considered them her whores as well. They willingly accepted what she offered and her efforts were always well rewarded. *Aren't we all just using each other?*

These men were so different, although, each man was handsome, tall and fair. Her mind derailed as she was assaulted with a vision of Missy and innocent green eyes. But she stopped there, as she always did, not wanting to consider the little girl's likely lineage. A firm hand redirected her mouth and brought her crashing back to the grim present. She cursed herself for not being able to completely tune out her surroundings and actions, as she had always been able to in the past. Then, she would simply crawl into the safe deep dark recesses of her mind and wait for the reward that would accompany her actions. But now, even the deepest corners of her soul were lit with ugliness. They were haunted. There was no safe place to hide. She'd seen to that herself, crossing every single barrier she'd weakly clung to, going farther than she thought she dared, until now...now she simply floated in a state of constant ache, where peace didn't exist. Junior finished. He turned away from her and zipped his pants. No words would pass between them. She knew that. Even their eyes wouldn't meet for long moments. His coldness covered her like a familiar blanket. *So different from Zane*, she mused. Although Junior and his younger associate were physically similar, something on the inside of each man was vitally different.

After an evening with Zane, the man would cry, pathetically begging her forgiveness, until he would finally compose himself enough to toss her a small brown paper sack filled with money or drugs. Their eyes always seemed to meet for a long, inexplicably painful second, and then he would silently leave the room.

Junior, however, liked to watch her enjoy her spoils. He shared in her tragedy and triumph. Tonight was no exception. After leaving her on her knees, he returned with a small glass box in one hand and a white washcloth in the other. Tossing Monica the washcloth, he sat back heavily in the cool leather couch.

Wiping the blood from her cheeks, mouth and nose, Monica couldn't contain her excitement as she crawled to the treasure that awaited her. Finally, daring to look Junior directly in the eye, she received the nod she was waiting for and eagerly dove into the box. "Thank you, Evan," she mumbled.

Her skin was slick with a thin layer of sweat and her heart pounded with anticipation. Rummaging through its contents, she laughed heartily and latched onto a small syringe. She picked up a rubber-constricting band but then dropped it in favor of drawing the clear liquid contained in a small glass vile. Her hands were shaking. Taking a deep breath, she savored these last few seconds of anticipation as though they were a drug themselves. Junior smiled, then laughed cruelly. What she had tried to hide only moments before, she now fully embraced.

When she finished drawing out the liquid, Junior leaned forward and offered her the rubber band once again. Shaking it off, she unceremoniously pulled down the front of her dress and injected the liquid directly into a large blue vein trailing from her throat to her chest. Junior's eyes widened as he noticed for the first time the scars that peppered her arms... he looked again...and her chest.

Withdrawing the needle, Monica tossed it on the ivory table and leaned back against the sofa, already feeling an icy fire flowing through her. She exhaled softly as her arms went limp and a look of pure satisfaction twisted her face. She glanced up to see Junior staring at her. *Oops. I forgot he was still here.*

He lifted his eyebrows in question.

"Faster that way...better," she purred, as her eyes rolled back and her mind lost all focus. The shackles of pain that had gripped her so tightly simply floated away.

"You'd put it straight into you're heart if you could, wouldn't you?" *Stupid bitch.* Junior leaned back and lit another cigarette. Resting his head on the soft cushion, he remained silent for a long moment. "That is, if junky whores even have hearts," he finally added. Monica didn't answer. She didn't even hear him.

CHAPTER 6

"MAN, I CAN'T believe it's this nice. I thought it was never gonna stop raining this spring." Claire looked up at the bright blue sky and squinted. Her hand automatically traveling back to her mouth where she enjoyed another large bite of hamburger.

"Yumm...These are really terrific. Did I tell you that already?" she mumbled, her mouth still full.

Amanda nose crinkled as her smile broadened. "Yes. But you can say it as much as you like. It's the first thing that I've cooked in ages that hasn't ended up charred." She sat down the long metal spatula. "But don't be too impressed. It's just hamburger and onion soup mix."

"Yeah, but I didn't have to fix it, or call for delivery."

Amanda looked around, admiring Claire's large redwood deck and her turbo- charged gas grill. "How did you end up with this?" Amanda pointed to the grill.

"It's Mark's. He brought it over for a big barbecue we had a few years ago and the bum won't come back and get it. He and the kids come over every Fourth of July and we have a picnic and play in the yard."

Amanda grabbed her own plate and plopped down on the padded wooden bench alongside Claire. While Claire was looking at Missy, who was playing on a blanket in the yard, sneaky fingers stole several chips from the darker woman's plate.

"Hey! Get your own." Claire pulled away her plate as her attention was drawn back to her disappearing lunch.

"But yours looks better!" Amanda pouted.

"It's exactly the same as yours." The lawyer arched an eyebrow. "How can it look better?"

Amanda shrugged, her fake pout evaporating as she continued munching on the stolen chips. "Dunno. Just does."

Claire smiled indulgently and placed a light kiss on Amanda's cheek. "Here," she offered the plate back to her friend. "They're all yours."

Amanda returned the kiss, but this time on the lips. She lingered there for a moment before sighing and pulling away. When she opened her eyes she found herself captured in a pool of stunning blue. "Thanks," she whispered affectionately, savoring the feeling of warm familiarity that always seemed to rush through her in the taller woman's presence. Before returning her attention to her daughter, she happily grabbed several more of Claire's chips. "I knew I liked you for a reason."

Claire snorted and took another bite of hamburger. "Who knew Doritos were such an aphrodisiac?"

Laughing at her friend's dry humor, Amanda stood to get a better view of Missy, who had wandered off the blanket onto the lush grass. The little girl was hunched over and appeared to find something very interesting among the bright spring flowers. *Uh oh.*

Amanda sat down her plate walked a few steps down the deck stairs.

"Whatcha lookin' at sweetheart?" she called out.

The girl squealed with delight, as Claire joined Amanda on the steps to see what the fuss was about. Missy suddenly straightened, waiving a large, black, wiggling cricket in her hand. "Bug! Bug!" she yelled to her mother.

"Missy, put the bug..."

The small blonde immediately popped the insect into her mouth.

Claire winced as Amanda bolted the rest of the way down the steps and began trying to pry the little girl's lips apart. "Eewwww! Missy that is so disgusting...here...spit it out."

The stubborn child refused to open her mouth and gulped loudly as she defiantly swallowed the bug.

Claire flinched as she knelt down a few feet in front of the child. *God, kids are totally gross! Did I eat live bugs?* she wondered.

Amanda looked down at the child, her hands resting on her hips in the universal maternal scolding position. Shaking a finger she reprimanded her daughter. "That was a bad girl! Bugs are not to eat. Only food goes in your mouth."

Claire looked up at Amanda, who was obviously not too worried nor too surprised by her daughter's unusual lunch selection. "Will she be okay?" The larger woman's face paled slightly.

The therapist nodded, amused by Claire's distress and obvious inexperience with young children. "Sure." She placed a reassuring hand on Claire's shoulder. "It was just a cricket. Could've been worse." Claire looked up doubtfully. "Could've been a spider or small snake," Amanda offered.

The toddler wobbled over to Claire who was still kneeling on the grass and now thoroughly grossed out. "Chips!" the girl screamed as two tiny hands reached out and stole the last of Claire's Doritos.

Amanda was about to correct Missy's behavior when Claire looked up at her with narrowed eyes. "And what were you going to tell her, Mandy?" Claire inquired wryly as she brushed off her knees and stood.

Smiling innocently, Amanda scooped the child up and began marching up the deck stairs. "Let's go brush your teeth, Kiddo."

A few moments later both blondes reappeared on the deck. The shorter one walked over to Claire, who had been impatiently waiting for their return, and sharply tugged her pant leg. Blue eyes peeled themselves off the child's mother and rested on the little girl's fair head.

"Tanks for chips Cwairrr." Missy threw her arms around Claire's legs and hugged her tightly.

Claire smiled down at the girl, and felt a strong blast of affection. *Lord, I'm in deep trouble here. The daughter gets to me just as easily as her mother.* "You're welcome, Missy."

Amanda could see that Claire was doing her best to wrestle a goofy grin off her face. The young mother smiled proudly as Missy released her captive and looked pointedly at the stairs. *You do have a sentimental side, don't ya Gumby?* Grabbing her daughter's hand, the pair slowly descended the stairs together. When the child was settled back onto her blanket with a fresh batch of toys, Amanda walked back to Claire, who was sitting on the edge of the deck her long legs dangling free, and her chin resting on the low redwood railing.

Amanda frowned a little at the serious contemplative face below her. "Whatcha thinkin' about?" she inquired softly.

Claire glanced up at her friend. "Hmm? Oh...nothing I guess." The brunette patted the wood beside her and Amanda joined her, tucking her own feet beneath her.

Amanda waited a few moments in silence before she wearily ventured into uncharted waters with Claire. "If something is bothering you...well...you could discuss it with me...if you wanted to."

"No. But thanks." Claire voice was firmer than she'd intended, and she didn't miss the look of hurt that flickered across Amanda's eyes. Even so, when Claire opened her mouth to speak, she quickly closed it, deciding to remain mute.

Amanda scrunched pale brows together. *She was fine a few minutes ago. Why wouldn't she...oh...right.* "It's my job, isn't it?"

Claire shifted guiltily. *Damn, am I that transparent?*

The smaller woman sighed and grasped Claire's hand. Her voice was teasing but it still held a serious edge. "Me being a psychologist, well...it tends to freak people out. Somehow they get it into their heads that I'm analyzing everything they say." Amanda's eyes pinned Claire. "I don't do that, you know."

Claire decided to face the issue directly. Amanda's profession, and what it might mean in the context of their relationship, had been a festering spot of worry for her since the beginning. "How could you not do that? I know I'm always seeing the 'legal aspect' of things. Can you really just turn off your training?"

"Claire, it's not a matter of..." Amanda stopped, wondering if she could truly make her friend understand. *I need to tell her this or she's never gonna feel comfortable opening up to me.* Firming her resolve, she nodded to herself and began again. "At work, an important part of my job is the ability to maintain a certain level of emotional detachment from my patients. It's what they need from me. It's also what I need in order to perform my job. And that's something..." green eyes softened and Claire felt the smaller hand wrapped around hers squeeze gently "...I could never have with you. I don't want to be detached or unbiased. I want to care...personally... a lot. You just looked like you were thinking about something rough. I was only asking as your friend. I promise." Claire swallowed hard as she tried to push down the lump that had formed in her throat. Turning away from Amanda, she focused on the relaxed child. "I...I..."

I need to back off a little before I scare the poor woman to death. Amanda's mind raced to find a way to help her friend relax. Bumping her shoulder against Claire's, she flashed her friend a cheerful smile. "Don't worry about it, Gumby. Now, what's up? Are you still mad at the Greer women for pilfering your Doritos?"

Claire burst out laughing amazed at how hard it was to maintain a funk in smaller woman's presence. "No. My Doritos are your Doritos," she promised solemnly. "I was just thinking...that I haven't felt this happy in a long time. With you both here..." her eyes flashed to the tiny figure below the deck "...the property just seems...I don't know...more like a home than just a house."

"And that makes you sad?"

"A little I guess. It makes me think about how lonely I was before I met you." Claire took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. "And how I don't ever want to be that lonely again."

Amanda was a little taken aback by the seriousness she saw in Claire's eyes. But she took the admission for what it was...a small step toward a future where just maybe...neither woman would ever be lonely again. Correctly sensing that Claire was at her emotional limit, she let a comfortable silence settle between them before changing the subject.

Amanda's reached up and idly fingered a lock of dark hair that fell several inches below Claire's shoulders. "What's your middle name?" The small hand moved deeper into the dark mane.

"What?" Claire leaned into the soothing touch, surprised and more than a little relieved by the change of subject. *I'll get there Amanda. Just give me a little time.*

"You know, your middle name." Amanda examined the soft shiny hair in detail, admiring the way the afternoon sun brought out its deep chestnut and mahogany highlights. She felt an almost irresistible urge to bury her face in the sable strands and deeply breath in

their fresh scent. Admitting to herself that she wouldn't be able to stop those urges much longer, she lightly kissed Claire's shoulder and began smoothing the lock back into place. She continued her inquiry. "That's the name that comes after Claire but before Easton. Come on, I want to find out more about you. I'm a very detail oriented person." She grinned when she saw Claire's body visibly relax under her touch.

The larger woman was having trouble concentrating on anything. Amanda's soft touch was affecting her in ways she considered profound. "My name...right. It's Alexandra, after my paternal grandmother."

"Hmmm. I like it. It's strong but still feminine, just like you."

Claire smiled at the compliment. *I am so crazy about this woman I can hardly stand it!*

"Thanks. What about yours?"

"What about my what?" Green eyes were now firmly fixed on the soft bare skin on Claire's arm. *That pale blue sleeveless blouse is fantastic.* Amanda found herself unwilling to control disobedient fingers as they drifted up and down the warm skin.

Claire groaned. "Jesus, Mandy!" She let out an exasperated sigh and grabbed the small moving hand. Bringing it to her lips she gently kissed its fingertips. Wide blue eyes begged for mercy. "It's humanly impossible for me to think when you're touching me like that."

"Fine. Spoil my fun," she teased as she gazed back at Missy who had fallen asleep in the grass. "I think the sugar from those cookies you gave her finally wore off."

Claire nodded and wrapped a long arm around Amanda's waist, pulling her in closer to sit in front her. "Well...what is it?"

Amanda happily rested her head on the broad shoulder behind her, lightly gripping the arms wrapped around her waist. Once again, the position was accompanied by a peaceful sense of quiet belonging and déjà vu. "I don't have a middle name."

"What?" Claire questioned. "Everyone has one. Oh boy, yours must be reeeeaalllly bad then." She squeezed the sturdy body in her arms.

"Nope," Amanda giggled. "I don't have one, not even an initial. Nothing. Nada. Zip. Zilch."

"Sure, Mandy," the lawyer drawled, making it quite clear she didn't believe one word. "I have vvvayyyys ov making yuuuuu tok" the dark woman threatened. A split second later, she was tickling a squirming therapist.

After a moment of torture Amanda couldn't take anymore. "I surrender! Uncle! I give!" she squealed between fits of laughter, finally persuading the merciless fingers to still.

"Well?" Claire demanded.

"I...uh.." Amanda burst out laughing again. "Can I tell you later? Pleeeeeasse."

Claire rolled her eyes at her companions shameless begging. "Fine. But I won't forget," she reminded the smaller woman, as she settled her back into a tight embrace.

"Mmm." Amanda snuggled deeper, taking a long moment to enjoy the sun and flowers and thick greenery displayed in Claire's huge backyard. Plentiful spring rains had left the landscape looking rich and lush and Amanda happily inhaled the smell of grass and the now familiar floral scent of her companion. The blonde had almost fallen asleep, drifting easily into Claire's irresistible warmth, when a deep voice roused her from the comfortable haze.

"Have you heard from your sister again?"

Amanda frowned at the distasteful topic she'd been trying to put out of her mind for the past week. *But somehow, when I'm in her arms the problem seems so much more manageable,* she mused silently. "No. She hasn't contacted me directly but she showed up at my folk's house yesterday. I talked with my dad on the phone last night." Amanda shifted to face Claire. "God, they were so upset. I don't think they ever really accepted

the fact that Monica had a serious problem. But yesterday she showed up high and looked like she'd been beaten up or in an accident or something."

Claire's face grew still. "What did she want? Was she alone?"

"He said she was alone and that she was looking for me. Apparently, she couldn't remember where I live." Amanda pulled back feeling a dark roiling anger pulsing through the lawyer. "It's okay, Claire. My dad told her to leave and didn't give her any information." *Or, for once any money.*" She smiled wryly. "Although, as soon as she sobers up she'll figure out that she can just open a phone book and get my address. I half expected to see her before now."

Claire stiffened and took a deep breath but Amanda spoke again before she could reply. "I want to see her, just not with Missy at home." She looked out affectionately at the sleeping child. "I've made arrangements for Missy to stay at Mrs. Fisher's house for the next few days. Her two-year old granddaughter will be visiting for the next week so Missy'll have a ball."

Claire didn't bother to mask her worry. "Seeing her could be dangerous. Who knows what she might do?"

Amanda's voice took on a fearsome quality. "I...am...not...avoiding...my...sister! We need to talk. I can't live like this...not knowing when she's going to show up and make trouble...or..." Amanda swallowed hard, the look on her face making it painfully clear she didn't even want to think about the her next statement. "Or, wondering if she might show up when I'm at work and try to steal Missy."

Claire could see her friend was doing her best to hold back tears. *Shit! What can I say to that? It's exactly what I've been thinking myself.* Claire softened her voice and gently cupped Amanda's chin, forcing watery green eyes to meet hers. "Let me help you. Please." She smiled weakly. "I can't stand seeing you upset...I...I know I can help you keep Monica from taking Missy legally. But if she really wants to take her illegally, there's nothing much we can do...except CONVINCE her that would be a VERY bad idea"

Amanda didn't miss the threatening tone in Claire's voice. *Could I convince Monica to leave us alone permanently? How far am I willing to go? As far as I have to,* came the immediate response. But what made her oddly uncomfortable, was that even after Claire's offer to help, she still wasn't sure how far the lawyer was willing to go. With that thought, all of Amanda's own insecurities came rushing back. *Why would she want to get involved in this mess? It's obvious she could have anyone she wanted. Missy and I are going to be nothing but trouble. It's not fair to her, and as soon as she figures that out she won't be able to run away fast enough.* Amanda's heart lurched at the thought.

Ignoring her aching chest and pounding pulse she screwed up her courage and prepared to let Claire exit the relationship gracefully. Amanda angrily wiped away an errant tear.

"C...Cl...Claire," her voice cracked. *Just do it quickly. Don't think about it.* "Maybe..."

"No," came the firm reply.

"But..."

"I said NO!" Claire pulled Amanda into a fierce hug and spoke into the soft red-gold hair.

"I'm not giving up on you or your problems, and I'm not letting you do this alone."

Amanda tightened her grip on Claire, crushing out all the space between them. "I really don't want you to let me do this alone," she said miserably.

"Then I won't," Claire whispered fiercely, grateful beyond reason that Amanda wasn't going to push her away. She turned and kissed the pale head resting several inches below hers, feeling Amanda's body relax as the nearly unbearable tension melted away in the embrace. *Mandy, I'm so glad I didn't meet you when I was younger. As nervous and inept*

as I am with this today, there's no way I could have handled this then. But now that I've finally found you, I'm and not gonna blow this. I'm not!

Amanda pulled back and sniffed. "Well, I guess we've got someone to find."

Claire nodded. "And I don't want to wait. Will you help me tonight?" Claire nodded again, a smile appearing. Amanda leaned forward and brushed a featherlight kiss on Claire's lips. "Thank you."

"You're welcome," was the simple response. "I was planning on seeing Mark later today but I'm sure I can reschedule," Claire decided.

Amanda bit her lip, her brow furrowed in deep thought. "Jody and I were supposed to get together too. I'll call her and give her a rain check. She's a mature person. She'll understand."

"I sure as hell DO NOT understand!" Jody ranted.

Amanda took a deep breath and tried to control her own temper. "Jesus Christ, Jody! I told you why I was doing this."

The larger woman crossed her arms and lowered the volume. "It's too dangerous to go looking for Monica alone," she said sensibly. "You know where you'll have to look, don't you?"

Amanda nodded, grimly remembering the neighborhood where Claire's explorer had been found. "Yes, I know. And I'm not going alone." Jody dropped her arms and lifted her eyebrows in question. *Why do I think she's not gonna like this.* "Claire's going with me."

"What?" Jody practically screamed. The older woman's voice turned combative as her hands went to rest on solid hips. "You barely know this woman and now you're going to traipse around the worst neighborhoods in the Twin Cities with her?"

"That's exactly what I'm going to do." Amanda's temper flared as she closed the distance between she and Jody. A small angry finger poked her partner's chest, punctuating each word she spoke. "SO GET USED TO IT!"

Jody stepped back out Amanda's reach and crossed her arms again. "Then I'm going too!"

"No you're not," Amanda challenged.

"Oh, yes I am!"

"Deal with it Mark. You're not coming with us." Claire began rummaging through her drawers looking for something to wear. "Do you know what the weather is supposed to be like tonight?"

Mark, leaned against the large oak dresser. "Umm...cool, windy, chance of rain." The big man shrugged. "Same as every night. Listen, wouldn't it be a better..."

"Nope."

RING...RING...RING...

Claire moved over to her nightstand and clicked open her cell phone. "Hello."

"Hi, Claire."

The lawyer smiled broadly, immediately recognizing her friend's warm tones. "Hi Mandy." Sticking a tongue out at Mark's smirk, Claire twisted her body so the smug man couldn't see her face. "What's up? I thought I wasn't picking you for..." she glanced at her watch, "...another hour of so."

"No, that's right I just...well...Jody's here and she's insists on coming with us."

Just great. Claire sighed. "I know what you mean. Mark's been harping on me for the last 30 minutes. He wants to come along too. What do you think?"

Amanda looked over at her pouting friend. "I think I'll it would be easier to let them come along than keep fighting about it. I didn't want to get a bunch other people

involved." Amanda narrowed her eyes at her friend who had a satisfied smile plastered all over her face. "But apparently they insist."

Claire could hear Jody's "damn right I do" in the background. *She'd better be nice tonight. I don't feel like putting up with any of her shit.* She winced internally at the idea of spending the entire evening in Jody's presence. *I'll try to keep from ripping off her head and ramming it down her throat...for Mandy.* "Okay Mandy, Mark and I will be there in about an hour."

"Thanks Claire, I appreciate it." *I really do appreciate this Gummy.*

"Bye."

"Bye." Amanda walked over to the sink and rinsed out her glass. "She didn't have to do that you know. We were planning on going alone." *Don't push it with her tonight Jody. Don't make me say something you don't want to hear.*

Jody looked offended. "We had plans tonight too, Amanda," she reminded the younger woman.

"I know." Amanda wrapped an arm around her friend and escorted her out of the kitchen.

"Did I mention that a friend of Claire's is coming along?"

"She has a friend?" Jody snorted. "Another lawyer no doubt. They travel in packs."

"Jody." It was a warning.

"Okay, okay, I'll do my best to be nice." The dark haired woman pulled out a dining room chair. Turning it backwards, she straddled it. "So what's her friend's name?"

"Mark." Amanda immediately noticed a change in her friend's demeanor. *You are so predictable, my friend.*

Jody affected a non-interested pose. "Have you met this Mark?" Her finger trailed around the rim of her iced tea glass, wiping away the moisture.

"Oh yeah. He's really good looking too." Amanda wriggled her eyebrows. "If I weren't gay..."

Jody ran a hand through her short hair, sending it further into disarray. *Is she just messing with me?* She regarded the blonde suspiciously as she swirled the ice around in her glass. "Define good looking."

"Humph. Are you saying I don't know if a man's good looking?" Amanda asked incredulously as she sat down in the chair next to her friend.

"Well, it's not exactly your area of expertise is it?" Jody pointed out sarcastically.

"What? You comment on women's looks all the time. That's not your area of expertise!" Amanda noted.

"That's different. I am a woman. That gives me dominion in both arenas."

Good answer. "Fine. You can just wait and see for yourself." Green eyes twinkled, knowing what her next words would do to her friend. "And you're probably right. After all what do I know? I mean...6'4" and 225 lbs. of solid muscle, along with a great smile, thick fair hair and light eyes... that might not qualify as good looking, right? Oh yeah, did I mention he's single?" Amanda burst out laughing as her friend began to choke on her iced tea.

"Why didn't you say that to begin with?" Jody choked out as Amanda slapped her on the back. Suddenly the older counselor jumped up like she was on fire. "Shit! I haven't shaved my legs for 3 days!" That comment sent Amanda over the edge. She began laughing so hard tears streaming down her cheeks. "It's not funny!" Jody complained. "How much time do I have?"

When Amanda finally stopped shaking she wiped her tears with the back of her hands.

"Wow! I needed that. Thanks Jody." *Boy, did I ever need that.* Amanda felt some of the gnawing anxiety she'd been trying to force away, recede naturally. She smiled

affectionately at her friend. "Relax. You're wearing pants for heaven's sake. No one will even see your legs." Amanda stood and motioned her friend to follow her upstairs. Periodic fits of giggles escaped from the blonde as the women walked down the hallway and entered her room. "Yeah, but I'll know," Jody whined as she lay down on Amanda's bed. "It will affect my confidence."

"Ha! That'll be the day." The blonde disappeared into the walk-in closet. "I already feel sorry for Mark," she teased.

Jody laughed and settled in to wait for her friend. Although Jody liked Amanda's entire condo, this room was by far her favorite. While the other rooms only contained one or two of Amanda's watercolors, this room was overflowing with them. The younger therapist was generally shy about her talents, and it took several months of prodding and gentle coaxing before she'd reluctantly agreed to display a few of her paintings at the Cornerstone Clinic. At home, however, she wasn't in the least self-conscious. But her best work, at least in Jody's opinion, remained locked away, for her eyes-only. *Or, the very few who make it into this room*, Jody pondered.

Nearly every bit of wall space was taken as odd shaped paintings filled in what would be unavoidable gaps in space anywhere else. There were even several partially completed paintings displayed "as is," just because Amanda said they made her happy, and it didn't really matter if she finished them or not.

The bed was large and soft, and laying on it, reminded Jody of the secret nighttime chats she'd shared with her younger brother and sister when they were kids. Jody sighed and regarded the comforter. Sometimes Salt Lake City seemed like a million miles away.

Maybe I should get a pet.

"Hang on for a few more minutes Jody. I wanna change into something warmer and I'm not finding exactly what I'm looking for." *I wonder if I packed enough warm clothes for Missy?* Amanda mentally calculated number of days she estimated Missy would be gone, and compared it to the number of sweatshirts and heavy pants she sent along with Mrs. Fisher. *Maybe I'll get lucky and this will all be over sooner than I think. God, I hope so.*

"I hope you sent some warm clothes along with my Buddy. It's still chilly in the mornings and evenings," Jody called out from her reclining position.

"That's why I love you Jody. You know, Missy is really lucky to have you for a Godmother," came the reply from the closet.

"And here I thought you loved me for my sparkling personality and great boobs." Jody ducked but nothing flew over her head. *That's weird. I thought that one would get her for sure. Oh well.* She waited a full 30 seconds before sitting back up. As she turned her head to say something, a heavy pillow sailed out of the closet and hit her squarely in the face. The momentum sent her reeling backwards off the bed.

Amanda smiled when she heard a loud thump and her friend's muffled curses. "She shoots, she scores," she called out victoriously as she continued looking for her shoes.

Exactly one-hour later the doorbell rang. "Jody could you get the door for me? I wanna turn off these lights before we leave. Without waiting for an answer Amanda disappeared into the kitchen.

Sure. Jody opened the door to find Mark patiently waiting. Claire was no where to be seen. *So far so good*, she silently mused.

The large man held out his hand. "Hi. I'm Claire's friend, Mark Gustafson." He pointed out into the darkness. "She insisted on checking all the window to make sure the place was safe. She asked me to let you know we were here so that she wouldn't scare anybody."

"Nice to meet you Mark." Jody smiled and returned the firm handshake. I'm Jody Penbrook, Amanda's business partner. Come on in." She gestured toward the interior. *Holy shit, Amanda! When you're right you're right.*

Mark looked back over his shoulder wishing Claire would hurry up. "Maybe I should wait for Claire?"

"Nah, she's a big girl." Jody slammed the door shut immediately behind Mark. She smiled sweetly. "She'll be fine."

"Well, if you're sure." Mark made his way to the couch and nervously sat down. *Where is Amanda? And why does this woman keep looking at me like I'm dinner?* Mark took a long hard look at Jody. While not nearly as striking, in a way, her dark good looks and strong features reminded him of Claire. *Maybe this evening won't be as depressing as I thought.*

"Hi guys," Amanda said as she reentered the room. Pale brows knit as she looked around. "Is Claire in the bathroom?"

"Hi Amanda," Mark answered brightly.

"Claire is checking all the windows and locks," Jody supplied, unable to keep the acerbic edge completely out of her voice. She mentally rolled her eyes. *Jane Bond is back. Although, she was forced to admit to herself, it's not such a bad idea.*

"And she's doing this alone?" Amanda asked clearly upset.

Both Mark and Jody shifted guiltily.

"Very nice, guys," the blonde woman scolded as she began moving toward the front door. Before she could open it she heard a light knock. Looking back over her shoulder she shot Jody and Mark a look that said 'you're damn lucky nothing happened.' They responded by simultaneously muttering 'uh oh,' then smiled as they realized they were thinking the same thing.

"Hi Mandy," Claire said brightly as the door opened and she was faced by her friend. Amanda grabbed Claire by the wrist and dragged her through the front door. "Why were you walking around outside... in the dark... ALONE?" Three sets of eyebrows raised.

"Well?" she demanded.

Claire was completely confused. "I...I...was just checking your locks." *Shit! What did I do?* "Because you were worried my sister or her husband would come back and try to break in here?" Amanda finished.

Claire nodded, a little taken aback by Amanda's obvious anger.

"If it was dangerous enough for you to be worried about my safety, don't you think it would have been smarter not to go running around alone? I think it's reasonable for me to be concerned about your safety too."

Claire looked at Jody and Mark who simply shrugged. Looking back at Amanda she could see her friend was truly upset. "I can take care of myself I... you...you...don't need to be concerned," Claire stuttered.

Amanda released Claire's wrist and laid her palms flat against Claire's chest. She could feel the heart under her hands beating furiously. *Did I do that? Crap. I really need to work on my temper.*

"I want to be concerned, remember?" Amanda lowered her voice so only Claire would hear her. "I'm sorry, Gumby. I'm not really mad. I just got scared," she whispered as her hands began moving in a soothing circular motion. "I guess I'm a little on edge about tonight." Before she even had all the words out she could feel the pounding pulse begin to slow.

The lawyer let out a breath she didn't know she was holding. *She was worried about me?* Claire glanced over at Mark and Jody who suddenly found their feet extremely interesting. "You're not mad at me then?" Claire asked Amanda sincerely.

"No." Amanda traced Claire's collarbone, wondering how long it had been since anyone had wanted to take care of Claire. "I'm not."

"Good." She hugged the smaller woman reveling in Amanda's obviously 'touchy' personality. *I'm more than happy to give and receive as many of these hugs as possible.* Claire spared herself a fleeting second to enjoy the warmth of concern Amanda was offering. *How did I get so lucky? Wait. She really thought I couldn't handle Monica or Chucky? As if!* Claire paused, a little disturbed at how much she'd love the opportunity to 'handle' them.

Both Mark and Jody would have preferred not to have witnessed the tender scene, but for very different reasons. When they each sensed the lover's quarrel was over, they approached the embracing couple. Mark cleared his throat awkwardly.

"It's okay to talk to us Mark," Claire teased.

Amanda reluctantly untangled herself from Claire and walked over to hug the tall blonde.

"Sorry Mark. I guess you didn't get a proper hello from me." He blushed slightly under the attention.

"That's okay Amanda, you're right. I should have gone with her." Mark nervously moved out of the hug and looked at Jody. "So are you a lesbian too?"

All three women stood frozen mid-motion, speechless, their mouths hanging open. Claire was the first one to recover. "Shit Marko, I can't take you anywhere, can I?" She turned back to the other woman. "At least he's housebroken," she offered wryly.

"What?" the big man complained. "I was just wondering."

Jody finally closed her mouth. "The answer is no," she croaked.

Amanda grabbed Mark's arm and began escorting him to the front door. She motioned to a laughing Claire, and a stunned Jody, to follow. "It's okay, Mark. I think the question just surprised us." Amanda barely contained her own laughter as she considered just how far from the truth his question really was. "Mark, she is SO not a lesbian."

"Well all right! That's all I wanted to know."

"You drive a bright orange Gremlin?" Amanda asked, hoping she didn't sound too surprised. Even in the muted glow of the streetlights, its pumpkin finish shone proudly. Amanda and Jody exchanged looks of mutual disgust.

"Oh, yeah! This car is Mark's baby," Claire informed the women. "He loves it."

"Ha ha, Claire. You know damn well, this piece of crap isn't mine." Mark turned eyes begging to be believed on Jody and Amanda. "It's my 17 year old nephew's car. I didn't want my truck to get messed with and I thought this would make a less attractive target."

"I don't know" Claire said skeptically. "Weren't you telling me earlier that this beauty was a classic? How much did you say you were going to offer your nephew for it?"

Paybacks for Gumby...Sucker.

Mark narrowed his eyes. "You're asking for it Claire," he threatened.

Jody and Amanda smiled at the familiar bantering as Claire and Mark went around to the driver's side and whispered something to each other. Meanwhile, Jody and Amanda entered the passenger's side. "Shit!" Mark cursed, as the door handle broke off in his hand. Jody was already inside so she reached across the driver's seat and opened Mark's door from the inside. Amanda settled in next to Claire in the back seat.

The car smelled like a mixture of beer and stinky sweat socks and... "Ewww!" Amanda crinkled her nose. "What's that smell?" She tried to hide from the hideous combination of aromas by burying her nose in Claire's denim jacket.

"Which one?" Claire answered disgustedly as she kicked a piece of stale pizza crust under the seat. "Jesus Mark! Couldn't at least have found a car that wasn't ripe?"

"Stop complaining. It was last minute, okay. I noticed you didn't want to take your car," he shot back. "And I think the specific smell you're referring to is Clearasil. There's a half-squashed tub of the stuff under Jody's seat."

"Ahhh. I thought I smelled medicine," Jody mentioned as she finally gave up trying to attach her broken seat belt.

Mark fumbled with the keys for a moment before the small car roared to life...really ROARED. "Sorry, I think the muffler has a hole in it," Mark apologized.

"There is no muffler. It fell off on the way over here." Claire happily snuggled with Amanda enjoying her musky perfume rather than the other unknown smells.

"Why didn't you tell me?" The large man questioned. "Jimmy's gonna be pissed!"

"Somehow I don't think Jimmy will notice, Mark," Claire snorted. "This is officially the most revolting vehicle I have ever ridden in...or seen for that matter."

Mark laughed. "You're right about that Claire. Sorry guys." His apology was greeted with several half-hearted grumbles.

Claire was surprised the Gremlin actually started again at Amanda's house. But now it seemed to be even slower than when they drove to Amanda's. *Will a missing muffler do that?* They were heading back to the area where the Explorer had been found and it would take an hour at this rate. "Why are we going so slow, Marko?"

"Have you seen the dashboard? Cause if you can 'see' it then you're doing better than I am. There's not even one light working up here. I have no idea how fast I'm going."

"Maybe there's a flashlight in the glove box?" Jody speculated.

Mark smiled and nodded. "Good idea. Why don't you check it out."

Jody grabbed the handle and pulled but nothing happened. She pulled it again. Still nothing. "This must be broken I can't get it open."

Mark scratched his jaw. "It's probably just stuck. Give a good yank and see what happens."

Jody shrugged and gave the handle a strong pull. On the third tug the door flew open and a large mass of small packets flew out. The bulk landed Jody's lap, but a few others scattered throughout the car. "What the..." She jumped back not sure what to expect. Each occupant picked up a packet to examine it. Mark blushed, Jody's eyes widened and Amanda started giggling. Claire simply tossed her packet back onto the floor and pulled Amanda closer.

"I got a super-ribbed model," Jody shared, after selecting a random packet from the pile.

"Oh yeah? Mine's an ultra sensitive, glow in the dark, one sized fits all," Amanda countered as both women began to laugh.

"How many rubbers does one teenager need?" Claire wondered aloud.

"At least he's thinking safety," Mark defended as he tossed down the classic Trojan.

"They teach that in school, you know."

"Looks like he's gunning for valedictorian!" Jody exclaimed, making even Claire chuckle.

After several more rounds of condom jokes Mark turned to Jody. "You said you were Amanda's partner..." The two began a conversation about both of their careers that basically ignored the backseat passengers.

"Looks like we're in a veritable love-nest, sweetheart," Claire whispered to Amanda as she gently kissed her cheek.

Amanda smiled at the unexpected endearment. "Umm Hmm." She agreed as she returned the kiss to Claire's jawbone. "But I still like the backseat of your car better."

Claire growled remembering just how much fun she had picking out her new car. Lightly grasping Amanda's chin she tilted her face up to meet hers in a soft kiss. Claire groaned and Amanda whimpered as the kiss deepened.

"Hey you two had better cool it back there," Jody interrupted in her best adolescent voice. "If one of you gets pregnant my mom won't let me hang around with you anymore." "If one of them gets pregnant I'm quitting my job and we're taking the show on the road," Mark quipped to Jody as he accelerated through a yellow light. "There's bound to be big money in that." He smiled wickedly.

"Oh yeah, I'd pay to see that," Jody agreed.

"Okay, you perverts. No getting your jollies at our expense!" Amanda protested.

"They're calling us perverts?" Mark questioned. "Hey Claire, do you still have your tongue or did Amanda swallow it completely?" The entire car burst out laughing.

The evening had begun on a promising note. Mark had called one of his police buddies and got some decent leads on different places Monica might end up 'crashing.' Early on, they had even encountered several people who recognized Amanda, thinking she was Monica, and telling her how fantastic she looked. Not surprisingly, these people who hadn't seen Monica for several years.

Eventually, the foursome ended up checking out what Mark called 'flophouses.' They scoured empty warehouses, decaying motels and even few decrepit private residences that were well known to law enforcement. Their occupants were mostly young people, runaways Jody guessed, and clearly addicts. But mixed in among them were a smattering of the elderly homeless and several people who appeared to be mentally challenged. After entering the first warehouse, Claire decided she was very glad that Mark had insisted on coming along. His size alone deterred most of the unwelcome attention. But the last place was by far the worst. Although it was a house, it was filled with all types of people, some stretched out sleeping on rickety furniture on the floor, some leaning against the wall staring off into space. No one paid the newcomers any mind as they walked through the house sticking their heads into the various rooms. The stench in the rooms made the Gremlin's interior seem like perfume. Having no success on the bottom floor the foursome carefully made their way upstairs.

The room at the end of the hall had several filthy mattresses scattered across the floor. Empty bottles, trash and syringes littered the torn stained carpet. The room's only non-rodent or insect occupants were two small boys that were practically sleeping on top of each other. The children were dirty and thin, and one little boy was wearing a single shoe. Jody and Amanda had wanted to pick up the children right then and take them out the house. But Mark explained it would be better to allow social services to come and get the boys. That way they could see the squalid living conditions for themselves and figure out if one of the passed out people on the lower floor were the children's mother or father. "Oh my God!" Amanda exclaimed, her voice a little shaky as she pushed open the heavy metal door and took a deep breath of the cool night air. "That's it. That's the last one. I don't want to go into anymore of these places. Thank goodness we didn't find her here. I..."

Claire wrapped her arms around the smaller woman. "Shh. I know." She looked at Mark and Jody who both shook their heads in agreement. It was time to call it a night. "We can try again tomorrow." The lawyer smoothed the blonde hair under her chin. "Let's go home." She took hold of Amanda's hand and began walking to the Gremlin, Jody and Mark traveled silently several steps behind.

Before starting the car, Mark opened his cell phone and called the police. The women grimaced as he relayed what they had seen and asked that a social worker accompany the police their current location. After the very brief call, Mark clicked shut his phone and

took a deep breath. "I think I could use a drink." He looked at his watch and sighed. It was almost 2:30 a.m.

"How about we head back to my house, Marko? I think we could all use a little time to wind down after tonight." Claire's thumb stroked the back of Amanda's hand and she received a little squeeze telling her that at least Amanda would be joining her.

"Not tonight, Claire. I'm wiped out. And I need to pick up Bobby and Keith from my mom's in the morning."

She's not as bad as I thought. And she does seem to really care about Amanda but...well...I still don't have like her. Defiantly, Jody decided to address Amanda rather than Claire. "I need to be getting home too, Amanda." *I can't believe I'm going to suggest this.* "Maybe you should stay at Claire's place tonight. I don't like the thought of you being at home alone."

Mark muttered something that echoed Jody's statement.

"Well..." *She's growing on you, isn't Jody?* Amanda smiled knowing her friend's stubborn resolve to dislike Claire was beginning to falter. Not that it mattered. She had no intention of being alone tonight. "What do you think Claire?"

A brilliant smile was her answer.

The foursome stood outside the Gremlin as it unevenly idled in Claire's driveway. Claire grumpily looked underneath the rumbling beast, praying an oil leak wasn't among its many ailments. "You guys sure you don't wanna come in?" She motioned to her house with one hand, Amanda's hand held firmly in her other.

"I'm sure. I'll talk to you tomorrow. Just let me know when you guys are going out again so I can come along too." The tall man looked down at Amanda who stood half a head shorter than everyone else. "Hey, Amanda do you ever miss Oz?"

Amanda narrowed her eyes as Jody and Claire tried unsuccessfully not to laugh. "Probably not as much as you miss Babe the Blue Ox," she retorted. The other women gave up their attempt to stifle their laughter as Mark bent over to kiss Amanda on the cheek. This drew a raised eyebrow from Claire, which only made him enjoy the platonic kiss that much more.

After the light peck on the cheek he whispered in her ear. "I'm sorry about your sister. Don't worry. We'll find her."

The blonde smiled affectionately as Mark waived goodbye to Claire and ducked into the Gremlin. "Not so fast, tough guy." She stuck her head through the open window and returned the kiss on a stubbley cheek. "Thank you, Mark," she remarked sincerely. "I wouldn't have wanted to go into those places without you." She could see his faint blush in the moonlight and backed away, not wanting to embarrass him further.

"Good night, Amanda." Jody walked over and hugged her friend. "I'll call you tomorrow."

"Bye." Amanda looked at Jody as she climbed into the car. She wriggled her eyebrows so only her friend could see. The older therapist nodded, reluctantly conceding Mark was extremely attractive and that Amanda was right.

The car doors slammed as Claire and Amanda walked across the yard, the damp grass soaking their shoes as they made their way onto the porch. "What do you think about them?" Amanda asked as she Claire keyed in the security code.

"What do I think about who?"

Amanda rolled her eyes.

"I assume your car is at Amanda's place, or do you want me to take you straight home?" Mark asked as he exited off the highway.

"No, it's at Amanda's. And thanks, I appreciate you taking me back." Jody shifted in her seat, a little nervous at being left alone with Mark.

The big man turned to Jody and smiled, the cool night air blowing his hair wildly around his face. "No problem. I was planning on going there anyway. Besides, I'm too wound up to go right to sleep. The fresh air will do me good." *Think of something interesting to say!*

"So, why do you dislike Claire so much?" *Oh that was smooth! Shit.*

Jody forgot about her nervousness. "You know, you're just as rude as she is! Have you ever heard a little thing called manners?" *What is with this guy? He can't miss the Ox. He is an Ox!*

Mark's eyebrows disappeared behind flying bangs. "RUDE! You're the one who wouldn't speak to Claire all night. I'd say that's pretty damn rude." He considered stopping, but he was on a roll. "You're acting like a spoiled brat who's jealous because her playmate has a new friend. SO DON'T CALL ME RUDE!" The tall man tightened his grip on the steering wheel causing it to creak loudly.

"ME! You're the one who wouldn't let Claire get more than 10 feet away from you. She practically had to peel you off her so she could use the bathroom at that gas station."

Jody was yelling. "Do all attorney's have hero complexes or just you and Claire?"

Mark leaned across the seat and looked into Jody's eyes. "Nope, their more brown than green. "Jealous much?"

"Smartass," she muttered, knowing he was at least in part, right. "Just take me to my car," she ground out between gritted teeth.

Uh...Oh. Now she's pissed. I'm so suave. No wonder I'm alone. Damn, she really is nice. She must have handed out 50 business cards tonight offering free counseling. And the way she wanted to take care of those kids...

"Turn left here."

Mark slammed on the brakes as the tires screeched and the car fishtailed. The momentum sent Jody crashing into the dashboard. "Oh Christ!" Mark yelled as he retook control of the vehicle. He immediately pulled off the road and began trying to tug Jody off of the floorboards.

"Don't touch me!" Jody slapped his hands away as she settled back into her seat with a groan. "Are you crazy? I know you're mad at me, but you didn't have to try to kill me!"

"Here." Mark winced and handed her a wrinkled handkerchief.. "Your nose is bleeding."

Jody warily accepted it and pressed it to her throbbing nose. "Ouch."

"I am so sorry, Jody. I'm not used to the brakes in this car. Who knew they would pick this second to decide to work? And, I'm not mad at you."

Jody looked at him expectantly.

"And I don't want to kill you," he added hastily.

"It's okay," she sighed. "It doesn't hurt...MUCH."

Mark slowly pulled the car forward, looping around to turn on the street he'd missed. The rest of the ride proceeded in silence. When they finally arrived at Amanda's house Jody was totally dejected, sore and tired.

"Thanks for the ride." She didn't even look at the man as she reached for the door handle.

"Jody, hold on a second."

"Oh sorry." Jody realized she still had the handkerchief and tried to hand it back.

Mark waived off the bloodied cloth. "Umm. No. You can keep it. I've got plenty.

I...um...just wanted to apologize again."

The shorthaired woman sighed tiredly. "It's okay, I know it was just an accident." She moved for the door again, only to be stopped by a gentle hand on her shoulder.

"Do you suppose you'd give me the chance to make it up to you?"

"Make it up how?"

"How about dinner? I can cook," Mark coaxed.

"What can you cook?" Jody asked as a little of her spirit returned. "And are you sure? So far the only time we've spent alone together has been disastrous."

"You name it, I'll fix it. I'm willing to live dangerously if you are! I call you tomorrow so we can set something up?" He asked hopefully.

"I'm in the book." Jody smiled cheerful and exited the deathtrap. *That was worth a bloody nose!*

"Your kitchen is so gorgeous, Claire. It's almost a shame that you don't cook in it more often." With a final swipe Amanda finished wiping off the kitchen table.

The search for Monica had left them tired, and after several long hours of walking up and down stairs, hungry as well. It was nearly 3:00 a.m. and they were almost finished cleaning up after a snack that had turned into a full-blown meal. To her delight, Amanda discovered that one of the few things Claire could make was French toast.

"Trust me, you don't want me cooking anything else. Besides, look how nice and clean my kitchen is. How many peoples kitchen appliances still gleam after several years of ownership?" Claire rinsed the last dish and slid it into the dishwasher. She stopped talking for several moments wondering whether she should bring up anything remotely related to Monica. "You know, Mandy, if Jody hadn't said anything about you staying here tonight, I would have."

"Because of Monica and Chucky?" Amanda asked vaguely disappointed that the only reason Claire may want her to stay over was for her safety.

"Well...only partly." Claire looked slightly guiltily. "I was sort of hoping you'd stay over no matter what happened tonight." Seeing no response from her companion she began to panic. "I have a really nice guest room, with clean sheets and everything," she added nervously, not wanting to rush her friend.

Noticing her friend's insecurity, Amanda quickly moved to dispel her fears. She smiled wryly. "If you hadn't asked me, Gumby...."

Impossible. I was DEFINITELY gonna ask, Claire thought.

"I was going to ask you."

Amanda walked over to the attorney and reached up to push back bangs that needed cutting. She smiled as she traced the prominent cheekbones. "I do believe you promised to play the piano for me," Amanda reminded her.

Claire returned the affection with a gentle kiss to the psychologist's forehead.

Pulling back she smiled. "All right, I did promise, didn't I?"

Taking Amanda's hand, Claire led her into her mostly empty living room. After depositing Amanda on the couch, she padded over to a short standing Tiffany lamp and clicked it on. The lamp provided just enough light for Claire to see the keys. Sitting down on the piano bench she stretched strong fingers. "Any special requests?"

Amanda beamed and shook her head. "Not right now, play something you like."

Claire closed her eyes for a moment and then began to play a relatively short piece by Debussy. The music was slow with a lovely melodic line and Amanda sat transfixed as she watched Claire play. She was amazed not only by Claire's obvious proficiency with the instrument but by the flowing grace the larger woman exhibited.

Watching Claire play was pure sensual enjoyment as Amanda grinned, loving every minute of it. Long fingers almost caressed the keys and the smaller woman found her eyes her lingering on Claire's hands. Finally her attention was drawn to Claire's face. The

attorney's demeanor was intense but open, allowing Amanda to share in what Claire was experiencing. *This woman 'feels' the music*, Amanda thought as the musician transitioned into another slightly more vibrant piece. She felt her own breathing increase at the sight. *Oh yeah. I'm certainly feeling something*. Amanda was delighted and more than a little attracted to the unexpected creative side Claire was so impressively displaying. Claire's expression changed again as she focused intently on a particularly intricate section. Amanda smiled in reflex. *The way her brow furrows when she plays is beyond cute*. Recognizing the end of the piece Amanda moved toward her musician. *Yes...yours*, her heart happily supplied.

"That was beautiful, Claire. Debussy right?" Amanda asked as stood along side the brunette.

Claire nodded pleased Amanda had recognized her selection. "Yep, the Sarabande from Pour Le Piano. Debussy's especially relaxing," she explained. "When I want to think, I play Scarlatti or Bach because their music is so organized." Claire fingered the keys gently. "Debussy is so free flowing, and there's no set formula to it. Sometimes it takes the whole piece to find the melody." Claire shrugged. "It makes me feel free to play it." Amanda smiled and leaned against the piano. "You can play the classical masters for me another time. Would you play something else for me?"

Claire blushed slightly embarrassed that Amanda would want to listen to her play. During her childhood Claire had considered the piano a chore. Her parents had forced her to take lessons leaving her resentful of the time they took away from her other interests. But despite herself, as she grew older, she began to enjoy playing and even tolerated the frequent recitals. She never really paid attention to those who insisted she had a real talent. Her 'talent' was irrelevant. She played for pleasure alone.

"Why not," she acquiesced pleased the music seemed to take Amanda's mind off of her sister and the horrid night they'd spent searching. "Do you want to hear some New Age music? I do a mean George Winston imitation."

Amanda laughed at the raised-brow expression on Claire's face and looked at Claire sheepishly. "I'm a sucker for torch songs and ballads. Would you sing something too?"

"Mandy, this isn't exactly a smoke-filled bar, and I..."

"Aw, come on... please? You play so beautifully. I have a hunch you have a wonderful voice too."

"Flattery will get you everywhere," Claire muttered as she shook her head. *I am just a big old mushball. But how can I deny her?* After a moment's thought, she knew exactly what she wanted to play. Amanda continued to lean against the piano as Claire began to make music.

"I wished on the moon for something I never new. Wished on the moon for more than I ever knew. A sweeter rose, a softer sky, an April day that would not dance away."

Claire stared directly into green eyes as she sang. Amanda found herself mesmerized by the smooth sexy alto voice and couldn't keep the smile off her face as Claire continued to serenade her.

"I begged of a star to throw me a star to throw me a beam or two, wished on a star and asked for a dream or two. I looked for every loveliness, it all came true. I wished on the moon for you."

Wow! Amanda felt a little weak in the knees. "You like those big band ballads too?" she asked softly as Claire finished.

"Oh yeah. They don't write good ballads anymore. That's one of my favorites. But I also like Ella Fitzgerald and Frank Sinatra."

Amanda settled herself on the bench alongside Claire before leaning in and kissing her lightly on the lips. "Claire, that was the most beautiful thing I've ever heard. Thank you." Only pulling her face a few inches away from Amanda's, Claire brushed her finger along Amanda's up-turned lips enjoying the way the shadows played along the youthful face. "I'm glad you liked it. If there was ever a song for you, that's it."

Wrapping her hand around the back of Amanda's neck she returned the light kiss with a passionate one. Amanda felt strong arms wrap around her, as the kiss deepened and intensified, leaving both women wanting more.

"I guess we're going to finish what we started in the car lot, huh?" Amanda whispered breathlessly as she pulled back a little but left her arms resting low around Claire's waist.

Claire nodded and kissed her again allowing her hands to roam along Amanda's sweatshirt, finally finding their way under it to feel soft skin of her stomach. Amanda mirrored Claire's actions as she placed both of her hands on Claire's middle, slowly caressing her through the thin cotton blouse, until she reached under the garment and rubbed her hands over the trim waist.

Claire groaned deep in her throat as she felt Amanda's hands move upward, continuing their sensuous massage. "That feels so good, Mandy..." she moaned huskily as they both took a moment to remember how to breathe.

Amanda silently pulled back and began removing Claire blouse. She smiled when she saw that the darker woman wasn't wearing a bra...again. Green eyes, already darkened with arousal, admired the creamy, perfect breasts. "Claire..." she mumbled as she leaned forward and laid her cheek against the attorney's chest, drinking in the overwhelming sensations of softness and heat. She hugged Claire tightly and stroked the velvety skin on her back.

Closing her eyes, Claire found herself unable to speak but continued to hold Amanda close, nuzzling her hair. They continued that way for several long moments before Amanda finally moved. With a smile, she stood and slipped off her sweatshirt. Tossing it aside, she took Claire's hand and began leading her to the couch.

"Wait!"

Amanda stopped instantly, afraid she'd done something wrong. She looked around in confusion. "I'm sorry. I thought..."

Claire pulled her back into a hug and quickly reassured the smaller woman. "You thought exactly right, Mandy. I was just hoping we could move upstairs." Claire eyed the narrow couch ruefully. *Dammit! I knew I shouldn't have listened to that twit decorator.*

Amanda followed Claire's line of vision and shook her head in agreement. "One of us would probably roll off and get killed."

"Let's go," Claire laughed as she grabbed Amanda and began ushering her upstairs.

Amanda smiled at her friend's obvious frustration over her slow pace. After stopping several times for tortuously languorous kisses the women finally made it into Claire's room.

Amanda slipped her hands into the waistband of Claire's favorite jeans and much to the older woman's delight, began slowly slipping them off, leaving soft kisses in the wake of the denim. "You are so beautiful Claire, I just..." Amanda stopped becoming a little flustered.

"It's okay. I know and ... Mandy..." She lost her train of thought as she was drawn into another deep kiss. Impatient large hands moved to unclasp Amanda's bra and couldn't help lingering on the delicate skin they found underneath. Slowing working her hands

down Amanda's stomach and around slim hips Claire finally slid off Amanda's jeans and lovingly stroked firm thighs. She paused there and leaned forward to deposit a light kiss. With a sigh, Claire freed her lips from the soft skin of Amanda's inner thighs. *If I'm going to kiss every inch of this delicious body I can't linger here...yet.* Sure moist lips traveled to Amanda's throat where Claire began to smother her with the softest of kisses.

Amanda moaned, completely captured in the oral assault she knew would be her undoing. *I can't believe I'm still standing.* Her legs had turned to jello long ago and she had only managed to stay upright because of the tight grip on her partner. "No hickeys, Claire..." she joked as she loosened her grip and ran her hands over Claire's muscular bottom. Claire snorted but continued to rain kisses on her chest and breasts. "That's NOT my style, Mandy. Well... at least not where they would show," she mumbled as she dropped to her knees and began kissing her way back down the therapist's body. Claire was lost in the light salty taste of Amanda's skin and the musky aroma flooding her senses.

Amanda's arched against the nearly overwhelming sensations, her hands finding their way into Claire's hair. Pushing Claire away gently, she cupped the attorney's face and tilted it up. Both women were panting, their eyes betraying a combination of lust and affection and desire. Without a word, Amanda pulled Claire onto the large bed. Sensuously crawling up Claire's body, Amanda made her way to waiting lips and kissed her passionately. Small trembling hands caressed the length of Claire's long frame. The attorney growled deeply as she tried to gain a tighter hold Amanda's slick moist skin.

"I'll never get enough of you..." Amanda whispered as her lips moved to heaving breasts. "But let's give it the old college try," were the last coherent words spoken for several hours. Claire gasped as Amanda's tongue circled her bellybutton and continued its trek downward.

Claire opened her eyes. *It was all a dream. I know it was. Nothing so wonderful could have possibly happened to me. I can still feel that soft skin ...* A slight movement caused Claire to look down to see Amanda's red gold hair spilling onto her stomach, Amanda's left hand firmly grasping her bicep. Claire smiled and took a deep breath as she stroked Amanda's back. *That was real... I am so lucky.*

The attorney stretched as best as she could with Amanda molded to her. She kept her movements slow and silent, not wanting to wake her sleeping lover. She looked around her bedroom, not quite remembering how they made it to the bed. Claire was sure she would find their clothes strewn about in the living room. *I've always wanted to wake up here with someone I really care about. I just can't believe it finally happened.* But here she was, and her heart swelled as sleepy green eyes slowly opened to greet her.

With a small groan Amanda turned her head and looked up at Claire with a sweet smile. Lifting herself up, she moved up the bed and gently laid her head on Claire's chest. "Hey, good morning," she husked, her voice still rough with sleep. She closed her arms around Claire.

"It most certainly is a good morning," Claire laughed as she planted a kiss on her forehead.

"This is the way I want to wake up every morning," Amanda mumbled as she returned Claire's kiss.

"Me too. I just thought it would never happen."

"Claire do you mean you've never slept overnight with someone after making love?"

Amanda asked a little surprised by the admission.

Claire shrugged. "Anything that's happened before was just sex." Claire struggled for a moment, not really wanting to continue but sensing that Amanda wanted to know. "I...I never wanted to stay or have them stay. It made me uncomfortable and nervous." Amanda looked down at their entwined bodies. *Well, she doesn't exactly look uncomfortable.* "Are you feeling nervous now, with me here?" Claire shook her head and held Amanda closer. "Absolutely not. I've never felt more safe or comfortable than I do with you in my arms." "Good," Amanda sighed relieved her feelings weren't one sided. "Because I don't know what I'd do if you were. I feel so happy, Claire. It all feels...so...so... right." Claire murmured her agreement and reached down to grab the maroon down comforter that had slid off onto the floor. After several awkward tugs she managed to settle the fluffy spread over their naked bodies. "Lets pretend that's not really the sun shining in my window and get a couple more hours sleep, hmm?" Claire yawned. Amanda nodded, listening contentedly as the heartbeat below her ear slowed even further. She wanted to say more but still wasn't sure the time was right. *Soon Claire...very soon.* Burrowing closer she inhaled the faint scent of roses. "Hmm. I love..." The words trailed off as she joined her lover in sleep.

CHAPTER 7

CLAIRE BUTTONED HER crème colored jacket as she and Mark walked to the door of the Cornerstone Clinic.

"Claire, is my tie straight?" Mark craned his neck.

She glanced at Mark and raised slender dark eyebrows. The prosecutor looked dashing in his tan linen suit and powder blue tie.

"You're worrying about how you look? The last time you did that was when you were dating Mary..."

"Please, don't bring up Mary now..."

"Come on, you and your ex-wife get along better than any other divorced couple I know."

Claire pulled open the clinic door.

"Well, I'm not dating Mary now. Jody..."

She turned to face Mark. "Jody what?"

Jody stepped out of her office just as the pair walked in. "Hey, you two are a little early, Amanda is still with a client," the psychologist looked at Mark and smiled.

"That's okay." Claire sat down in the waiting area and folded her fingers across her stomach. "We can use the extra time to decide where we want to go."

"My vote is for some good old fashioned Scandinavian food. I haven't been down to Lena's in ages," Jody said as she sat down near Mark, fingering the soft blue fabric that circled his neck. "That's a great tie."

Whoa! Claire raised an eyebrow, suddenly comprehending the situation between Mark and Jody. *Ha! Good luck, buddy. You're gonna need it.* She smirked, knowing what her friend's reaction would be to having reconstituted cod for lunch. "Jody, Mark loves lutefisk, he was just talking about it the other day."

"Really Mark? That's great. They say lutefisk is an acquired taste. Most of the men I've known don't like it."

Mark blanched and swallowed. "Oh yeah, just love it."

Jody smiled again and soft brown eyes brightened. "Really?"

"Jody, he absolutely adores lutefisk. He can't get enough of it," Claire interrupted.

"Wow. You know I keep trying, but I just don't like lutefisk. Maybe because I know it's dried fish soaked in lye." She shivered. "I have a hard time with it, but I do like pickled herring. I guess you'll have plenty."

Claire snorted under her breath as she observed Mark loosen his tie and turn even paler. *More paybacks for Gumby, Marko.* Before Claire could inflict further retribution, Amanda's office door opened and the therapist and her client stepped out. Noticing Claire and the others, she walked over and gave the attorney a quick kiss on the cheek and grasped her hand.

"You're early, Gumby." She waived at Mark though most of her attention was on Claire.

"Hey, nice tie, Mark," she offered absently.

Claire brought up their joined hands and kissed Amanda's. "Mark does look pretty nice today, doesn't he."

Before anyone could make another comment, the clinic door was abruptly slammed open. Monica emerged a second later. Amanda's sister perfectly fit the stereotypical description of a drug addict on her last legs. She was literally skin and bones, her eyes were lackluster and they seemed to be permanently ringed with dark circles.

Amanda ran over to her sister. "Monica, where have you been?"

"That mother-fucker cut me off," the gaunt woman replied in a raspy voice.

Amanda gingerly hugged her sister. "When was the last time you ate something?" She cringed as she felt her sister's bones through her thin clothing.

"After everything, he just cut me off cold turkey. Damned bastard liar..."

Claire stepped over and gently pulled Amanda away from the shivering Monica.

"Let's sit Monica down," Claire whispered to Amanda as Monica continued to mumble. *God, how could she look even worse than she did a week ago?* Amanda was clearly upset by her sister's startling appearance. *Can't blame her there.*

Jody handed Monica a glass of water, which she drank down in one long gulp. "What's going on Monica?"

"I need to find Junior!" she whined. "He promised me!"

"Who's Junior?" Jody coaxed as she grabbed a muffin off a tray they had set out for waiting patients and offered it to Monica.

"He's a lying bastard!" Monica pulled a Swiss army knife from the pocket of her ragged, dirty jeans. "And I'm going to cut his fucking tongue out so he can't lie to anyone else."

"Monica, give me the knife," Amanda ordered.

"What do you care? You're stealing my daughter away from me!"

"Missy is my daughter, I adopted her. You are her aunt. I'm not stealing anything."

Amanda knelt before her sister and spoke in low soothing tones. "We want to get you some help, Monica. Give me the knife, please..."

Monica stared at her sister for a moment, her dull eyes glazed and tired. Amanda could see the layers of exhaustion on her gaunt face as she continued to hold the knife.

"Come on, give me the knife, then we can talk about Junior, okay?" Amanda tried again.

Claire moved directly behind Amanda and laid a warm hand on her shoulder. "Monica, your sister loves you very much. You should do what she asks."

"Why should I listen to you? What do you care?"

Who says I do? "You're Amanda's sister and I care that she wants to help you. That's reason enough."

Monica stared at Claire for a long moment and then narrowed her eyes. As quickly as her mood became hostile, it changed to sudden sadness. She began to cry. "I just want to die now," she mumbled, running a trembling hand through stringy hair.

Amanda's heart ached for sister. "Things will get better, Monica. I promise. You just feel this way now." Green eyes flashed with determination. "I'm not going to let this Junior person hurt you. And you need to stop hurting yourself."

Monica dropped the knife as though she never had any intention of using it and took bite of muffin. She hummed loudly in appreciation, forcing crumbs to trickle out of her mouth. *Man, she's nuts.* "Just who is this Junior person and where can we find him?" Mark interjected, his prosecutorial nature driving him.

Leave me alone! Why did I come here again? "Junior is one of those hot shot attorneys just like Mandy's girlfriend," she sneered at Claire. Yeah... he's just another shyster lawyer. Evan Moore, Evan Asshole Moore."

Claire face remained neutral, her mind making the association between Monica's Evan Moore, Junior, and the Evan Moore she worked with. With a sickening 'click' the pieces fell together in her head. She groaned out loud. *Evan Moore is her drug contact?* Claire let out a disgusted breath. *God, I knew he was a slime but this?* The more rational part of Claire's brain took over and she considered the company Evan kept, his lavish lifestyle and his legal specialty...criminal defense of narcotic cases. *How else does such a rotten lawyer do so well?*

Claire felt a bolt of blind fury flash through her, irrationally blaming Evan for Amanda's problems with her sister. "Mark I know where we can find Evan Moore." *When I get my hands on you Evan...*

The tall man nodded, having recognized the name immediately. "Will he be at work during lunch?"

"I know where he is at this very minute," Monica added smugly. *They know Evan? Ohhh, yes. This will be perfect.* "I'll take you there."

"Claire, can I use your cell phone to call the police?" He began rooting through his jacket for a pen.

Monica immediately jumped to her feet. "No cops!" *I want to be there personally.* "Call the cops and I'll deny ever meeting the pig." Sensing Claire's anger, she directed her comments to her. "I can take you right to him, he's meeting with someone important." *I know you want to confront him, Claire. I can feel it. You hate him as much as I do, don't you?*

"Absolutely not," Mark stated firmly. "There's no reason to do this personally. Just tell me where he is and..."

"No! Only I can do it! I don't know the address but I know where to go. I'll take you there." Monica was beginning to panic.

"How do you know where he is?" Jody asked skeptically.

Monica smiled. "I do have ears Jody." Her voice was rich with sarcasm. She shoved a large bite of muffin into her mouth. "Although, they're not a body part Evan's been particularly interested in."

"Show me." Claire demanded as she grabbed Monica by the wrist and began dragging her toward the door.

"Claire wait!" Amanda ran around in front of the older woman, effectively blocking the door. "You're going to bust in on a drug deal? Are you crazy?"

Jody and Mark looked at each other, wondering if that was indeed the case.

"Oh, it's not a drug deal," Monica added cryptically. "It's an important meeting, but no drugs." Seeing that Claire was beginning to falter, she pressed her case. "You'll never catch him otherwise. He's too high up in the organization." *Come on Claire...*

Claire's body was deathly still, but her grip on Monica's wrist didn't falter. She made her decision. "Anyone who wants to stay here is welcome. Let's go." She yanked Monica around Amanda and out the door.

Jody, Mark and Amanda all looked at each other. Amanda was the first one out the door.

Claire shifted angrily toward Monica. "I asked you why we're here," she spat.

A devious smile curled Monica's lips as she sunk deeper into the soft leather seat. "I told you. This is where Evan is having his 'meeting,'" she said innocently, enjoying Claire's sudden burst of frustration.

The tall attorney leaned forward over her seat and roughly grasped the front of Monica's shirt. "You'd better not be lying."

"Claire! What are you doing?" Amanda's quickly laid her hands over Claire's white knuckles. She gentled her voice and removed any trace of panic. "Let her go, Claire." Wild blue eyes calmed at Amanda's gentle touch and she slowly let go of the tattered shirt, leaving two large wrinkled spots in her wake.

Amanda's hands remained firmly over Claire's. "What is it, Claire?" *This is not just about Evan. She seemed to accept his possible involvement surprisingly well.* Amanda brushed her thumbs over the large hands in a soothing motion, feeling a gnawing sense of worry settle deep in her gut.

Claire's face took on a pained expression and she gazed out at the sprawling estate before returning her attention to Amanda. Her voice was a whisper. "This is Uncle Luther's house." Reading Amanda's confusion, she schooled herself in patience and elaborated. "He's not really my uncle but...well...I've known him since I was a kid. He's an old family friend whom I dearly love." Fierce eyes turned to Monica. "And who I don't believe would be mixed up in any drug deals." *Shit! What is going on? Claire felt like her world was crashing down around her. Evan I can believe. But not Uncle Luther! This must be some sort of mistake. There must be some reasonable explanation...*

"Claire..." Mark shut off the ignition, "we should go find out what's going on." The big man let out a shuttering breath, praying Luther wasn't involved in dirty dealings. *But that would explain why he inexplicably acquitted Aaron Levine. Come to think of it, Judge Rumble presided over several cases that were miraculously dismissed.* While Mark didn't share a personal relationship with the judge, he still considered the elderly man a valuable addition to the bench and hated the idea that he may be involved something illegal. *Plus, his mind added, it would devastate Claire.*

Claire nodded and turned to Amanda. "Why don't you and Jody wait..."

"Not a chance, Gumby. If you're going in, so am I." The blonde's tone brokered no arguments as she raised pale brows in challenge.

"But Mandy..."

The three sets of eyes rolled and waited impatiently for Claire to lose this argument.

"I'm going!"

"But Evan may be..."

"I'm going!"

Dammit. "Be reasonable! We don't know..."

"Claire?"

"What?!"

"Aren't you listening?"

"What?" Claire threw her hands in the air.

"I'M GOING!" *I have to go. I won't be left behind.*

For several long seconds, the car was silent except for Claire's exasperated breathing. *Why won't she listen to reason?* The frustrated lawyer looked around the car to Jody, Monica and Mark, who all three shot her slightly annoyed, slightly amused looks. "Fine," she eventually gave in. Swallowing a sense of dread that threatened to paralyze her, she leaned forward between the split in the front seats to meet Amanda, who was already leaning forward. With great effort, she completely tuned out the car's other occupants and spoke only to her lover. "Swear you'll be careful." A warm hand reached out and covered Amanda's. A firm squeeze emphasized her words. "I need you to be." Claire's admission was whispered in a deep, heartfelt voice that sent shivers through Amanda's soul. Piercing crystal eyes pinned her in place and she felt her heart stop. Before the almost desperate words finished ringing in her ears, an invisible barrier snapped within the young therapist and an overwhelming blast of emotion surged between she and Claire. Its familiarity and utter rightness caused her chest to ache and tears to spring to her eyes. She paused and swallowed hard. "I swear." Her voice cracked with a myriad of emotion so intense that Claire's immediate response was visible at the pulse point of her throat and in the depths of watery azure eyes.

In that split second in time, Amanda's world was invaded by a crashing sense of clarity that had always managed to elude her. Its inevitability settled around her like a protective cloak and any questions or insecurities or doubts simply scattered to the winds. Even in this uncomfortable place, and stressful time, its simple acknowledgment filled her with a sense of peace and belonging that enveloped her. *I'm in love with her. Completely, hopelessly, utterly, totally in love. And when this is over...No, tonight...Whether this is over or not...nothing is going to stop me from telling her. It would be okay.* Claire felt it as surely as she felt her own pounding pulse begin to steady, and a familiar sense of determination rise within her. *I need to end this.* Without another word Claire exited the Pathfinder. A second later Amanda did the same, dragging Monica behind her.

Jody and Mark sat in the car, dumbfounded, as a crackling energy exited the vehicle with Claire and Amanda. They watched through the front window, as Amanda dropped Monica's hand and fell into Claire's waiting arms. The smaller woman whispered something in Claire's ear that caused the brunette to pause, then nod, and place a gentle kiss on Amanda's cheek.

"What the hell just happened in here?" Mark looked around the vehicle in confusion. Jody shook her head, causing wavy brown bangs to feather across her forehead. "I'm...I'm not sure. Whatever it is between them...for a minute there... well...I dunno." Mark couldn't think of anything meaningful to say, so he shrugged, and actually said what he was thinking. "It is the force. It is their destiny." The impressive Darth Vader voice caused Jody to burst out laughing.

Destiny? Is that was this is? I think you're right about that, Mark. "We'd better get out there before they decide to go in without us." Jody stopped mid-motion, her hand still gripping the door handle. "Mark?" Expressive blue eyes met hers. "Do you really think we should be confronting Evan without the police?"

The big man thought for a second before replying. His brow furrowed in concentration, creating shallow creases on fair skin. He sighed heavily. "No. But there's no way to stop Claire now, and I can't let her go alone."

Jody smiled and nodded, acknowledging she felt the same way about Amanda. "Sometimes this best friend business is a real pain in the ass, you know?" she commented wryly.

"You got that right, Jody. But lucky for us it's always worth it. Come on, let's go."

All five of them stood outside the large door, not sure of their next move. "We can't just go bursting in," Amanda finally broke the silence.

"We're not." Claire rang the doorbell and within seconds a small, ancient, formally dressed butler opened the door.

"Why hello Miss. Easton," he smiled broadly showing off perfect white dentures. "You haven't been by in ages." The man lowered his spectacles and looked at the other people who were complete strangers. His eyes fixed on Monica and he fought to keep from wrinkling his nose.

Claire laid her hand on the shoulder of his crisp black uniform. "Hello, Edgar. Is Uncle Luther at home?" *Please say no. Please say no.*

"He is, Miss. But he's in a business meeting, and asked that he not be disturbed under any circumstances."

"I see." Claire's heart sank. "Edgar, it's very, VERY, important that I speak with Uncle Luther immediately. I'm sure he won't mind the intrusion. I'll tell him you tried to keep me out..." she smiled knowingly, "...but that I wouldn't take no for an answer." She squeezed the hand still resting on the slender shoulder. "Please," she asked, allowing a little of her natural magnetism to shine through.

"Well..." The old butler hesitated, torn between his duty to his employer and the pretty smile he could never resist. *Why do I bother saying no to her?* "All right, Miss. Come with me." He gestured toward the interior and he pulled the heavy door open, allowing the group to enter the mansion.

Everyone, except Claire, stood with his or her mouth hanging wide open. Catching flies. They had all been raised in middle to upper middle class homes and had never seen a place like this...except on television.

The home was three stories high and full-length tapestries covering the walls of the enormous foyer. Life-size sculptures lined the sides of the room, which was bisected by a huge marble staircase and an opulent chandelier hung graciously above the staircase, its tubular crystals scattering the afternoon sun

Jody looked around the entryway wide-eyed astonishment. "Holy Shit. It could be a hotel. How much do they pay judges!" she exclaimed. "No wonder our taxes are so high!"

"This isn't Luther's," Claire interrupted. "Aunt Helen's family is richer than God. She's the great-granddaughter of Cadwallader Farmington, one of the founders of General Mills." She was met with blank stares. "The people who make Cheerios," she reminded, blue eyes rolling impatiently.

"Ohhhhh." Bobbing heads.

Claire reached out and grabbed Monica by the back of the collar as the skinny blonde started to wander away. "Is Uncle Luther in his office, Edgar?"

The butler nodded.

"Where's Aunt Helen?"

"Mistress Helen is visiting her sister in London and won't return until tomorrow. Indeed, she'll be very sorry she missed you."

Claire smiled weakly. "Thanks, Edgar. I'll show myself to Luther's office."

The old man looked around nervously and fiddled with his ascot.

"Don't worry." Claire patted his cheek indulgently. "Uncle Luther will understand the intrusion. I promise."

"Very well, Miss." Edgar gave her a lingering look before bowing slightly and disappearing through a doorway that was completely hidden by a bright blue tapestry.

Is everyone in love with her? Amanda wondered as the old man retreated with a look of adoration plastered on his face that she had seen echoed on Mark's, *and on mine too*, she supposed.

"Oh goody!" Monica squealed. "Things are about to get fun!" The skanky woman giggled inappropriately, breaking her blissfully long silent spell. Amanda whirled around and stood face-to-face with her older sister.

"You'd better not be doing this to embarrass Claire or her friends," she threatened.

"Tsk. Tsk...Sis. Have I ever lied to you before?" *Oops. I'll be lucky if Amanda doesn't deck me for that one.*

Amanda fought the urge to knock her silly. "Dozens of times and you know it." Though a large part of Amanda hoped that this time her sister was lying. That they'd leave this place embarrassed, but having established that Claire's associate and dear family friend had nothing to do with drugs or dirty deals or Monica. *I could live with that embarrassment. What I don't want to see is Claire's heart break.*

"It's this way." Claire motioned to a door in the far corner of the foyer. "Let's get this over with and go home." *I need to have a talk with certain blonde counselor.*

The five made their way through the elaborate room and into a long, dimly lit hallway whose wood paneled walls were adorned with large, oil portraits. Their feet made no sound and they shuffled across thick burgundy carpet.

Mark focused on his breathing as he tried to push away a sudden sense of foreboding that washed over him. Countless criminal prosecutions had given the tall man more than a taste of what could happen when people were cornered. *That's it...relax. We just need to stay in control. I won't let anything happen them.*

At the end of the hallway stood a set of tall double doors that Claire opened without hesitation, allowing the group to enter an impressive library. Eye level bookcases lined the walls of the large room. Above the books, a small dark shelf circled the entire room and held antique dolls, trains, and their accompaniments. And still higher, were more formidable oil portraits framed with pressed gold leafing. Between the break of two bookcases was another small door, behind which, muffled, but clearly upset voices could be heard.

Claire stopped moving and Amanda saw the blood drain from her face.

With her eyes, Amanda asked Jody to watch Monica. When she received a quiet nod from her friend, she gently steered Claire away from the rest of the group.

"Are you okay, sweetheart?" The counselor reached up and brushed aside back dark bangs, worry leaking into her voice.

Claire's heart warmed at the endearment. *I wonder if she knows what she just said?*

While Claire was sure about her feelings for the younger woman, she couldn't get seem to shake a deep-seeded fear that Amanda's feelings didn't run as deep. The thought of an unrequited love with Amanda made her physically ill and Claire closed her eyes, feeling slightly out of control. *I can't think about that right now.* "Actually, no. I'm not okay. I don't want to go in there and find Luther talking with Evan."

"Just because he's talking to him doesn't mean there's something sinister going on. What if they're just friends?" Even as she said it, Amanda knew it wasn't convincing. But she desperately wanted to ease the ache radiating from Claire.

"Mandy," Claire sighed heavily, "Luther was the presiding judge in almost all of the drug cases that were dismissed. And Evan was lead defense counsel. It would make perfect sense that they were somehow working together. I just don't know why," she finished in anguish.

Amanda grasped Claire's hand tightly and looked around the beautiful room. "It wouldn't be for money...that's for sure." She returned her attention to Claire. "Gumby, why don't we just let the police handle this. Even if you do barge in there and find them talking together, it's not like that's illegal. Do you really expect them to just admit to fixing cases together? Let's just go and leave the investigating to law enforcement." *Come on Claire. This will only make you miserable. Don't let Monica manipulate you into doing something that'll only bring you pain.*

Claire ran her hand down the soft material of Amanda's blouse. *God, I love this woman. I should have never let her come here with me. If anything happens to her I...*

"Claire?" Amanda interrupted the grim mental ramblings. "Can't you just drop this?" Her eyes and voice were pleading and Claire felt another stab of guilt.

"You know I won't do that. I need to find out for myself. But you could wait in the car," she offered hopefully.

"And you know I won't do that."

The voices behind the door grew louder and more agitated and Claire easily recognized Judge Luther. The darker woman's eyes never left the door as she slipped off her jacket and tossed in on a low padded bench. She squeezed Amanda's hand firmly before dropping it and in a blur of movement marched over to door, opened it, and stepped inside.

How does she move so fast? "Shit," Amanda mumbled and she quickly rushed passed Jody, Mark and Monica. After a second of confused hesitation the rest of the party, with Monica lingering in the rear, followed Amanda into the office.

Judge Rumble was standing in front of a large oak desk, his wire rimmed glasses gripped tightly in his shaking fist. "ENOUGH!" he shouted. His face was a light shade of purple and the dark rings around tired eyes testified to his stress. "I told you, Junior, NO MORE! I can't...I won't live like this."

Evan laughed cruelly. "Shut up old man. You'll do exactly as I say and you know it. I'm in control here, not you." Evan leaned over the desk and pushed out his cigarette in a large crystal ashtray.

"And why would he do that, Evan?" Claire's menace filled voice sounded through the small office.

A muffled snap was amplified by the shocked silence of room when Judge Rumble dropped the now shattered glasses from his hand. "What...What are you doing here?" he asked frantically. The white haired man looked around furiously, wondering how Claire had gotten past Edgar and what she was doing here...NOW. Neither he nor Evan appeared to notice the small group of people that had trailed in behind Claire but remained waiting very near the doorway. Claire ignored the judge and approached Evan, who didn't look at all phased by her presence.

"Claire, we're having a private business discussion." His eyebrow quirked. "Although I do appreciate your enthusiasm. Why don't you come by my office on Monday and we can discuss some ways of getting you more involved in my more...delicate cases." He folded the arms of his trademark black silk shirt and dark jacket as he chuckled condescendingly.

"Shut up, you pig," Claire seethed. Seeing she'd get no place with Evan, she turned to Luther.

The old judge looked as though he was about to have a heart attack on the spot. His skin color contrasted sharply with his thick snow colored hair. Perspiration stains were beginning to show through his pale golf shirt and his voice shook as he spoke. "I had no choice," he repeated over and over, as tears coursed down grizzled cheeks.

Claire was at his side immediately. "Calm down Uncle Luther. It'll be okay." Amanda and Jody rushed over, each woman grasping an elbow as they guided the man into a large comfortable office chair.

Luther looked up at Amanda and Jody with dark glassy eyes. "What...Who?"

Claire knelt in front of the trembling man and wiped his sweating forehead with a tissue she'd grabbed from his desk. "It's okay, Uncle Luther. They're here with me. They're my friends."

Jody was surprised when she didn't bristle at the hasty description of their relationship offered by Claire. *I guess she is...or at least will be my friend.* The dark haired psychologist glanced at Amanda who was deftly checking the old man's pulse and at Claire, who was worriedly picking pieces of broken glass out of Luther's palm. They worked in effortless harmony and Jody was forced to acknowledge the perfect way each woman complemented the other. They simply fit. *Like a puzzle once you've found the missing piece.* Mark's words drifted back to her. *Destiny. Who am I to fight destiny?*

Suddenly, a muscular man in golf clothes burst past Mark and Monica, who was lurking behind the large County attorney, trying her best not to be seen. He rushed over to the Judge. "Dad, what happened? Are you okay?" He worriedly looked at Claire. "What's going on?"

Before Claire could answer, he spotted Evan, who was leaning against the opposite wall. His eyes immediately went cold and he stomped over to the arrogant attorney, pushing his way into his personal space. "Junior? What in the FUCK are you doing here? You came to my home?" His voice shook with anger and disbelief.

Claire straightened. *Evan is Junior?* Claire thought. "You know him?" *Christ! You're involved in this too?* She stood and tried to ignore her pounding head. *From bad to worse,* her mind irritatingly supplied.

The man shifted uncomfortably. "I...I..."

Everyone flinched at the shrill sound of Monica's laughter. Smiling, she slid around Mark, making her presence known for the first time. "Oh joy! The gang's all here." Fearlessly she stepped between the two men. Lifting up her arms up simultaneously, she dragged a finger down both men's chests in a familiar gesture. "Hello boys."

"Monica?" the men said in unison, though only Evan's was filled with venom.

"Did you miss me, Junior?" Her eyes darkened with fury and she removed her finger from the smug man's chest. Monica positively glowed as she saw it dawn on him that she had led Claire here and probably told her all about his business dealings. *That's right Junior. I spilled my guts. But I'm not gonna end up in some river like Aaron Levine.*

"You shouldn't have fucked with me Junior," the blonde stated coldly. Turning to the other man she opened her hand and laid her palm flat on his hot chest. "And Zane... you shouldn't have fucked me at all." In an eerie mood shift, her voice lost its cold edge and the last vestiges of whatever kindness remained within her shone through. "It would have been so much better for you," she said tenderly.

Claire shuddered at how much the quiet voice reminded her of Amanda. And for the first time she really looked at the two women as sisters.

Zane turned to father, whose face had gone ashen, then back to Evan. "You BASTARD!"

The salesman pushed Monica out of the way and with a single staggering punch to the jaw, dropped Evan to his knees. "What are you doing here, talking to my father?" he barked.

Mark moved to intercept the next punch but Claire waived him off. This was what they needed to know. Zane reached down and with a swift tug, yanked the tall man to his feet.

"WELL?"

"Why don't you tell him, Luther?" Evan sneered as reached up and wiped his bleeding nose with one hand while using the other to brace himself against the wall. All eyes turned to the judge.

"Zane," he began, not bothering to rise out to his chair, "he threatened to expose you. I...I...had no choice. It would kill your mother. You know how she feels about drugs and she's so proud of you. I had no choice." Shaky hands ran through disheveled hair. "Don't you see?"

Oh no. Zane closed his eyes as felt the sickening impact of his father's knowledge and disappointment. He roughly pushed Evan away, and approached his father. "Dad..." He stopped and swallowed, looking very large next to the hunched over elderly man. "He was blackmailing you because of me? You should have come to me. I could have..."

"NO! He said he would expose your drug dealings," the old man cried desperately, his voice changing pitch as anxiety rushed through him. "He had photos and papers and he said if I would just dismiss one case they would all disappear." He shook his head as if just now occurred to him that Evan couldn't be trusted. "But then he demanded another and another..."

When Zane turned back toward Evan his eyes were filled with rage. Claire could see he was beyond reason. "You are DEAD, Junior," he yelled in a voice that dripped with fury. "Eventually, but not today, Zane." With a smile, Evan reached back around his waist and pulled out a small shiny handgun. He cocked his head to the side and pointed it directly at Zane.

Monica immediately took a step backwards while Claire and Mark moved protectively in front of Amanda and Jody.

Evan's eyebrows shoot skyward as he focused on Claire. "How sweet, Claire," he sneered. "Do I sense a love connection?" he snorted and wiped his bloody nose with the back of his hand. "I always thought you had a little too much testosterone for your own good. Although..." cool eyes appraised Amanda, "if she anything like her sister," he licked his lips suggestively, "I can't say as I blame you."

Amanda was standing so close to Claire's back, she literally felt the darker woman go rigid at Evan's words. *She's gonna charge him, gun or no gun.* "Don't," was all she whispered. "You promised." After a long moment, Amanda felt the coiled tension in lover slightly relax.

The tall woman released a shuddering breath and gave Amanda an almost imperceptibly nod, silently acknowledging the promise she'd exacted outside the mansion. *No heroics. I remember Mandy. But I can't let something happen to you, no matter what I promised.* "Take the gun and leave, Evan. You can't very well shoot all of us and still expect to get away." She raised her arms indicated large number of people in the small office.

Evan glared at the beautiful attorney as a fresh stream of blood dripped from his nose, down his chin, and splashed onto the pale carpet. "No, I suppose not," he agreed amiably. "But then again, I really don't want shoot you all. No..." he recklessly used the barrel of the gun to scratch his chin, macabrely smearing the blood, "I think I'll save the bullets for my special favorites."

When he extended his arm out again, he had a new target. Monica. "You rotten BITCH," he choked. "Watching your pathetic junky-ass die is going to give me more pleasure than you could ever imagine." He cocked the gun and Claire felt Amanda begin to move behind her.

Monica didn't even flinch. "Don't do me any favors, Junior," she smiled sweetly. "I won't bother to say goodbye because I'm quite certain we'll be seeing each other again." Their eyes bored into each other's and the room collectively held its breath.

Finally, Junior nodded. "If anyone will end up in hell together...it'll be you and I. You'll just beat me there." His finger whitened on the trigger and in a flurry of movement Claire and Mark bolted toward Evan as Zane lunged into Monica.

CRACK! A shoot rang out.

Evan screamed piteously as two large bodies descended upon him. A pair of large hands knocked the hot gun away and a powerful kick sent Evan sailing into a large wooden file cabinet. His head crashed against the hard walnut surface and his body sagged heavily over Judge Rumble's desk.

In a millisecond Amanda was at Claire's side, checking her for injuries. With her heart in her throat, small hands frantically probed Claire as she rambled angrily. "BUT YOU PROMISED! YOU PROMISED!"

Claire pulled the shaking woman to her and felt Amanda hands give up their search and cling fiercely to her. The therapists chest heaved as a sob escaped. "He missed me Mandy, I'm fine," the darker woman soothed. "But..." Claire looked over to Zane and Monica who were lying in a tangled heap on the floor, Jody and Mark already hovering over them. Amanda's eyes followed Claire's and they stepped out of the embrace to join the others.

Mark carefully pulled Zane and Monica apart in an attempt to see whose blood was liberally coating the carpet. He and Claire began checking Zane while Amanda and Jody went to work on Monica.

"Monica, wake up." Jody firmly slapped Monica's cheek. The blonde woman's chest and neck was covered with a thick coating of blood and she wasn't moving.

"Monica!" Amanda began looking for the bullet wound, while Jody checked for a pulse. Dizzy hazel eyes fluttered open and Monica brought a hand to her head as she began to sit up. "Ow! What happened?" She looked at the blood covering her chest. "Is any of this is mine?"

Amanda shook her head, her bottom lip quivering. Headless of the gore, she pulled her sister into a ferocious hug and tried to keep from falling apart on the spot.

"Dammit. You mean I'm still alive?" Monica asked, finally realizing she hadn't been shot.

"Don't sound so disappointed, you freak," Amanda mumbled as she kissed the clean side of Monica's face and regained her composure.

Jody had already moved over to Claire and Mark who were desperately trying to stop the flow of blood from Zane's upper abdomen. Mark had stripped off his jacket and shirt and was pressing them into wound. Zane moaned in pain and coughed violently sending a light spray of blood onto Mark chest. Claire's hands were also pressed firmly into the makeshift bandages but the liquid continued to flow.

"Jesus, it won't stop!" Claire pushed harder.

"Did you check for an exit wound?" Jody asked, trying not to get sick as the thick crimson substance pooled around her knees. Without waiting for answer she carefully turned the panting, moaning man on his side and discovered a gapping hole. "Shit!" She stripped off her own shirt and pressed it to the exit wound though she knew it wouldn't do any good. She'd seen enough gun shot wounds in the Gulf War to know an obviously mortal injury. *It won't be long.*

Amanda bent down and began surveying Zane. "What can I do?" Jody looked to her partner and silently conveyed that there was nothing anyone could do. Amanda checked the exit wound and flinched. *My God Zane, I can't believe you're still alive.* She shook her head and placed her hands over Mark's as she calmly directed the large man. "Mark, you need call an ambulance."

"Right. Of course." He stood up and wiped his hands on his tan slacks. "There must a phone in here." He brushed by Judge Rumble who was standing silently, watching the life force quietly drain from his son.

Zane coughed again and tried to speak. After several more attempts his weak, raspy, voice was finally audible. "M...Mo...Monica," he sputtered.

Monica tore her eyes off Evan who was still lying unconscious across the desk. Claire wasn't sure if he was receiving those looks of pure hatred from Monica because he tried to kill her or because he failed.

Monica crawled the few feet between she and Zane. Laying a hand on his cheek she smiled gently. She tilted her head to the side and looked at the man as though seeing him for the first time. Visions of a handsome 20-year-old running back, who sent her love letters and offered her 'forever', played behind perpetually bloodshot eyes. "I told you Zane, you should have stayed far away from me. What is it?" *I should feel something, shouldn't I?*

Amanda and Claire exchanged looks, both wondering about the obvious history between the two.

"B...Ba...Ba...Baby," he finally managed and Monica's eyes widened.

I didn't know you knew about Missy. Monica knew exactly what he was asking but remained silent as his body was wracked with set shuddering coughs. More blood dripped from the corner of his mouth and Claire lifted her hand to gently wipe it away, before placing it back along side Amanda's in vane attempt to stop the bleeding. Monica found it strange that Claire would bother to wipe away a few drops from Zane's mouth, when it seemed like he was losing it by the gallon. She could hear Mark giving 911 the judge's address in the background.

"Pa..Please, Mon..." he begged. Amanda, Claire, and Jody all looked to Monica, not understanding Zane's question, mistaking the term "baby" for a lover's pet name. After several more painful coughs Zane's panting began to slow. "Please," he asked one final time. And for some reason, this time, Monica choose to answer. She slowly nodded and a small smile crossed Zane's lips. He gulped a deep breath of air and after what seemed like an eternity he slowly exhaled. At the end of his breath his eyes widened and rolled back and his arms gave a quick jerk before falling limp. He didn't inhale again.

Monica simplify stood up and moved to a chair across the room where she watched Mark tie Evan's hands behind his back with his belt. Claire lifted her hands off Zane's chest and carefully closed his eyes with her fingertips, leaving red bloody smudges on his eyelids. Amanda and Jody stood, and Jody offered Claire a hesitant hand that she immediately accepted.

Judge Rumble had yet to utter a single word. Gone was the panicky flustered man of a few moments ago. In his place stood a perfectly calm, incredibly tired looking old man. He stared blankly down at Zane's lifeless body.

"Uncle Luther..." Claire stopped. The words couldn't get past the lump in her throat but she tried again. "I...I am so sorry." She bent down and gave the man a gentle hug, to which he didn't respond at all. His eyes never left his son.

Mark walked over to Claire with a bleary-eyed Evan in tow. "Claire, I'm gonna take this garbage outside and wait for the police, okay?"

"That's a good idea, Mark." Unexpectedly, Claire reached up and harshly gasped Evan's face with her still bloody hand. "I hope you enjoy these last few breathes of freedom, JUNIOR, cause I'm gonna make sure they're the last ones you get!" Worried by the murderous glint in Clare's eyes, Mark jerked Evan out of her grasp and roughly pushed him out the office door.

"Uncle Luther..." Claire began again, but stopped when there was still no response. She turned to Amanda, silently begging her to do something.

Amanda stepped forward and spoke in a firm but calm voice. "Judge Rumble, lets go sit down." She reached for his hand and the white haired man surprised everyone by quickly pushing it away. For the first time since the shooting he looked up from his son, and spoke to Claire.

"Claire honey, I need a few moments alone with Zane before the police arrive." The slow deep voice irresistibly reminded the attorney of her childhood.

Claire didn't answer for long time. Then, she shocked Amanda and Jody by agreeing with the judge. "All right," she said quietly. "I'll be out in the library."

"No, Claire. That's not a good idea." Amanda's eyes were serious as she tightly gripped Claire's sleeve.

"Amanda's right, Claire. He's in shock. He shouldn't be alone," Jody reasoned.

"I know you girls mean well," the judge stated calmly. "But I need a few minutes alone with my boy before half of Minneapolis comes barging into this room. Now go on into the library with Claire. I'll be fine. I just need to say goodbye to Zane."

Claire stepped forward and gave her old friend a kiss on the cheek. As she pulled back their eyes locked for a long moment. Finally, she released the old man and slid her arm around Amanda's waist. "I'll be right outside, Uncle Luther. Come on, Mandy. Let's go."

Amanda's feet were rooted to the ground until she saw Luther drop down onto the floor and take Zane's limp hand in his. He began quietly talking to his son about his mother and reached up to stroke pale cheeks. Eventually, Amanda allowed herself to be pulled out of the office with a reluctant Jody, and numb Monica, following quietly behind her.

Claire walked across the library and gathered the jacket she had left there earlier. She handed it to Jody who seemed to be oblivious to the fact that she was only wearing a bra. All three women were covered in blood.

"Thanks." Jody gratefully took the jacket and slipped it on, pleased with its warm comfortable fit. Her body was rapidly cooling down as the adrenaline rush started began to ease. *I'm glad I'm not the only woman in the world with long arms.* Her eyes idly scanned the titles of the books on the bookshelf and she wondered how Mark was doing with Evan.

Monica found a place on a chair on the far side of the room. Her stomach ached and her head pounded. Once again, her body was making its cravings known. She wrapped her bony arms around herself, and cursed Junior's pathetic marksmanship.

Amanda settled down next to Claire on the padded bench that had held Claire's jacket. The younger woman took a breath to speak...

BANG! A loud shot echoed in the office.

Jody, Monica, and Amanda all jumped at the noise. Claire sat perfectly still.

"FUCK!" Jody bolted into the office and the door slammed loudly behind her.

Amanda looked over at Claire whose body was deathly still. *Did you know that was going to happen? Oh, Gumby.*

Several heartbeats passed and the dark haired woman simply leaned forward and placed her elbows on her knees. Her head dropped forward as she heard the faint sounds of sirens in the distance, and Monica humming a tune she couldn't recognize. A small hand found its way to her back and a warm cheek pressed against her shoulder. Claire didn't know what else to do. She placed her palms over her eyes and began to weep.

Amanda deeply breathed in the fresh scent of pine, wet leaves and flowers. The cold damp spring weather had taken a pleasant shift and she eagerly embraced the relatively

warm night air. An easy breeze gently blew her hair around her shoulders as she surveyed Claire's yard from the low railing of the wooden gazebo. Pale moonbeams trickled through the branches of tall trees, painting the yard with streaks of light, which cut through inky shadows in odd patterns. *This is really beautiful...so peaceful.* Even this close to the city, a million stars twinkled overhead. For a moment, Amanda wished she'd brought her easel and brushes.

Here in this secluded place, at this late hour, there were none of the sounds usually associated with the city...or even the suburbs. There was no traffic or music or neighbors, only loudly chirping crickets and the rustling of the newly grown leaves. She took another deep breath of the night air and decided this...was a really good idea. She needed time alone with Claire. They needed to talk... about everything.

Amanda cursed herself for letting another day pass without telling Claire exactly how she felt about her. She recognized the flashes of fear and insecurity that sometimes flickered across the darker woman's eyes, and knew she was foolish to allow precious moments to slip away with things left unsaid. *Hadn't yesterday proven that?*

Amanda shuddered at the thought, that but for a simple twist of fate, it might have been Claire's blood that had stained her hands and clothes. *So close. Too close.*

And once the police arrived at the Rumble Mansion, all hell broke loose. Hours passed and the women were caught up in a frenzy of paperwork and interviews and telephone calls. Finally, Claire offered to stay and help an overwrought Edgar. And although it was at Claire's insistence, Amanda knew in her heart it was wrong to leave her. It was clear that Claire loved Judge Rumble and Zane. The tall attorney wasn't even allowed a good cry before the police burst in, and she'd squared her shoulders, and wiped her eyes, and took over.

When Luther and Zane's bodies were carted out of the office Amanda and Claire were on opposite sides of the library with what seemed like a hundred of people between them. Claire stopped her statement mid-sentence as her eyes followed the loaded, creaking gurneys that traveled across the room. The carts rolled away, and Claire's eyes lifted, somehow drawn to Amanda's. Stark pain radiated through the lingering glance and young therapist felt the ache as if it were her own. It was. Amanda's instincts screamed "go to her...NOW!" but before she could reach her lover, several well-meaning paramedics intercepted her. By the time she'd convinced them she wasn't injured, that the blood wasn't hers, Claire was gone, off talking to someone else...helping...explaining...and alone. And still, something had to be done about Monica. Monica. By the time Claire finally gave in to Edgar's pitiful requests, the ragged blonde was nearly out of her mind. Amanda knew she had to take her sister away before she did something crazy... in front of the entire Minneapolis police department.

Claire had stolen a single private moment with Amanda and told her go. "Take care of your sister," she'd said. "I'll see you as soon as I can."

And Amanda reluctantly agreed, knowing it had to be done, that it couldn't wait. She asked Jody to take Monica and wait outside for the taxi to arrive. But on her way out, she couldn't help but stop and quietly observe her friend in action.

The older woman skillfully cajoled and informed, doing her best to minimize the bad, and maximize what little good she could glean from the horrific situation. She fought ruthlessly for the reputation of her dead friend and mentor. Amanda stood back in awe, savoring this glimpse of Claire the advocate, politician, warrior.

More than ever Amanda wanted to put all this ugliness and pain behind her. She needed time with her daughter without fear, and time with Claire without reservation or restriction. So she set out get just that. And she did...at least in part.

After hours of tears, threats, pleading, and even a little "tough love" as Jody had put it, Monica willingly gave a statement to police that led to a 30-day commitment in a secure treatment facility. Her sister had to be free from drugs before Amanda could expect a rational discussion about Missy. And although she had no intention of giving up her daughter, she'd never sought to keep Monica completely out of Missy's life, the drugs had simply given her no choice.

The commitment wasn't a real solution and Amanda knew it. Monica had already been through treatment several times, only to be discharged and plunged into a never-ending cycle of addiction. But there was always hope, Amanda had reminded herself, and this offered her a much-needed reprieve and time to regroup and plan.

By the time Monica had been taken away, and she'd picked up Missy, and calmed down her hysterical parents, the day was gone. She arrived back at her condo well after midnight, with a sleeping toddler on her shoulder. After placing her daughter in bed, Amanda wandered downstairs, fixed herself a tall glass of iced tea, and settled in to check her furiously blinking answering machine.

BEEEP. "Where are you?"

BEEEP. "Are things okay?"

BEEEP. "How did things go with Monica?"

BEEEP. "I'm still at Uncle Luther's. I may end up staying the night. Aunt Helen's coming home early."

BEEEP. "I wish I were with you."

BEEEP. "My batteries running low...and...well I just wanted to say I miss you and I...I...hope you're doing okay. I'll call you tomorrow. Take care."

She sounded so tired. I'm so tired. Amanda rubbed heavy eyelids. *She needed me to be with her and I wasn't.* She sighed and the breath came out little shaky. *She needed me and I failed her. She could have died today. I could have lost her forever.* This time it was Amanda who put her face in her hands and began to sob.

A hooting of an owl drew Amanda from the thoughts of the previous day. *I'm here now, Claire. And you'll be damn lucky if I let you use the bathroom without me!* The wind shifted directions and brought with it rich scent of a nearby pond. Amanda shivered as the cooler breeze raised goose bumps on her thinly covered arms.

Suddenly, a warm body pressed itself against her back and soft hands ran the length of her arms. "Are you cold?" the deep voice whispered directly into Amanda's ear. She shivered again, but for a totally different reason.

"Not anymore."

The lips against her ear smiled. "Good." Claire wrapped her arms around the smaller woman and happily breathed in the faint scent of Amanda's musk perfume. "What were you thinking about?" She placed her chin on the head below hers. "Missy?"

The blonde squeezed the arms wrapped tightly around her and nodded. "Among other things. It was nice of Jody to let her sleep over tonight, huh? Missy's been missing her like crazy. Although, I think after the day we spent at the park, Jody ended up with a very tired little girl."

"I'm glad you guys had fun. I'm sorry I wasn't able to be there."

Amanda shrugged. "S'alright. We needed a little time to ourselves. Besides, you had important stuff to do."

"Important...yes. More important...no." Claire looked out into the yard. "You didn't have to do that, you know."

Amanda grinned broadly. "Of course I did. You said you'd never been camping so..." About 20 feet away from the gazebo stood an large tent with the sides rolled up exposing the

mosquito netting. Several opened sleeping bags were laid out across the floor to serve as padding and a small lantern burned in the dimly in the corner. "I'm starting you off slowly. Back yard camping is just the first step."

"I see. Do I sense a trip to the Boundary Waters in our future?"

Amanda smiled at the words 'our future.' "Would you like there to be?"

"Nah," Claire teased. "Even a cute blonde like you isn't worth braving those mosquitoes for!"

"Hey!" Amanda protested in mock insult. "Don't make me find some other sexy lawyer to take me!" Amanda felt Claire's chin leave her head and a sudden blast of hot air caress her ear.

"You think I'm sexy?"

Amanda closed her eyes as the low growl rumbled through her. "Oh, yeah," she chuckled. With a sudden spin, Claire whirled Amanda around to face her, leaning back she lifted Amanda to her until small feet were barely touching the ground. Their mouths were barely inches apart. "How sexy, Mandy?" Claire purred, her voice completely serious. Amanda licked suddenly dry lips, her eyes irresistibly drawn to full mouth so close to hers. Her mind went blank. "W...Well..."

Claire tilted her head even closer to Amanda's but stopped hairbreadths away from the waiting lips. "You don't seem very certain of your answer."

Amanda's nostrils flared as the hot moist air tickled her lips and the light scent of roses wafted up between them. "I...I..."

In three long paces, during which Amanda's feet never touched the ground, she found herself pinned up against the center beam of the gazebo. Her heart began pounding wildly as Claire placed her hands on either side of her waist and slowly drew her fingers up her torso, and along the sensitive flesh of her inner arms. The light pressure caused Amanda's arms to rise of their own accord, and the gentle touch eventually stopped at her wrists that were now held high above her head, against the wooden beam. Amanda groaned softly as finger trips left trails of fire across hypersensitive skin. "Claire." She swallowed hard. "What...what are you doing?"

Claire shifted her hands slightly, until she was holding Amanda's wrists with one hand. She drew her free hand back down one of Amanda's arms, then along her shoulder and up her neck. "I convincing you of your answer," came the simple reply. She leaned into the smaller woman and gently traced her soft lower lip. A gust of wind blew strands of Claire's hair forward across Amanda's neck and chest. The smaller woman's stomach clenched tightly at the feathersoft touch.

Claire's mouth drew nearer to Amanda's and her eyes fluttered shut, relieved beyond reason that she would taste the lips that had been lingering so close to hers. *No!* She growled with frustration when Claire's mouth detoured across her cheek and came to rest alongside her ear. The darker woman took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. "Have I ever told you how wonderful you smell?" Claire whispered.

"God, Claire!" Amanda moaned as she started to tremble under the weight of her own arousal. "I...I need you to kiss me."

"All right," came the smooth response. Claire pulled away from Amanda, standing to her full height, but never releasing the smaller woman's wrists. She slid a palm under Amanda's chin and raised the blonde's head until their eyes met and held. Claire was beginning to have a difficult time controlling her own breathing. A slight tilt higher and she exposed the tender skin of Amanda's neck. In a flash, she bent and laid claim to Amanda's throat with passionate lips. Amanda gasped.

"Are you still cold." The words were mumbled between wet kisses to Amanda's throat.

Is she kidding? "Claire...Claire lets go inside..." Amanda looked desperately back toward the house. She knew they should move inside but was finding it nearly impossible to concentrate on anything but the insistent kisses under her ear.

"No." Claire's tongue worked its way down Amanda's heaving chest stopping only when it reached her shirt. With one deft hand Claire began unbuttoning the light chemise blouse. Several buttons later a gust of wind opened the blouse further, billowing the thin material.

Amanda groaned loudly as a rush night air caused the baby fine hairs covering her stomach and chest to stand up and her nipples to strain against the material of her bra. Claire slid her hand into the flapping blouse and cupped a full breast. Amanda shuddered as the warm palm contrasted sharply with her wind-cooled skin. *God! She's gonna have me begging soon.*

The blonde began to feel a light ache in her shoulders as her knees threatened to buckle, and Claire's arm began supporting more and more of her weight. *Why won't she kiss me?* Her mind cried, although she was thoroughly loving every second of this delicious torture. Her lips throbbed with want, and she spared a fleeting thought for her sister, admitting that if Monica wanted drugs half as badly as she wanted...no needed... Claire's mouth on hers, no treatment would help.

Blue eyes strained as Claire peered through shadows and stared intently at the undergarment binding ample cleavage. *I wonder if it's red? Jesus, how I love red lingerie.* Although it looked black or dark purple in the moonlight, Claire decided that since she couldn't be certain, she would think of it as red.

"Claire," Amanda panted. "We...We really need to go inside the house. Please."

"No," the older woman stated firmly, not letting Amanda's words deter her from her path. When she slid her hot wet tongue underneath the top edge of Amanda's bra and swirled it around an already painfully erect nipple, Amanda cried out. Claire felt the pressure against her hand as the counselor began to tremble. She was having terrific fun but didn't want to hurt Amanda in any way.

"Mandy." Firm teeth gasped a throbbing nipple through the sleek material, and gently tugged. Amanda cried out again as her body began writhing under Claire's assault. "If I let go of your wrists will you promise not to move?" the deep voice continued.

A tornado could have passed through the yard and Amanda wouldn't have noticed. Her world was solely focused on the electric sensation of Claire's lips and teeth on her breast, and the pulsating need they were creating in her groin. Claire smiled against the soft skin, knowing she wouldn't get an answer if she remained in her current position.

Bringing her head up even with Amanda's, she used her free hand to pull her captive to her. "Mandy," she tried again to get her attention again.

Amanda pried open tightly shut eyes to find Claire's face inches from hers. She could almost taste those sweet parted lips resting so tantalizingly close to her own. She thrust forward to meet them, only to have Claire pull away again. "Clairrrrrre," Amanda growled from deep in her throat. A bolt of anger flashed across emerald eyes that glimmered in the moonlight.

Claire smiled, finding tonight's unplanned turn of events more than satisfying. That she was turned-on by this heady sense of power wasn't a big surprise. After all, at least part of Evan's ravings were true. Claire probably did have a little too much testosterone for her own good. But she'd always embraced her aggressive tendencies, refusing to be ashamed of her true nature. In fact, she'd turned it into a successful career.

But on this starlit night, Claire was learning something about herself she'd never suspected. Part of her...a BIG part of her...longed to be in Amanda's shoes. Seeing that

brief flash of anger in Amanda's eyes had given the taller woman an unexpected thrill. She could see the animal lurking just below surface and had a sudden, nearly uncontrollable urge to unleash it. Claire suspected the young counselor would wear the mantle of power like true royalty, with one very eager attorney as her subject. *Time for that later, Mandy. I was so right. You are a fantastic playmate.* The woman in her grasp jerked slightly, refocusing Claire's attention.

"If I let go of your arms will you promise not to move," she patiently repeated.

"No," Amanda whispered defiantly. *If you let go of my arms you won't be able to peel me off you.*

A dark eyebrow arched and Claire gently removed a strand of pale hair that had blown across Amanda's cheek. She leaned in again but kept her mouth just out of Amanda's reach. Still, it was close enough for the woman to breathe the same air.

Claire dropped her voice to its deepest register. Her eyes darkened and face took on a passionate, commanding quality that caused Amanda's heart to hammer within her chest and a warm trickle of moisture to trail down her inner thigh. "Other than lowering your arms... you won't move another muscle."

Amanda moaned at the assertive words, her hips bucking of their own volition. The darker woman's lips moved even closer, until Amanda could feel the barest hint of tingling pressure. "Mandy, if you try to run, or get away from me..." Amanda licked her lips nervously, causing her tongue to lightly brush against the full mouth across from hers. Her arousal skyrocketed and she felt tremors begin between her legs, "I'll chase you down...and take you right where you stand."

Claire unceremoniously dropped Amanda's wrists and surged forward to devour the younger woman's mouth. Hot lips and wet tongues melted into each other as Claire swallowed a deep guttural moan that was torn from Amanda's throat. The body in her arms convulsed as she tightened her grip, nuzzling her face against the hot cheek and soft red-gold hair splayed across her shoulder. Amanda's knees completely gave way but strong, steady arms, easily supported her.

Finally, after several moments of soothing touches and soft words, the women separated and Amanda looked up into a brilliant white smile. She smiled sheepishly in return, green eyes twinkling. "You're pretty proud of yourself aren't ya, Gumby?"

Claire's nodded and her smile got bigger. "Absolutely."

Amanda leaned in and kissed the delicate skin around Claire's collarbone. "You know, there's a tent over there that's filled with sleeping bags and blankets and fluffy pillows."

Claire reached down behind Amanda thighs and lifted her as easily as she would have a child. The smaller woman giggled but her lips never left Claire's neck and chest.

The attorney stepped down off the gazebo, hoping she wouldn't drop her bundle. *Ugh! Those kisses are way too distracting. If she doesn't watch it I'm gonna kill us both.* After several unsteady steps, Claire stopped outside of the mesh tent. She arched an eyebrow and waited "Well?"

"Umm." Amanda was thoroughly enjoying her work and didn't appreciate the interruption.

"Well, what?" she asked impatiently as nimble fingers began unbuttoning Claire's blouse.

"How sexy am I?"

Too damn sexy for your own good, is what she thought. What she said, however was, "I'm still not sure. I think I'll require more convincing."

Claire rolled her eyes and sighed dramatically as she kicked open the flap to the tent.

"Work, work, work!"

The two women lay in a tangled heap of arms and legs. Amanda could still hear her heart pounding in her ears as Claire let out a deep breath, and adjusted her position beneath Amanda. Snuggling closer, Amanda sighed. The cool breeze was a welcome relief to overheated skin.

"Do you have any idea how happy I feel right at this moment?" The smaller woman asked, each word punctuated by a light kiss to her lover's face and neck.

"Umm...pretty happy?" Claire guessed as she reached down and pulled up thin blanket only as far as Amanda's waist. Trailing a finger lightly up and down blonde's spine Claire marveled at the soft warm skin. "I'm glad you're happy, Mandy," she spoke softly.

Resuming her light kisses Amanda murmured into Claire's neck "Mmm...I'd love to help you feel just as wonderful as I feel now." She felt a catch in her lover's breathing as the body below hers stilled. Propping herself up on one elbow, she reached up and smoothed back slightly damp bangs. She could barely make out Claire's eyes, which had taken on a silver-purple hue in the moonlight. "Gumby?" She questioned.

The smaller woman felt Claire's arms tightened around her and after a sudden shift, she found herself looking up into round watery eyes. Claire closed her eyes tightly, causing two hot tears to stream down her cheeks and lightly splash on Amanda's chest. The young therapist could feel the anxiety coursing through her lover. But before she could speak, she heard the low rumble of Claire's voice.

"Do you really wanna make me happy, Mandy?" Claire whispered, her voice cracking. Amanda's heart lurched at the sound of her partner's insecurity, and she understood the question carried implications beyond the moment. Raising two slightly shaky palms, she cupped Claire's cheeks, and used her hands to force direct eye contact. She waited patiently until glistening frightened eyes met and held hers. *Dammit! I should have done this a long time ago.* "God yes, Claire. I want more than anything to make you happy," she whispered fiercely.

Two more hot tears fell. *What am I doing?* Claire tried to pull away but Amanda held her face firm, refusing to let go, maintaining eye contact. The attorney hesitated, unsure of what to say or do next. She started to panic. Amanda's eyes were beginning to unnerve her. They asked questions she didn't want to answer, demanded things she might not be able to give. Her breathing quickened and her heart started to pound. But instead of fleeing, she convulsively pulled Amanda into a crushing hug, burrowing her face into the smaller woman's hair.

"What will it take, Claire? All you have to do is tell me," Amanda coaxed. Claire didn't answer, but Amanda could feel the iron grip around her tighten. Wet tears flowed freely against her neck and her own eyes welled in response. "I do want you to be happy, Claire. You just have to tell me what you need."

A sniff, and then another, and finally Claire lifted her head. Her face was inches from Amanda's, and the trail of her tears shone brightly in the moonlight. She closed her eyes and willed herself not to answer.

"Tell me, Sweetheart... Please." Amanda's voice was somewhere between pleading and demanding.

Claire's shoulders jerked and her head sagged slightly to the side. But even as she tried to pull away, she couldn't ignore Amanda's plea. Her resolve weakened by Amanda's gentle words, Claire gave up the fight she was destined to lose anyway. Falling into Amanda she wrapped her in a crushing embrace. But this time she spoke.

"Tell me you really care about me," Claire asked, self-consciousness gone.

Though she thought it impossible, Amanda managed to tighten her grip on her partner. Her own wet cheeks pressed snugly against the side of Claire's head, she answered her lover's need. "I really care about you, Gumby, I swear it."

"Tell me you don't want to leave." Claire knew she should stop. Wanted to stop. But couldn't. She desperately needed Amanda. The reassurances the smaller woman was granting became like air or water. She had to have them.

Amanda eased Claire's head from hers. Slowly bringing up her mouth, she gently kissed Claire on the temple. "I won't leave. Not unless you want me to," she whispered hotly, willing her partner to believe her.

And despite herself, Claire did. It was impossible not to. The smaller woman spoke with an intensity that reached out and grabbed hold of Claire's very soul.

"Tell me you love me," Claire implored again. But this time she was surer of what the response would be.

Amanda reached up, tangling her fingers in dark hair. Roughly, she pulled Claire into a passionate kiss and the attorney responded with abandon, losing herself in soft lips, warm skin, and an eager heart. When the kiss ended both women were breathing heavily and Amanda shifted so that Claire's eyes were directly in front of hers. "I want your full attention for this, Claire." Fierce green eyes pinned open azure blue. "Yes, I do love you," she breathed. "And so much more than that..." She smiled gently. "I care about everything that affects you. I need you. I like you." She paused, and with a single finger gently wiped away a tear from Claire's cheek. "But most of all...I want to be with you." Claire looked down at Amanda, stunned. Everything her heart had been craving was laid out before her. All she had to do was accept it. Not knowing what to say, she bent her head slightly and kissed both of Amanda's cheeks, allowing their tears to mingle.

With a gentle tug, Amanda pulled Claire down onto her chest. Throwing an arm across the smaller woman's middle, Claire laid her cheek on the silky skin of Amanda's breast and listened to the steady, pounding heart. Small fingers threaded softly through sable hair and blue eyes fluttered closed at the intimate touch. For long moments neither woman spoke, each thinking about the emotional scene that played out moments before. Finally, Amanda felt Claire take a deep breath as if to speak.

"Mandy?"

"Hmm?"

"Thanks." Claire reached for her hand and twined their fingers securely together.

Amanda laughed as relief flooded her. "You're welcome, Gumby." She squeezed the fingers nestled between her own and yawned. "Let's get some sleep."

"Mandy?"

"Hmm?"

"I love you too."

"I know," was the sleepy but tender response.

"Mandy?"

She has GOT to be tired. Amanda smiled as she felt the warm puffs of air against her chest lengthen and grow steady. "Hmm?" She barely heard the murmured question that followed.

"What color is your bra?"

2 MONTHS LATER

SPLASH! SPLASH!

"Cut it out Bobby!" But the scolding words were softened by a smile.

SPLASH! *giggle*giggle*giggle*

"Oh, I see how it is." Long fingers tickled a tiny tummy. "You think that's funny, huh Missy?" The little girl laughed again and scooped up another handful of water. Claire raised her eyebrow to its most intimidating level, and there was a thoughtful pause, before all three children erupted into hysterical laughter, splashing Claire even harder than before.

"Keith, you little monster! I'll get you for that!" But Claire laughed in spite of herself. The little boy, a walking replica of Mark, had worked his way around behind attorney and dumped a bucket of water over her head.

Jody and Amanda idly watched the summer frolickers from a comfortable position on Claire's redwood deck. The older counselor shook her head in amazement. *How Amanda ever talked Claire into that tiny wading pool, with three kids, I'll never know.*

Amanda raised a hand above her eyes to block out the bright glare of the summer sun while she used the other to fan herself. It was sweltering, but otherwise, perfect for a Fourth of July picnic. She smiled as Claire stopped her all out assault on Keith, to retie the rubber band that fell out of Missy's hair. *What a difference a little time makes.* Claire's initial awkwardness with the little girl had long sense faded. In fact, Missy brought out a playful side of Claire that the psychologist found irresistible. Appreciative green eyes were drawn to a pale yellow bikini and Amanda's mind drifted to several other things she found irresistible.

Jody gave Amanda a quick hip check and the younger woman blushed, having been caught with what she was sure was a leer on her face. Jody smirked and tipped her beer bottle nearly vertical, in an effort get every last drop of what she considered liquid gold.

"Ahhh!" She smacked her lips loudly. Reaching into the cooler near her feet she grabbed another for herself and wriggled her eyebrows at Amanda. The blonde nodded.

"So, how did it go with Monica yesterday?" A light hiss sounded as Jody twisted the bottle cap.

Amanda continued to watch Claire and the children while she spoke to Jody. She lifted the cold bottle to her forehead and sighed as cool beads of moisture trailed down the side of her face. "Pretty good actually. She's gonna stay at Pinehurst at least until the end of the summer. She's entering into their second phase of treatment." Amanda shrugged, not wanting to get her hopes up too high, but nevertheless encouraged. "She's never gotten this far before."

Jody smiled. "That's great. I really hope things work out for her this time." *Mostly for your sake, my friend.*

Amanda cracked open her bottle. "Thanks," she said cheerfully. "Me too."

Jody settled her forearms on the deck railing. "How does Claire like her new job?"

Amanda thought for a moment before answering. "I think...she really likes it. But it's different from what she's used to and it's going to take a little time for her to get settled."

Three days after Evan's arrest, when Maylor & Moore had him released on bail, Claire resigned. She spent the early weeks of summer working in her yard, brooding, and deciding whether she wanted to continue practicing law. After several sessions of prodding, or nagging as Claire referred to it, Mark convinced her to accept a position at the Hennipin County Attorney's Office. He promised she'd like being 'one of the good guys' and sweetened the offer by reminding her that, though they couldn't do it personally, their office would be the ones prosecuting Evan.

"Hey Jody, you could hand me that brush?"

Jody looked over at Mark, who was wearing blue jean cutoffs, no shirt, and a white kiss the cook apron with "Attorneys Do It With Their Briefs On," emblazoned across his

chest. She grabbed a BBQ stained brush from the table and whispered conspiratorially to Amanda. "He looks ridiculous doesn't he?"

Amanda laughed and nodded. "Yep."

"But gorgeous," Jody sighed.

The blonde therapist squinted and tilted her head as if in serious thought, which earned her a hard slap on the rump from Jody. "Ouch!" Amanda glared at her business partner but relented with a smile. "Definitely, gorgeous. But more importantly..." she paused dramatically, "He can cook!"

Both women laughed and toasted each other's bottles. "Amen to that!" Jody praised.

A heavy thumping sound caused the women to turn. Claire trotted up the stairs with a wet child in each arm and Bobby suctioned onto her leg. She looked pointedly at Mark and Amanda. "Did you two lose something?" With a mischievous grin she jostled the children in her arms causing them to giggle and drip on Bobby.

Mark and Amanda looked at each other and then back to Claire. "Nope," they said in unison.

Jody rolled her eyes at her friend's antics and took pity on Claire. "Come on kids, let's go show off our muscles and dump the water out of the pool." Jody motioned her arms like a weight lifter and the kids immediately mimicked her and cheered.

Laughing, Claire deposited Missy and Keith at the bottom of the stairs. As soon as little feet hit the ground they were off and running. "Thanks, Jody." The attorney stuck out her tongue at Mark and Amanda. "I'm gonna change into something dry." She brushed passed them and disappeared into the house.

Amanda hesitated at the sliding glass doors, trying to think of a reason to go in the house "I...ahh...I..."

Mark laughed and had mercy on the stuttering woman. "Go on." He waved at the doors.

"Jody and I can keep an eye on Missy."

The blonde smiled happily and kissed the cook. "Thanks Mark."

"The ribs will be ready in about a half-an-hour, Amanda," he yelled after her, but she had already turned the corner. The big man looked at his watch and shook his head as he turned down the grill down to its lowest setting. *Man! So much for eating anytime soon.*

Amanda poked her head around the doorframe of Claire's bedroom, expecting to catch the taller woman dressing. Instead she heard the water running in the bathroom. As she settled down on the corner of the bed wait for her friend, her eyes drifted to a small watercolor painting of a starlit night and a moon-draped gazebo. VERY happy memories flooded her and she was suddenly glad for the room's powerful air-conditioning.

SPLAT! A wet swimsuit bottom landed on the floor along side the bed.

Pale brows lifted.

SPLAT! A bikini top joined its mate.

Amanda grinned wickedly, eagerly anticipating Claire's naked appearance from the bathroom.

"I can hear you panting out there, Mandy," Claire teasingly called from the bathroom.

Amanda sucked in a breath, about to protest, but stopped and allowed it to trickle out slowly. *God, she's right! I'm actually panting and I haven't even seen her yet. Love...is great.*

Claire emerged from the bathroom roughly scrubbing a towel through waterlogged locks and wearing a light cotton robe. Amanda looked at the robe and poked out her bottom lip

"Aww, come on Claire." She pointed at the offending garment. "That's mean."

"I didn't know who else might be in here," she lied and hid a smile, knowing full well she'd been teasing Amanda all day. After a final vigorous rub, pitched the towel on top of her swimsuit.

"Humph!" Amanda immediately bent down to pick up the wet items. "That's so gross Claire, how do you expect these to dry?" She held up the items with a look of disgust on her face.

Claire smiled inwardly, secretly enjoying the smaller woman fussing over her things.

"Sorry, Mom." She pulled Amanda to her. Wrapping her arms around her waist she arched a dark eyebrow. "Do I need to be punished?"

Amanda snorted and backhanded Claire in the belly. "You wish, Gumby." But she lightly brushed her lips against Claire's anyway. When the gentle, almost platonic kiss ended, she pulled back. Quickly changing her mind, she leaned in again, this time hungrily, and was immediately rewarded with a throaty groan. Satisfied, she delicately nipped Claire's bottom lip as she withdrew.

"Hey where do you think you're going?" Claire protested, as swaying hips made their way to the door.

"Time for lunch, Claire," Amanda said innocently. "We don't want poor Mark to gnaw his own leg off."

"Now? You want lunch now?" *No!!!!*

Amanda nodded and smiled sweetly. *Thought you had me didn't ya. Ha, serves you right! Too bad it's killing me.*

Blue eyes narrowed "Tease!"

Amanda's hands went to her hips as she thought of Claire in her bikini, and the hours of silent torture she'd endured. "And you're not?" she challenged.

Claire focused on her feet and tried to stifle a laugh. She failed miserably. "All right, Mandy, you got me there," she grinned. "I'll be down in a few."

The smaller woman winked and stopped for a long second to let her feelings for the tall attorney show in her eyes. "I'm totally, crazy in love with you, Gumby. You know that, right?"

Claire nodded and Amanda smiled brightly before disappearing into the hall. She stared at the empty doorway, missing her lover already. With a small sigh, she reached into her dresser and withdrew a fresh smelling T-shirt, panties and a pair of cotton shorts.

Slipping them on, she was drawn to the laughing voices below her window. Peering out she saw Jody chasing around three laughing children and Mark happily basting the ribs, his large finger stealing tastes BBQ sauce every few strokes. Then Amanda joined the fray and Claire could see the game shift to hide-and-seek. Everyone looked happy and content. *What a difference a little time makes.*

At that moment Amanda chose to look up into Claire's window. She flashed Claire a toothy grin, which was warmly returned. In her yard was the best piece of her past, the steady loving hands of her present, and a small beacon for the future. Life...she decided...was very, very good and Claire jumped down the last three steps of the staircase, not wanting to waste a single moment of it.