

# DESTINY

A digital illustration of two women in a fireplace setting. The woman on the left has long brown hair and is nude, sitting with her legs crossed. The woman on the right has short blonde hair and is wearing a light-colored lace dress, leaning over the first woman and touching her shoulder. A fire is burning in the fireplace on the left, and the background features a brick wall and ornate woodwork.

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Destiny

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## **DEDICATION**

*To my wonderful family for their love and support.*

## CHAPTER ONE

Rachel impatiently glanced around the small cramped office, her eyes finally resting on the large clock hanging a bit crookedly on the wall. She let out a heavy sigh. Fifteen more minutes and she could breathe in the fresh air of freedom. She rubbed her eyes as she stared at her computer screen, then let her gaze drift over to her two co-workers watching as their fingers nimbly punched the keyboard keys in an effort to beat their self imposed deadlines. Every so often, their attention was drawn to the clock as they typed even faster.

As Rachel watched them, an uneasy feeling of being trapped, a feeling that was becoming more frequent with each passing day, crept over her and she wondered if they ever felt the same way she did. Often she sensed that they really were content with their jobs and lives as they frequently shared intimate details with her. She was cautious not to share too much of her own personal life. They knew she'd been married and divorced, but they could never know why she had no interest in men instead assuming she'd been burned too often. Small town bigotry was something she'd never understand, but she was smart

enough to know that she had to protect herself at all costs. Small minds didn't change easily.

She often times wondered what her co-workers secret to contentment was, though. How could they want nothing more out of life? Was nine to five all there was? Was having a job all that mattered in their lives? She didn't think she could live another moment if all life had to offer her for the rest of her life was this God awful boring existence. Was this discontentment part of her sexual orientation or did all women feel this way at a certain point in their lives? The women she'd known never talked about it if they did feel it. Maybe it was one of those things women just kept to themselves. She couldn't bear another day in this office. There had to be more than this to life and she was determined to break away from the pack and set her yearning nature free.

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Rachel stood on the porch of her apartment building anxiously awaiting the familiar Toyota. When it finally turned into her driveway, she ran to the car barely giving the driver a chance to stop as Rachel grabbed the door handle and jumped into the passenger seat.

"Wow, you must have really missed me today," Kerri Tabor said grinning widely.

Rachel didn't respond. Kerri peered at her then gently pushed Rachel's hair back from her face. Rachel's tears were on her fingertips. "What's the matter, honey?" she softly asked with a trace of alarm

in her voice.

"Everything." Her lips trembled. She shook her head slowly back and forth. "I don't know...it's just how I feel."

Kerri enclosed her in her arms, and then grabbed a tissue from the glove box. She tenderly dabbed at Rachel's eyes. "Don't cry, baby. It'll be all right."

Rachel flashed Kerri a weak smile. "I hope so," she answered in a wobbly voice.

Kerri patted her shoulder. "Where do you want to go, Rachel?"

"I don't care. I just need to be alone with you."

She nodded. "We need to talk about what's gotten you so upset."

Rachel sighed. "I don't have a clue. I just feel so muddled up inside. I'm frustrated and restless and I don't even know why." She closed her eyes as she leaned her head back against the headrest.

"You know I'm always here for you, Rae." Kerri stroked Rachel's hair, then slowly backed out of the driveway and headed toward her small two-room apartment.

Once inside the security of Kerri's apartment, Rachel curled up on the sofa with her feet tucked under her.

Kerri popped a movie into the DVD player. "Do you want anything?"

Rachel shook her head. "Just to be with you." She loved being here with Kerri often referring to Kerri's apartment as their private love nest. She looked over at Kerri thankful for what the woman had given her, not only physically, but also emotionally. Rachel

would forever be grateful for Kerri's trust and friendship.

Kerri's short-cropped brown hair was disheveled as usual. She was pretty in her own right, but downplayed her looks, rarely using any type of makeup unless it was absolutely necessary. She was at home in sweats or jeans and flannel shirts. She was a thirty-two year old tomboy and that was one of the things that had attracted Rachel to her two years ago. Rachel was the complete opposite of Kerri. She was comfortable, proud of her femininity, and very happy to do everything under the sun to enhance it at every opportunity.

Kerri caught Rachel's eye and smiled as she started the movie then sat next to Rachel. She slipped an arm around Rachel's shoulder drawing her close.

Rachel contentedly leaned her head back against Kerri's chest. "Ker, can I ask you something?"

"Of course, honey, you can ask me anything." She squeezed Rachel's arm. "You should know that by now."

Rachel's eyes lowered. "Do you love me?"

She laughed. "Now that's a silly question."

"I'm serious," Rachel persisted. "Would you miss me if we weren't together?"

She frowned. "Where's this going, Rachel? You know how I feel about you. I'd be devastated if we weren't together." She kissed Rachel's cheek. "Maybe I should remind you just how important you are to me," she murmured caressing Rachel's neck.

"Is your love for me only physical?"

Kerri sat up straight. "Rachel, I've never met

anyone like you before. Can't you see that we have so much more together than just a physical relationship? My God, we're not kids. If I wanted only sex then I could get that anywhere. I love your compassion, intelligence, and your wonderful sense of humor. I'm hoping that in the near future we'll finally be able to move in together."

"When?"

Her eyes narrowed. "Honey, I'm trying to save enough so we can afford a decent place. Do you want to move in here with me? Is that what this is all about?"

She took a deep breath. "I don't want to stay in Wilson Point, period. There's nothing here for us." She searched Kerri's eyes. "We're still young and we should just pack up and go somewhere far from here before it's too late. I'm tired of having to keep our relationship a secret."

Kerri's brow puckered. "I think that's easier said than done. I'm still in design school and with my part time job, I'm lucky I have any free time. And the time I do have, I give to you. Besides, no matter where we go there will always be some people who won't accept us and I don't see that changing in the near future. Whether we live in Wilson Point, Pennsylvania or Los Angeles California, we'll still run into anti-gay people. Honey, face facts. No matter how kind or generous we are, some people aren't going to care once they know our sexual orientation. I don't intend to spend my life worrying about who likes or doesn't like me...life is too damned short. We'll never escape those people, but we don't have to



let them destroy us either. All we can do is be ourselves and don't let them put a damper on our happiness."

"We wouldn't have to live in a stuffy small-minded town like Wilson Point.. I get so tired and bored with nothing to do. It's too rural and red necked. Look how far we have to drive to find any sort of culture."

"You're exaggerating just a little, don't you think?" Kerri said with a laugh. "Buffalo's not that far."

"In a large city we would just blend in and have some breathing space. I could work full time while you finished school. Please at least think about it."

Kerri's lips drew tight. "You haven't heard a word I've said."

"Yes, I have, but you aren't listening to me. Aren't my feelings important to you?"

"I can't leave right now, Rachel. I only have a few more semesters. Do you know the paper work involved to transfer? And I'd lose my funding and have to find the money to make up that slack. Besides, another school may not be able to fit me in with the courses I need. I thought we discussed that before." Her eyes softened. "Honey, let's just concentrate on the future we're planning together. We're going to be spending the rest of our lives together."

Rachel slowly let her breath out. "I quit my job today," she said quietly.

"What?" Kerri's eyebrows shot up in shock.

"I said I quit my job."

"I heard you, but why?"

"I'm sick and tired of the boring routine. We need to move away from here as soon as possible. I've

taken the first step in making that a reality. The next step is up to you." She looked into Kerri's usually bright eyes, but now saw the darkness and the frightened pained look Kerri was trying to mask.

Kerri removed her arm from Rachel's shoulder and turned to face her. "Rachel, aren't you being a little immature to quit your job just like that? We're not kids, for God's sake and we both know how difficult good jobs are to find."

Rachel stiffened. "I don't think I'm being immature at all. I want to see what the rest of the world has to offer before I get any older," she retorted in an icy tone. "I don't want to look back someday with regrets for what I could have done with my life."

"Wow, I can't believe you'd act on impulse without thinking things through." She emphatically shook her head back and forth. "This is so unlike you. If I didn't know better I'd think you were going through a mid life crisis."

"I'm not having a crisis," she snapped. "I did think everything through. That's all I've been doing for months now. I've weighed the pros and cons. Sometimes taking a risk opens up wonderful new opportunities." Kerri's attitude annoyed her. She was treating her like a child, but worse than that, Kerri was belittling her.

"What exactly *are* you looking for, Rachel? I thought we were building a future together here. Don't you think quitting your job should have come under the list of things to be discussed as a couple? I certainly do. If I wanted to do something as drastic I certainly would have talked it through with you first

before doing it."

Rachel rolled her eyes. "Don't you ever think there's something more to be gained out of life? How can just existing make you happy?"

"I'm not 'just existing' as you put it. That's why I'm in design school. I know that eventually I'll leave here, but it won't be for a couple of more years. I'll still be young; we'll both still be young." Her eyes brightened. "We'll have the rest of our lives together, honey, and I promise you it won't be in Wilson Point." She patted Rachel's hand. "I don't want to fight."

"You'll end up staying here and never leaving."

"You have no right to assume that, Rachel." She folded her arms over her chest. "What exactly do you want?" she quietly asked.

Rachel shrugged. "More than what Wilson Point is offering, I suppose."

"More than what I'm offering." She swallowed hard.

Rachel looked at her barely able to stand the pain in her lover's eyes. "I love you with all my heart, Kerri. I want a future with you, but just not here."

"I can't figure you out at all some times, but I can tell you one thing...the way you're talking doesn't make me feel very secure."

"I do love you so much, Kerri. Please don't ever doubt that." She grabbed Kerri's hands.

Kerri gazed into Rachel's eyes then leaned in closer softly moving her lips as she gently caressed Rachel's neck with tender kisses. "Do you?" she hoarsely whispered. "Show me." She rubbed Rachel's back,

and then unhurriedly undid her bra. Her hands found the familiar breasts and she softly cupped them, massaging first one and then the other. A moan escaped from Rachel's lips. "We have so much passion together," she murmured slipping a hand inside Rachel's jeans and teasing her with her fingertips until Rachel hurriedly undid her jeans sliding them down her slender legs. Kerri removed Rachel's panties and her tongue expertly traveled to Rachel's throbbing clit.

## CHAPTER TWO

The charcoal gray sky split open spewing down sheets of icy cold rain making visibility almost impossible. Rachel stood on the porch of her apartment building waiting for Kerri. She cupped her eyes with her hands looking down the almost flooded slick street but saw no cars in sight. She was worried. Even though Kerri was an excellent driver, this rainstorm tested the skills of even the best drivers. She nervously chewed on her bottom lip.

Her thoughts took her back to when she had first met Kerri. She'd gone to the local college campus to sign up for a couple of nighttime classes and had become confused as to which building she was to register in when Kerri appeared out of nowhere offering assistance. After Kerri escorted her to the proper building and patiently waited until Rachel had successfully completed her registration, Rachel offered to buy Kerri some lunch to thank her for her help. As they sat in the coffee shop chatting afterwards, Rachel discovered how much she had in common with her rescuer. They spent the next hour discussing their love of poetry and literature promising to get together again as they exchanged

phone numbers.

Rachel was pleasantly surprised when Kerri called a few days later inviting her to a poetry reading. Rachel found herself enjoying the poetry reading almost as much as she was enjoying Kerri's company.

Over the next few weeks, their friendship blossomed and grew with Rachel looking forward with anticipation to Kerri's bubbly voice on her answering machine each day when she returned from work. She wasn't prepared for what would happen between them one night, though, and in retrospect was glad that she hadn't known or she may have never gone to Kerri's tiny apartment that night.

"Did you ever imagine you'd end up back in college at this age?" Kerri asked.

Rachel laughed. "No. When I married Bill, I thought that was it. My life would be lived the way everyone thought I should live it and I'd continue my job as a secretary and eventually have a couple of kids and the white picket fence kind of life."

Kerri's eyes clouded. "Was your husband good to you?"

She nodded. "For the most part." She saw the intensity in Kerri's eyes as they met her own.

"Why did you divorce him?" She leaned forward. "I'm sorry if I'm asking too personal of a question."

"No, it's okay." She smiled. "I couldn't see myself living with him for the rest of my life. Something just didn't feel right and I found myself physically unable to give him what he needed and deserved...what every man needs and deserves from his wife."

"You didn't like sex with him."

Rachel was surprised by Kerri's blunt observation. Her face flushed.

"I'm sorry...I shouldn't have said that," Kerri quickly apologized.

Rachel nervously glanced down at her hands. "No, you're right...I didn't like sex with him. I tried to, but I was only kidding myself and what made me feel worse was deceiving him. He deserved better." She shifted her body on the sofa.

"You did what you had to do for yourself, Rachel," she answered softly as she moved from her easy chair to the sofa and seated herself next to Rachel.

Rachel tensed as Kerri peered intently at her. She tried to think of something to say, but no words would come. Her heartbeat quickened.

"You have beautiful blond hair, Rachel. In fact everything about you is beautiful."

Rachel blushed as she sipped her wine cooler. She didn't know how to respond to Kerri's compliments. "Thank you," was all she could manage.

"Please don't be embarrassed." Kerri moved closer looking intently into her eyes. "I knew you were special from the first minute I saw you." Her voice was low and her eyes searched Rachel's. She slowly leaned forward and brushed her lips against Rachel's.

Rachel swallowed hard as a shudder tore through her. She nervously placed a hand on the back of Kerri's head then slightly parted her lips to let Kerri's tongue slip inside. She lost herself in Kerri's kiss. It'd been so long since another woman had touched her.

Kerri took her hand and quietly led her into her small bedroom. She lit several candles then slowly

undressed Rachel kissing every inch of her body as Rachel's clothes fell silently to the floor. Her gentle hands aroused familiar sensations in Rachel.

Kerri removed her own clothes then tenderly lay Rachel down on the bed. She put her arms around her drawing her close as her kisses grew more passionate unlocking the raw hunger within Rachel.

As Rachel became moist, she pleaded for Kerri to take her. She moaned begging for the release that she needed, the release that would bond them.

Rachel jolted back to the present at the sloshing sound of a car slowly making its way up the street, its windshield wipers furiously swishing back and forth. Kerri swung the car into the driveway.

Rachel put her jacket over her head and made a mad dash for the car. "I'm glad you're okay, Ker. I shouldn't have asked you to come out in this storm," she panted apologetically as she tossed her jacket in the back seat.

Kerri grinned at her. "You know that I'll always be here for you whenever you need me. I'm your Knight remember? So, what's up?" she warily asked as she looked at her.

Rachel sighed tiredly. "I'm just restless."

Kerri raised her eyes in surprise. "And? Let me guess...you're having second thoughts about quitting your job and are already bored to tears. Am I right?"

"No, that's not it. I just feel like this town is closing in on me and that if I stay any longer I'll regret it."

"I think you're just bored without having your job to go to everyday." She cautiously backed down the driveway. "Do you want to get something to eat or



see a movie?"

"I don't know what I want to do."

Kerri reached over and patted her knee. "It'll be okay, Rachel. I promise. Maybe if you talk to Mr. Canton he'll give you your job back. Tell him your plans didn't pan out and you need your job back."

Rachel numbly nodded knowing that her former job was the last thing she wanted or needed, but she wasn't in the mood to argue.

Later they sat in Kerri's apartment with a large pizza sitting on the coffee table in front of them. "It's good, honey...don't you want any?"

"I'm not hungry." Rachel closed her eyes and leaned back into the sofa.

Kerri set her slice of pizza down then wiped her hands on a paper napkin. "You've barely said two words tonight. Okay, Rachel, what's wrong now?"

"Everything."

Kerri wrapped her in her arms. "This isn't like you, honey. Tell me how I can help you. Please don't shut me out." She stared into her eyes. "We've always been able to talk about everything and get our strength from one another."

A sharp streak of lightning lit up the semi-darkened room followed by a loud crack of thunder. "I don't know what to do, Ker," she groaned.

"Come on." She took Rachel's hand and led her into the bedroom. "Let's cuddle. Remember the first time we had a rainstorm and we stayed in bed all day making love? That day will always remain one of my most cherished memories."

Rachel smiled at the remembrance as she removed

her clothes and climbed into bed. "It's chilly in here."

Kerri kissed her cheek. "I'll warm you up." She lit some candles then quickly got out of her clothes and slipped into bed beside Rachel. She put her arms around her as she nuzzled Rachel's silky hair. "Feeling warmer?"

"Always...when I'm with you." She sighed contentedly as she closed her eyes. She didn't want to think tonight. Her mind needed some rest.

"Do you want to talk? Or is there something else you'd like to do?" Kerri whispered suggestively close to her ear.

"Just hold me, Ker. Please, just hold me."

Kerri rested Rachel's head on her shoulder. The rain beating against the window pane soon lulled them into a peaceful sleep.

When Rachel awoke, she was surprised to see Kerri filling her backpack with books. "Where are you going so early?" she asked with a yawn. "It's only seven thirty."

"I've got an early class. I hope I didn't wake you. I tried to be quiet." She walked over to Rachel and picked up her hand. "It was so nice waking up next to you knowing that someday soon I'll be waking up next to you every morning."

Rachel looked into Kerri's twinkling eyes. "Ker, we need to talk."

"Okay, but first let me tell you what I've been thinking," she said excitedly.

Rachel squeezed her hand. "Okay."

Kerri sat down on the bed next to her. "I don't want you to look for a job or to go back to Canton's."

I'll take care of everything until you decide what you really want to do. It'll be fun living with you." Her hands swept around the small apartment. "I know this isn't much, but we can brighten it up and you can do anything you want to fix it up. Or if you'd rather, we can keep your apartment and I'll move my things in there."

Rachel tenderly touched Kerri's cheek. "You are so sweet. That's one of the things I love most about you, but you barely make ends meet as it is. And you know how strict my apartment management is—not to mention my nosy neighbors. If we moved in together in my building it wouldn't take long for the gossip moguls to spread it through the town."

"Let's not worry about that now. I've got to get to class." She kissed her, and then stood up. "Oh, I almost forgot, what did you want to tell me?"

Rachel smiled knowing she didn't have the heart to tell her what was on her mind after Kerri had just offered to share everything she owned with her. "It can wait."

"Okay, we'll have a long talk when I get back." She hurried out of the apartment.

Rachel lay back on the pillows listening as Kerri's footsteps hit the stairs. A smile tugged at the corners of her mouth as she pictured Kerri, backpack secure on her back, charging down the stairs like a bull as she hurried out onto the waking street, soon blending in with the other pedestrians.

Fifteen minutes later, Rachel got out of bed, and made a pot of coffee. After she finished her second cup, she made the bed and straightened up the

apartment. She peered into the refrigerator and cupboards finally pulling out enough ingredients to make some homemade soup. Kerri was a disaster in the kitchen so Rachel knew she'd enjoy anything that was home cooked.

As she chopped vegetables and added them to a pot, she wondered if she was making the right decision. She had someone who truly loved her. Should she risk throwing it all away? She wasn't getting any younger and the longer she stayed here the more settled she and Kerri would become until finally they would find themselves in a rut and too old to make a new start. They would be forced to permanently spend their lives in secrecy. That was the one thing she couldn't bare. She sighed. Her decision weighed heavily on her heart. It wasn't fear, but the awakening realization of how short life really was. Life could drastically change from one day to the next and there were no certainties in this life. She needed to live now; she couldn't wait. Who knew if tomorrow would ever come?

She had just stepped out of the shower and was toweling herself dry when she heard the door burst open and Kerri's bubbly voice. "Rachel, I'm home! Wow, something sure smells good in here!" She heard the lid being lifted from the kettle and smiled knowing Kerri's pleasure at seeing the homemade soup. She quickly dressed then hurried to the living room.

Kerri bounded over to her wrapping her in her strong arms. "I missed you," she said kissing her. "The place looks great and the soup smells fantastic."

"I know how hard you work. You deserve to come home to a clean apartment and a hot meal." She touched Kerri's cheek. "I love doing these things for you, Kerri."

"I could definitely get used to this," she grinned. "I have a surprise." Her eyes brightened.

Rachel smiled. "What?"

"I've been asked to privately tutor one of the students in my design class. That's going to bring in a bit of extra money so I'm hoping in a few months we can move to a bigger place. Give up your apartment and stay here until we find a place we both like. Money may be tight for awhile, but we'll get by."

"That's wonderful news," Rachel answered wondering how she could bring up her own selfish concerns to Kerri when Kerri obviously was spending all of her free time making plans for their future.

Kerri grabbed her arm. "Oh, honey, I'm sorry. Here I've been going on and on and this morning you said you wanted to talk to me about something." She settled into her easy chair and kicked off her shoes. "Okay, I'm going to keep quiet now and give you a chance to talk for once."

Rachel took Kerri's hands and then rested her head in Kerri's lap. "I love you more than you'll ever know."

Kerri ran her fingers through Rachel's damp hair. "I love you, too. That's why I'm trying to make things perfect for us. Once I finish school who knows what could happen. I could be designing for a famous company some day."

Rachel blinked back tears. "I know you'll do it

some day, honey. I've never doubted it for a minute. I just wish you would have been able to do it ten years ago."

She shrugged. "That's life, but I'm thankful that I've been given the chance to pursue my dream instead of wondering if I could have done it or not." She continued stroking Rachel's hair then gently raised Rachel's head as she peered into her eyes. "What's really wrong, baby?" She brushed the tears from Rachel's eyes. "Tell me," she prompted.

Rachel got to her feet and walked to the sofa.

Kerri was instantly at her side. "Come on, Rachel. I know something's wrong. Please talk to me." She pulled her close.

Rachel took a shaky breath. "I've made a decision," she haltingly said.

"What is it?"

She let her breath out in a rush. "I want to leave Wilson Point as soon as possible."

"Honey, someday we will leave...together. I promise."

"No, Kerri, I don't want to wait...I can't." She wrung her hands. "I'm thirty-one years old for God's sake. If I were twenty-one, then maybe I'd feel differently. Time isn't on my side any more."

"You're talking like you're eighty-one. We're still young." Kerri swallowed hard. "Are you telling me that you won't wait just a little longer? I'm trying to make things good for us. I thought you were as happy as I am," she said in a broken voice.

"I am happy being with you, Kerri. I love you. I don't see why you can't come with me. I'll get a full

time job and make up for the loss of your scholarship. The opportunities will be so much better away from here. I won't feel so stifled. I want to be able to walk down the street holding hands with you with no one concerning themselves about our sexuality."

Kerri shook her head back and forth. "I can't just pack up and leave, Rachel. Besides do you even know where you want to go?"

She shrugged. "I was thinking maybe New York City. I want to feel alive and the excitement of a big city might take away this dead feeling I've had inside for so long."

Kerri winced. "I didn't know that's how I was making you feel." She blinked back tears. "I make you feel like you're dead." She took a shuddering breath.

"Oh no, Kerri, that's not what I mean."

"We'll take a trip to New York together if that's what you need. We should spend some time alone together. It'll do us both good to get away for a vacation." She snapped her fingers. "I know. We'll see a play. I know how much you love the theater. When I finish school we can move to a nice quiet suburb of Buffalo."

"Just listen to me, Kerri. We need to begin our life together somewhere new where no one knows us. I'm tired of living in secret. Please understand what I'm going through," she pleaded. "Doesn't it bother you at all?"

Kerri ran a hand through her hair. "Not this again. Buffalo is certainly a big enough city to lose ourselves in."

"I'm tired of this whole area." She frowned. "You

know what you mean to me, Kerri."

"Sometimes I wonder. My life is right here for the time being and I thought your future was here with me. Besides I love having the rural countryside and the bustling city almost at my fingertips."

"I do want a future with you, but not here."

Kerri let her breath out in a rush. "I've told you repeatedly that we'll never find that perfect place you seem to think exists. It's not going to happen. We will always run into ignorant people no matter where we go. We are who we are and I'll be damned if I'm going to let ignorance stand in the way of my happiness. If someone chooses not to like me for who I am, then he or she can go straight to hell! I don't give a damn! You need to quit letting other people dictate your life for you or you'll never be happy."

"Kerri, don't you care about my feelings at all? Can't you see what's happening to me?"

Kerri shot her a pointed look. "You obviously haven't given this much thought and that's not like you at all, Rachel. Why the need to get away right now? What's the hurry?"

"I...I can't explain it, Ker." She pushed her hair back with both hands. "I feel like I'm suffocating in Wilson Point. What have I done with my life? I don't feel fulfilled."

"Is what you're really saying is that you don't feel fulfilled with me?" she quietly asked.

"Of course not, Ker. I don't know how to explain it to you," Rachel replied, throwing her hands in the air. "You refuse to hear what I'm saying."

"I'm not going to try to stop you from leaving,



Rachel. I know you well enough to know when you make up your mind about something no one will change it for you. Do what you have to do and never let it be said that I ever stood in the way of your happiness."

Rachel grabbed Kerri's hands. "Kerri, I love you so much." Her eyes glistened, the words catching in her throat. "I want to spend the rest of my life with you. Don't ever forget that, but I'm suffocating here. I have to go for my own sanity and I hope that you'll reconsider and come with me. I need you."

Kerri shrugged. "I'm not going to try to stop you, but you're being unrealistic in thinking that I can just pack up and leave with you. I have some studying to do." She pulled a book from her backpack and without another word walked to the bedroom.

In bed later that night, Rachel listened to Kerri's heavy breathing, but knew that she wasn't asleep. She moved closer tenderly touching Kerri's smooth cheek. "Ker?"

"Hmmm?"

"Were you sleeping?"

She slowly let her breath out. "No, just thinking."

"About what?"

Kerri shifted turning her face toward Rachel. "Us. I thought my life was finally going the way I'd always hoped and now you're leaving me." Her voice cracked, and then broke. "I'm afraid that I'm losing you and I don't know what to do."

Rachel ran her fingertips over Kerri's cheek feeling the tear that trickled from her eye. "I'll never leave you, Ker. I just need to do this. For us."

Kerri sighed. "You need to get this out of your system. Is that what you're saying?"

"I don't know."

"How do I know that you won't some day meet someone else and decide you need to be with her for awhile to get it out of your system?"

"That's not fair. It's not the same thing."

"Dammit, why do you have to leave me?" she cried as Rachel wrapped her arms around her.

## CHAPTER THREE

Rachel grabbed a couple of suitcases, packed as much as she could fit into them and carried them to the porch. Kerri's car turned up the street. Kerri, dressed in sweats, leaped out of the car, and grabbed the suitcases gently placing them in the back seat. Rachel slid into the passenger seat as Kerri jumped back into the driver's seat. After a couple of minutes of tense silence, Rachel finally spoke. "So, are you all right with this?"

She shrugged keeping her eyes on the road. "You know how I feel and my feelings obviously don't matter so what's the point in repeatedly asking me how I feel?"

Rachel patted Kerri's knee. "Please, Kerri, if you say you'll come with me soon then I'll wait to leave."

She shook her head. "Rachel, I can't and there's no sense in going over this again and again. You never discussed your plan with me in the first place to leave immediately so I suppose I've finally realized just where I do stand in your life."

"Oh, that's so unfair, Kerri. I love you, dammit and you know it."

She sniffed. "You have a funny way of showing it."

"I love you so much," she exasperatedly replied. "Is it asking too much for your support here? I want you in my life. I need you in my life. We're a team, Kerri. We can go so far together and nothing will stop us. We just can't do that here."

Kerri kept silent on the remainder of the drive to the bus station. She parked the car in front of the modern new building and removed the luggage from the back seat. "I guess this is it," she said emotionless.

Rachel touched her arm. "Aren't you coming in with me?" She looked into Kerri's eyes. Kerri was putting on a brave front, but Rachel knew her well enough to know that Kerri didn't want her to see how she really felt.

She shook her head. "What for? I'm not going to watch you get on that bus and disappear from my life as though I condone your decision. You don't even know what you'll find when you arrive in New York."

Rachel saw the dark circles under Kerri's eyes. She knew Kerri hadn't slept well the past few nights. She hadn't either. All they'd done for the past week was argue and it had taken a toll on the both of them. "I'll call you tomorrow. I promise."

Kerri scratched her head. "I've got something for you, Rachel."

"What?"

She took off her ring. "Here." She placed it in Rachel's hand holding her hand briefly before letting go.

Rachel's eyes teared. "But...but this is the ring I gave you," she whispered in a cracked voice.

"You can stay here with me knowing we'll leave here in a couple of years or you can go now, but I can't wear your ring if you get on that bus." She swiped the tears from her eyes. "I can't make any more promises if you leave."

"This means we're breaking up, Ker. Take back your ring. Please put it back on right now. I don't want to break up."

"Then please get back in the car." Her eyes pleaded with Rachel. "Don't break my heart," she whispered.

"Please understand why I'm doing this, Kerri. I do love you. We'll be together like we planned." Rachel picked up her suitcases and walked into the bus terminal. Once inside she turned watching through the glass door as Kerri wiped the tears from her cheeks then got into her car quickly speeding away.

\* \* \* \*

Rachel stepped onto the bus and found a seat in the middle grateful that the bus wasn't crowded. She leaned her head back against the seat listening to the chitchat around her, then closed her eyes and drifted into an uneasy sleep. The past invaded her semi-conscious dreams, causing her to remember things and the feelings that went along with them. She'd have rather left those long ago memories to lie dormant, but they resurfaced forcing her to relive the haunting agony of her actions.

Rachel's mind took her back to ten years ago. It was one of the most emotionally stressful times in her life when she'd finally made the decision to tell her

parents that she was a lesbian. Their object horror and the look of shame on their faces made it clear that they couldn't accept her, at least not this way. After unsuccessfully trying to reason with them, she'd finally succumbed to their shame and began dating the young men of Wilson Point while she scoured lesbian clubs in Buffalo whenever she could. Eventually she married Bill Warner and her parents breathed a sigh of relief...until her subsequent divorce and the return of her maiden name. Before they retired to Florida they'd made it perfectly clear that her decision to go back to the lesbian lifestyle instead of trying to revive her destroyed relationship with Bill Warner left them no choice but to distance themselves as much as possible from her. Her infrequent visits to Florida were short and stiff and she saw the relief in her parents' eyes every time her visits ended. It was the same relief she felt in her own heart. She and her parents had nothing to talk about and the visits were strained and ended up draining all of them. They wouldn't budge in their beliefs and she didn't have the strength to try to change them.

She'd been lonely and heartsick and yearned for a solid lasting relationship instead of the usual one-night stands she only seemed capable of having. When she met Kerri that all changed and she was fulfilled having one woman to share her heart and life with. That was until the restlessness settled in around her soul almost choking the life out of her. Something was still lacking. She had everything she'd ever wanted, but true happiness was still eluding her. She was empty inside and the void was so deep that even

Kerri's love couldn't fill it. Her existence in Wilson Point was a lie. It had been a lie from the minute she came into this world. She was hiding behind a person who didn't exist and trying to be the person everyone expected her to be. If Kerri wasn't so stubborn and bent on waiting a couple of years, they could both be happy now traveling together to a new city and a new life instead of having this pall of uncertainty hanging over them. Overall, Rachel knew that she would never be complete until she could truly set the real Rachel free.

She stirred, and then slowly opened her eyes. A pleasant looking older woman was seated next to her. Rachel rubbed the back of her aching neck.

"It's not very restful sleeping on the bus," the woman remarked.

Rachel smiled at the friendly face. "No, I found that out the hard way," she answered still rubbing her neck.

"Next time bring a pillow," the woman advised. "Where are you headed?"

"New York City."

The woman nodded. "Me, too. My daughter lives there—Manhattan. A few times a year I try to visit. Normally I would fly, but I haven't quite gotten over my fear of flying again since 9-11. I know that I should be over my fear by now, but I still can't bring myself to get back on a plane."

Rachel nodded. The woman had the type of face that reminded Rachel of the grandmothers in magazines and TV commercials at home in the kitchen baking cookies. Her hair was a soft white,

which was severely pulled back into a tight bun. Her clear blue eyes accented her beautiful complexion.

"Do you have family in New York?"

"No. I'm just doing what I've always wanted to do...having an adventure."

"Is someone meeting you?"

"No."

The woman's eyes narrowed. "Have you been to New York often?"

Rachel shook her head. "Believe it or not but I've never been to New York. I'm excited beyond belief."

"Oh, you young people today."

Rachel laughed. "I'm not that young. Actually I'm thirty-one."

The woman cocked an eye. "You certainly don't look it. Well, no matter what age you are, please be careful. My daughter is married with two children and I still worry about them all." She carefully eyed Rachel. "Just be careful," she repeated. "It's not safe for a young woman to be traveling to a big city by herself nowadays. When you get to the bus station, grab a taxi, or take a bus or subway to your hotel."

Rachel frowned. "I don't have a hotel reservation. I thought I'd walk around and find a suitable one later. There's so much I want to see!"

The woman rolled her eyes. "That's not a good idea. You'll soon be initiated to how cruel the city can be if you're not careful. Now don't get me wrong, it's a beautiful city, but nowadays you need to be extra careful no matter where you're traveling," she warned in a warm mothering voice.

"I know you're right, but that's part of the



adventure for me."

She raised her eyebrows. "I don't think you'll find it a welcome adventure if you get mugged." She dug in her purse for a piece of paper and pen. "Here," she said scribbling the name of a hotel. "This is The Delcore. It's nice, clean and comfortable and won't break your pocketbook."

Rachel smiled. "Thank you."

The woman settled back in her seat. "My name's Mary."

"I'm Rachel."

"That's a pretty name," she replied with a smile as she extended her hand. "It's nice to meet you, Rachel."

Rachel returned the woman's friendly smile. "It's nice to meet you too, Mary." She relaxed as Mary chatted about her daughter, son-in-law, but mostly her grandchildren. "As soon as we get over the bridge, we'll be heading into the George Washington Bus Station," Mary announced. "The address I gave you is in Manhattan. You can get on the subway there."

"I've never been on a subway. I'll just take a taxi."

"It's expensive," Mary warned.

"Until I get familiar with the subways and buses, I think I'll stick to taxis."

When the bus finally pulled into the terminal, Rachel swallowed the loneliness, which swelled up in her chest as she stared out of the window in awe at the throngs of people milling about. As she timidly stepped off of the bus, a couple of panhandlers quickly descended on her, but Mary grabbed her arm

and gently, but firmly guided her toward a waiting taxi.

"I wish you luck, Rachel, and maybe we'll run into one another again," she said with a twinkle in her eye.

"Thank you for all of your help, Mary. It was nice meeting you," Rachel answered as she climbed into the taxi. When she was securely settled in the backseat and the driver had pulled away from the bus terminal, relief flooded through her with the realization that she wouldn't have known where to find a suitable hotel if it hadn't been for Mary. At the same time, though, the loneliness of being a stranger in this enormous noisy city immediately overtook her. She already missed Mary's motherly security. She took a deep breath as she looked at the crowded streets and slow moving traffic. So, this was New York...the city she hoped to find happiness in.

Later, mostly stuck in traffic, the taxi pulled up in front of The Delcore Hotel. Rachel paid the driver then picked up her luggage and slowly walked inside of the massive building. Once inside, she was amazed at the beautiful antique furnishings. For a moment, she felt as though she'd been swept back in time to another era. She could only imagine what the hotel must have been like in its glory days. She wondered about those who'd passed through this exquisite lobby in its heyday. In awe, she slowly made her way to the front desk and set her luggage down.

The desk clerk peered at her through small wire-rimmed glasses perched on his much too long thin nose. "May I help you?" he asked in a nasally voice as he pushed the glasses up further on his nose.

She smiled. "Yes, I'd like a single room, but I'm not certain how long I'll be staying."

He punched the keys on his computer. "Besides daily, we have weekly and monthly rates," he said turning the screen and showing her the prices.

She compared the savings between the weekly and monthly rates, and then opted for the monthly rate. That would give her plenty of time to find a suitable apartment. She gave him her credit card.

"You'll be in room 802, Ms. Summers," he said with a weak smile. He nodded toward a young man waiting at the end of the counter. "Joey, please take these bags up to Room 802 and see that Ms. Summers has everything she needs." He turned his attention back to Rachel. "I hope you enjoy your stay with us."

"Thank you," she replied as Joey grabbed her luggage. Joey smiled brightly as he escorted her to the elevator. When they reached the eighth floor, Rachel followed him off the elevator and down a long corridor to her room. Once inside the room, he set down her luggage and handed her the room key. "Is there anything I can get you?" he softly asked.

"No, this is perfect, thank you." She gave him a generous tip then closed the door behind him. "What a beautiful room," she said aloud as she noticed the same antique style that decorated the lobby. She sat down on the edge of the king sized bed then lay back relishing the almost perfect feel of the mattress. She didn't care if she ever moved from this spot. Her body relaxed and she realized how tired she was after her trip.

Two hours later, she opened her eyes anxious to

explore the city. She climbed off the bed and opened a suitcase rummaging through it. She settled on a pair of jeans and sweater. After applying fresh makeup and quickly running a brush through her tangled hair, she left her room.

Out on the bustling street she was again overwhelmed with loneliness. Here she was in a city full of millions of people and she was totally alone. She wished Kerri were here with her right now. They could see all of these new sites together for the first time. They'd share their tears at the site where the Twin Towers had once stood. They'd ride on the Staten Island Ferry. At the sight of The Statue Of Liberty, they would look at her with pride. They might even catch a Yankees game. Kerri would love that since she was a huge baseball fan. They'd have fun exploring Greenwich Village.

She sighed. Yes, this vast city lay ahead of her ready to be explored, but she'd have to do the exploring alone. She frowned. Why was life so unfair? She shouldn't be here by herself. She shook off her dark foreboding thoughts. She was here alone and that was a fact she couldn't change unless she went back to Wilson Point—to Kerri. And as much as she yearned for Kerri at this very minute, she knew she couldn't leave. Something deep inside of her knew she had to do this and she was determined to make the best of it. Hopefully Kerri would change her mind and decide to join her. If not—well, she didn't want to think about that. She took a deep breath and set off to the left of the hotel.

She walked for two blocks occasionally stopping to

browse in a shop. After an hour, she realized how hungry she was and stepped into a casual looking restaurant. She was grateful, as she observed the patrons, that jeans were acceptable. She noted the sign at the entrance welcoming customers to seat themselves. She found an empty booth towards the back of the crowded room.

As she was looking over the menu trying to decide what to order a stunning tall brunette stopped at her booth. "Are you waiting for someone?" the attractive woman asked with a friendly wide smile.

Rachel shook her head. "No, I'm dining alone." She looked quizzically at the woman.

"Do you mind if I join you?" Her eyes swept over the crowded room then settled on Rachel. "There aren't any other seats available. I promise I won't try to engage you in conversation. I'll be as quiet as a mouse."

Rachel laughed. "I'd be grateful for the company. Please have a seat." She looked into the woman's beautiful chocolate brown eyes.

"Thank you." She slid into the booth opposite Rachel. "My name's Angela." She extended a hand.

Rachel shook the warm hand, and then released it. "It's nice to meet you, Angela. I'm Rachel."

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Rachel." She picked up a menu. "It's so hard to decide what to have. Everything here is simply delicious. Have you eaten here often?" She gazed into Rachel's eyes. "I'm here so much I should have stock in the place." She laughed. "But I don't recall seeing you here before."

"No. I've never eaten here. I only arrived in the city

this afternoon." She smiled easily and was amazed at how relaxed she felt in Angela's company. Or maybe it was because it made her feel not so lonely eating her first meal with another even if it was with a total stranger. "Anything you can recommend will be appreciated."

"Welcome to New York, Rachel. I was born and raised here. You'll get used to the rat race." She smiled. "Seriously, it's a fantastic city, but I may not be so generous in my assessment during rush hour."

Rachel laughed again. "Well, I'll be using public transportation."

Angela raised her eyebrows. "Then you do have my deepest sympathies," she teased. She looked back down at her menu. "If you like Italian food then you are in for a real treat."

"I love Italian...the manicotti sounds good," Rachel said studying the menu.

"It's superb...just the right blend of seasonings. I believe that's what I'll have, too." She snapped her menu closed.

Angela was a lively, animated conversationalist and had Rachel laughing so hard at her anecdotes that she thought her sides would burst.

As they drank their after dinner coffee, Rachel asked Angela what type of work she was in.

"Real estate...I'm hoping someday to have my own company, but right now I'm in a partnership."

Rachel's interest was piqued. "Do you also handle apartment rentals?"

Angela set down her coffee cup. "A few, but apartments, good ones anyway, are not easy to come

by."

Rachel's eyes narrowed. "I was afraid of that. Well, if anything becomes available would you let me know?"

"Of course." She reached into her jacket pocket and pulled out two cards and a pen. She scribbled something on one of the cards then handed it to Rachel. "This is my business number and the other number is my home phone number." She handed Rachel the second card and the pen. "Write your name and phone number and I'll call you if something comes up."

Rachel scrunched up her face. "Believe it or not, but I don't even know the phone number. I'm staying at The Delcore Hotel."

"Nice place...I'll look up the number." Her eyes grew serious. "You're staying in a nice, safe section of the city, Rachel, but unfortunately you'll see parts of the city that'll make your hair stand on end."

She nodded. "Yes, I've heard."

"Will someone be joining you in the near future? I'm only trying to get an idea of what size apartment you're looking for."

Rachel lowered her eyes. "I only need a place big enough for myself for the time being." She raised her eyes and saw the questions in Angela's, but the woman quickly changed the subject.

"You must be overwhelmed with the city."

Rachel smiled as she tossed her head. "That's an understatement. I come from a small rural community in Pennsylvania where everyone knows everyone else."

She returned Rachel's smile. "Well, New York is a great city to get lost in...if that's what one has a mind to do." She picked her coffee cup back up.

"I'm looking for a change of scenery. I'm not getting any younger so this is my adventure while I'm still young enough to enjoy one."

"I'd be happy to show you around if you'd like," Angela offered.

"I'd be grateful for the company whenever you have the time."

"I have all the time in the world. I'm free and single," she replied flashing a brilliant smile. "I don't have anyone waiting at home for me." She threw her hands up. "I take that back. My little pride and joy is at home ready to greet me every night."

Rachel raised her eyebrows. "You have a child?"

Angela grinned "My cat. She's been with me for four years now, but she's just like a little girl."

"I've never had any pets," Rachel admitted.

"Well, I'm grateful I got to keep Shugie Marie after my nasty breakup."

"I'm sorry about your breakup. Breakups are difficult."

She smiled. "Don't be sorry for me. It turned out to be the best thing for the both of us. We grew apart and wanted different things. If we'd stayed together we would have probably grown to resent one another."

"How long were you together?"

"A little over ten years."

"Did you have any children? I mean human ones?" she asked.



"No. I did want a couple, but Karen wasn't too keen on the idea so we never went that route."

Rachel raised her eyes in surprise. "Karen?" She met Angela's warm eyes.

She nodded. "She was my partner. I'm a lesbian." She peered at Rachel, and her expression still held the friendly warmth it had when she first introduced herself. "If that offends you I'm sorry, but I'm not sorry for who I am."

"This is unreal," she exclaimed. "I never dreamed I'd meet another lesbian just a few hours in the city."

Angela grinned as her face relaxed. "You have lived a sheltered life. If you're game, I can show you around a little now. The night's still young. I can show you the best lesbian bars in the city."

"Great! I'm game."

## CHAPTER FOUR

Rachel stretched then turned on her side. The compact alarm clock sitting on the bedside table read seven forty-five am. She rolled onto her back and put her hands under her head, then stretched again and got out of bed.

After she showered and dressed, she'd grab a newspaper and look through the want ads. She was thankful that Angela had also graciously offered to keep an eye out for any job openings.

She'd had so much fun with Angela last night visiting all of Angela's favorite nightspots. Those places were certain to become some of her favorites as well. One place in particular, The Barstel, was one of the friendliest bars Rachel had ever been to. She wished Wilson Point had a place like The Barstel. It would have given her and Kerri a chance to be around others who loved the way they did. But if such a place had existed in Wilson Point, the fair citizens, once they got wind of it, would have made inhabiting it almost impossible, the way they'd always kept gays securely locked in the closet. If they couldn't be seen, they didn't have to be dealt with. She'd never understand why Kerri didn't jump at the

opportunity to leave. Sometimes she wondered how well she really did know Kerri or if she even knew her at all. She sighed.

Rachel had instantly liked Angela finding it easy to open up about herself as if she'd known Angela her entire life. She didn't mention Kerri, though. The thought of Kerri left a dull ache in her heart and until she knew what future they were to have together, she decided to keep it secretly hidden within her own heart. Conversation with Angela was easy with no constrictions and Angela never once ceased to make her laugh with her funny stories about her life and growing up in the city. She hoped that theirs was the beginning of a long and beautiful friendship.

An hour later Rachel stepped off of the elevator and was making her way across the lobby when she heard a familiar voice calling her name. She quickly turned around.

"Rachel, I'm so happy that you decided to stay here."

"Mary, it's so good to see you again! This hotel is fabulous. Thank you so much for telling me about it," Rachel said. "Are you staying here, too? I thought you'd be staying with your family." A bright smile broke across her face.

Mary smiled broadly. "I am staying with my family, dear. My daughter and son-in-law own this hotel. I retired and passed it on to them after my husband Craig died."

Rachel stared dumbfounded at her.

She extended a hand. "I'm Mary Delcore."

"This is a beautiful hotel, Mary. Everyone has been

so kind and helpful to me."

The older woman took Rachel's elbow and led her to one of the elegant sofas. "They'd better," she warned. "Actually I pride myself on the staff. Some of them have been with us for years and have become almost like family." She studied Rachel's face. "How do you like the city so far, dear?"

"I love it!" Rachel exclaimed. "I've already made a friend and she's in real estate. She's going to help me find an apartment. Well, that'll have to wait until I find a job. In fact, I was just going to go to the newsstand to grab a few papers to see what's in the classifieds."

"That's what I wanted to talk to you about, Rachel. A good friend of mine, Mel Grayson, is looking for a secretary. I happened to mention you and he'd like to meet with you if you're interested. He's the president of Grayson Media."

"Grayson Media! They're one of the biggest advertising agencies in the country! I certainly am interested. Thank you so much, Mary. I can't believe you'd go to all this trouble for a complete stranger."

"Nonsense. I'm a pretty good judge of character...you have to be to run this place for as long as my husband and I did." She handed Rachel a card. "Here's the address. He'd like to meet with you this afternoon if it's convenient. If not you can call and schedule an appointment."

"I'll be there." Rachel grinned. "I swear you're my guardian angel, Mary."

The older woman gave her a motherly hug. "It's my pleasure to help others."

\* \* \* \*

Kerri ran her hands through her tousled hair for the hundredth time that morning. The small apartment echoed with the loneliness she felt in her heart. How could Rachel leave her so abruptly? She'd known for some time that Rachel wasn't happy, but still she never expected her to up and leave. She'd tried to make her happy, but even her love wasn't enough to make her stay. Rachel craved something that couldn't be quenched until she came to terms with her own inner needs. She hoped Rachel found what she was looking for even if it meant losing the only woman she had ever given her heart to completely. Kerri chewed her bottom lip. She wouldn't cry. She'd shed enough tears to last her a lifetime.

Slowly, without warning, anger was now building and taking the place of heartbreak. For the past two years, Rachel had led her to believe they'd be together for the rest of their lives. She allowed Kerri to settle into a false sense of security. Who the hell did she think she was to force what she wanted on Kerri without giving her a choice? Rachel wasn't a child and certainly had to realize that one couldn't just pack up her life and take off. If they'd been twenty years old Kerri would have gone in a heartbeat, but Rachel couldn't seem to get that through her thick skull.

Kerri's jaw tightened. She was obviously going through some type of mid-life crisis even if she wasn't exactly considered middle aged yet. Still, Kerri would never forgive Rachel for leaving so abruptly and

taking back everything she'd promised Kerri about forever. She'd left her alone, confused, and heartbroken. But worse of all, Rachel had violated the bond they'd shared. She'd never even had the decency to call when she got to New York City like she promised leaving Kerri to wonder if she'd vanished off the face of the earth.

Even though Kerri was angry, she was also worried sick with her mind fluctuating between both of those emotions. Images of Rachel's battered body lying in some dark alley preyed on her mind. She couldn't sleep or eat and could barely concentrate on her studies. She'd thought of trying to track her down, but didn't even know where to begin. All she could do was pray, an act that was totally foreign to her and still gave her little comfort, for Rachel's safety and that Rachel would have the common courtesy to contact her. Each day returning from her classes, she entered the apartment hopeful that Rachel had returned and was there waiting for her. But she had to face the cold hard truth - Rachel wasn't coming home. Tears stung her eyes.

Kerri ran a shaky hand through her hair again as she grabbed her backpack. "Damn you, Rachel," she cried as she stomped out of her apartment. She was all ready ten minutes late for her first class.

\* \* \* \*

Rachel walked into the Lincoln Towers. The tall building contained forty-eight floors with Mr. Grayson's office on the fourteenth. She stepped into

the crowded elevator and pushed number fourteen. At number fourteen, she followed several others out of the elevator. The plush carpeting and cheerfully decorated walls quieted her nerves. She found the office and composed herself before entering the room.

She was amazed at the atmosphere of the large reception area. The room was like a fantasyland with huge sculptures and posters of commercials Rachel had remembered seeing over the years. She walked to the receptionist's desk where a young perky woman who looked like she was just out of high school smiled up at her.

"Can I help you?" she asked in a bubbly voice.

Rachel noticed the earring in her nose and lip. Her medium length hair was a mixture of every shade of red imaginable with a black streak running down the middle of it. She smiled. "Yes, I'm Rachel Summers. I have an appointment with Mr. Grayson."

She tilted her head towards the door behind her. "He's expecting you. Please go right in."

Rachel hesitated for a few seconds outside of the massive door, and then gently rapped at it.

"Come in," a muffled voice from the other side invited.

Rachel timidly walked into the office and her eyes were immediately drawn to the largest aquarium she'd ever seen. It must have held hundreds of fish. To the right of the aquarium were wall-to-wall television sets and all sorts of electronic equipment that rendered her clueless as to their function.

Mel Grayson sat quietly at his desk, which was situated to the left of the aquarium. His eyes were

focused on Rachel, slightly unnerving her, as she made her way to his desk. She nervously made eye contact with the man who had a reputation for being this century's creative genius.

When she reached his desk, he stood up and extended a hand. "It's my pleasure to meet you, Ms. Summers. Please have a seat," he said motioning to one of the large comfortable looking leather chairs in front of his desk.

"Thank you," she said as she sat in the chair and forced herself to relax.

"So, tell me a little about yourself," he began. "What are your goals?"

She looked into his eyes. They were soft and kind. "I want to work for a company where I can help to make a difference."

He stood up, walked to the front of his desk, and leaned against it as he intently stared at her. "I hope that our commercials do make a difference. My goal has always been not to just sell a product, but to enlighten the masses about why a particular product is something they need. I've turned down many clients when I didn't feel the product truly lived up to what was being said about it."

Rachel nodded.

He was a handsome man who looked like he'd be more at ease out of doors than stuck behind a desk all day long. His body was lean and he had a nose that reminded her of nobility with a firm jaw line and a nice mouth. "Mary Delcore is very impressed with you. How long have you known her?"

Rachel's cheeks grew warm. "Not long."



He chuckled. "Mary reads people very well and if she recommends you then I know you're the right one for the job."

"What does the job entail, Mr. Grayson?"

"Please call me, Mel. Actually, you would be my assistant. You'd keep track of my appointments and maybe once in a while give me your input on an advertising campaign."

"It sounds exciting. I'd love the opportunity. I can give you references."

He shook his head. "I don't need to see any references. I like to judge for myself a person's strong and weak points and his or her work ethics."

She smiled. "I won't disappoint you."

"The hours you'll be working are strictly office hours with maybe an occasional weekend, depending on what project I'm involved with." He smiled broadly. "So do you have any questions?"

She returned his smile. "When can I start?"

"How does Monday sound?"

\* \* \* \*

Mary Delcore was waiting for her when she returned. "Well, what did Mel say? Did he hire you?"

"Yes!" she squealed. "I start next Monday. He's so nice."

"Congratulations!" Mary hugged her.

"I don't know what I would have done if I hadn't met you."

The woman smiled a smile so bright that her wrinkled face glowed. "You're a fine woman, Rachel."

I sensed it the minute I met you on the bus. I only extended to you the same generosity I would hope someone to extend to me if I were in your situation. I shudder to think what may have happened to you if we hadn't met."

Rachel's eyes glistened. "Still I'll never be able to thank you enough."

"Just seeing you safe and content is thanks enough. Now I want you to go get freshened up so I can take you to dinner to celebrate."

\* \* \* \*

That night, Kerri lay in bed listening to a light rain tapping softly against the windowpanes. She looked at the pillow where Rachel had laid her head and picked it up hugging it close to her. Nighttime was the worst. This was the third night without Rachel and Kerri didn't know how she could go on. A tear escaped from her eye. Before she could stop herself, she began sobbing almost uncontrollably. When she'd cried herself out, she knew that sleep wouldn't come. She lay in the darkness for twenty minutes, then slipped out of bed and made her way to the sofa.

She fumbled with the remote control and when she discovered that the batteries must be dead, she flung it aside. She wasn't in the mood for TV anyway. She only wanted the noise to ease her own loneliness. She flicked on the radio and leaned back on the sofa. She closed her eyes and let her mind drift. When the telephone rang it momentarily startled her. She quickly jumped to her feet.

"Hello?" The silence on the other end of the line made her wonder if the connection had been cut off. "Is someone there?" she asked.

"Yes, Kerri, it's me."

Kerri was thrown off guard. "Are you okay?" She managed to keep her voice even, even though her heart yearned to say all of the right words that would bring Rachel back to her. She couldn't allow herself to cave in at the sound of Rachel's voice and come across as needy. She had to be strong.

"I'm fine. I met a wonderful woman—"

"It didn't take you long. Please spare me the intimate details," Kerri broke in swallowing the lump in her throat. "I suppose she's the reason you haven't called."

"No...no, Kerri, Mary Delcore is in her seventies. I met her on the bus."

"Is there a point to this story, Rachel?"

"She's been helping me out."

Kerri shifted her weight from one foot to the other. "Are you coming back?" She kept her voice steady not wanting Rachel to hear the pleading in her voice.

Rachel hesitated. "I just got here, Ker."

"A few days ago. Did you even consider that I might have been worried? You promised to call."

"I'm sorry."

"That's it? Sorry doesn't cut it."

"I'm calling you now."

"Why are you calling me?" Kerri was hurt. "Obviously we ended things at the bus station."

"Kerri, don't you know what you mean to me? I don't want us to end things."

Kerri bit her bottom lip fighting back the tears. "You're the one who chose to leave. What do you want from me?"

"I don't want to lose you, Ker. I want and need you in my life."

"I can't just be your friend, Rachel. We've shared too much. I want all of you or nothing."

"Kerri, please listen to me for a minute. Don't you know what you mean to me?"

A tear slipped from Kerri's eye. "Obviously I don't mean enough.. Please have a good life, Rachel. I wish you only happiness and I hope you find what you're looking for. There's nothing more to say." As she removed the phone from her ear, she heard Rachel's voice pleading with her, but she knew there was nothing more to be said. She hung up the phone. Her tortured heart couldn't take any more battering. All emotion drained from her leaving her cold and numb as though someone had just died. There was nothing left inside, but a deep dark hole where her heart had once been.

## CHAPTER FIVE

Rachel hung up the telephone. Kerri's abrupt dismissal of her was not what she expected, but then how would she feel in Kerri's place? She needed Kerri's understanding even though she knew that now was not a good time to seek it. A big part of her feared life without Kerri. Kerri had always been her refuge when life battered her. Could she face life alone? She missed Kerri and wanted to share every part of herself with her, but not in Wilson Point. Why couldn't Kerri understand that? Would Kerri ever understand? Still, she needed to know where they both stood together as a couple. She would not accept the fact that it was over. They'd shared too much together for it not to account for something. Even though Kerri had given her ring back, her heart still refused to believe that this was the end of them.

Her hand shook as she picked up the phone and redialed Kerri's number. "Please don't hang up, Ker...just listen to what I have to say."

"What do you want to tell me?" Kerri asked in a cracked voice. "I can't take much more."

Rachel's heart was slowly breaking. "Please give us some time, honey. I want you to wear your ring. I don't honestly believe that you wanted to give it back

to me, did you? I'll mail it to you."

Kerri's voice was barely audible. "I can't have a relationship on these terms, Rachel. We're not children. Please don't call me again unless it's to tell me you're coming home. I need to move on with my life. It's not fair of you to ask me to wait for you when you don't know if and when you'll ever return."

Rachel heard the line go dead. She wiped the tears from her eyes. She was determined to pull herself together. If Kerri didn't want to work on their problems or even speak to her, then so be it. She'd be damned if she'd let anyone ruin her happiness. If Kerri was determined to forget they'd ever been a couple, then that's exactly what she'd do. She drew a shaky breath. She knew it was easier said than done. She did love Kerri and couldn't turn her emotions off in the blink of an eye. She couldn't bare the thought of Kerri with another woman and couldn't imagine sharing her life with another woman either.

She had to pull herself together and work out a plan for getting Kerri back, but that would have to wait until later. She promised to meet Angela for drinks at The Barstel and she didn't want to be late. Angela had all ready become a sincere trustworthy friend and she found herself leaning on her a little more with each passing day. She'd almost told Kerri about Angela, but now was relieved that she hadn't. Kerri would have totally misunderstood her friendship with Angela. Someday when Kerri met Angela, she would see what a wonderful friend she was and then hopefully all three would grow to be close friends.

Rachel arrived at The Barstel fifteen minutes late and after walking inside and looking around for Angela, realized that Angela, also, must have been running late.

She made her way to an empty table in the back of the room, removed her jacket, and sat down. She ordered a glass of wine and sipped at it as she wondered what had delayed Angela. She glanced around the rapidly filling room of laughing and chatting couples. The emptiness she'd felt upon first arriving in the city, and the phone call she'd just had with Kerri, now engulfed her heart. She was alone and it was a feeling she didn't like. She wished Angela would get here soon.

She didn't notice that a pair of dark eyes had been focused on her since she entered the room. Her gaze finally led her to the bar where she saw those eyes firmly glued on her. She evenly met the stranger's eyes. The owner of the dark eyes sat perched on a bar stool grinning at her. Rachel self-consciously looked away and down into her wine glass. When she finally raised her eyes again, the dark eyes of the stranger were still focused intently on her. Rachel smiled weakly at the stranger then watched as the woman slipped, in an unladylike fashion, off the barstool and slowly swaggered over to Rachel's table.

"Hi." The woman peered into Rachel's surprised face.

"Hello," Rachel answered. "Is there something I can do for you?" she curiously asked.

"I saw you sitting here all alone so I thought you might like a little company. My name's Jaylene."

"It's nice to meet you, Jaylene. I'm Rachel."

Jaylene rested her elbows on the table. Her short straight black hair seemed to fit her sharp pointed features. She was stocky, but not overweight and dressed in a pair of tight fitting blue jeans, tee shirt and black leather jacket, which matched the leather boots on her feet.

"I haven't seen you in here before, have I?" Jaylene asked with her dark piercing eyes focused on Rachel's face.

Rachel nodded. "I was in here the other night with a friend. I haven't been in the city for long, though."

"I see," Jaylene replied. "May I sit?"

"Of course." Rachel motioned to the seat across from her. "But I am expecting someone."

Jaylene smiled. "No problem. As soon as your friend arrives I'll leave." She sat down.

Rachel wasn't sure if she liked Jaylene or not. Her forward self-assured brazenness unnerved Rachel. Jaylene's full lips wore no lipstick, but her natural coloring made it appear as though she did. Her olive skin showed no signs of imperfections. She was attractive.

"May I get you another?" Jaylene motioned towards Rachel's half full glass.

"No thanks." She was relieved when she spotted Angela by the door. She stood up. "My friend's here," she announced to Jaylene hoping the woman would go back to the bar.

Jaylene looked to where Rachel was staring. "You're meeting Angela Consanti?" she asked with a note of surprise in her voice.



"You two know each other?" Rachel asked.

"Small world, isn't it?"

Angela caught Rachel's eye, smiled, and waved as she made her way over to the table.

Rachel watched the expression on Angela's face and saw how quickly Angela's cheerful demeanor instantly changed when she saw Jaylene.

"Hi, Angie, it's been a long time since I've seen you. How've you been?" Jaylene asked with a touch of sarcasm in her voice.

"I've been just fine, thank you. Now if you'll excuse us," she said brushing Jaylene off.

Jaylene's lips curled into a slight snarl. "Ah, I can take a hint. Nice meeting you, Rachel. I'm sure we'll meet again." She winked, and then sauntered back over to the bar.

Angela removed her jacket and placed it over the back of a chair. "I'm sorry I'm late, Rachel. My last appointment took longer than I expected."

Rachel smiled. "I haven't been here that long. I was running late myself."

"I hope Jaylene didn't annoy you."

"Not at all. I did find her to be a bit strange, though."

Angela laughed. "That's a polite way of putting it. She's a royal pain in the ass."

"How well do you know her?" Rachel asked.

"All too well, but that's another story for another time."

"Let me get you a drink," Rachel offered. "What would you like?"

"Whatever you're having is fine."

Rachel noticed that Angela's gaze followed Jaylene to where she resumed her seat on the barstool looking intently at them.

"Stay away from her, Rachel. She's bad news," Angela warned.

## CHAPTER SIX

Rachel spent days debating whether to renew her lease at The Delcore for another month. Even with Mary's generous discount and her salary, it was still more than she could reasonably afford. Added to that was what it was costing her for her meals. She was growing tired of eating out and couldn't wait until she had a kitchen of her own cooking some of her favorite dishes.

When the phone rang one cold gray morning, Angela's bubbly voice on the other end of the line, barely gave her a chance for a greeting.

"Good news! I think I've found you the perfect apartment. I'll pick you up on your lunch hour and show it to you."

Rachel thought the morning would never end. This could be a dream come true. She'd been hoping to have a place of her own before the holidays. She'd saved every dime she could and most times Angela insisted on picking up the tab on their several times a week get togethers.

At twelve-thirty, Angela arrived. "Would you like a quick bite to eat before I show you the apartment?" she asked.

"I'm too excited to eat," Rachel squealed. "Let's see the apartment now."

Angela squeezed her arm. "Okay, we'll grab something afterwards."

Rachel barely paid attention as neighborhood after neighborhood sped by. When Angela finally parked the car in front of an enormous brownstone, her breath caught in her throat. "It's gorgeous! I never dreamed anything as beautiful as this existed so close to the city."

Angela laughed heartily. "There are many beautiful neighborhoods around the city. You just haven't seen them yet." She led Rachel through a gate and down a sidewalk to the rear of the building. She unlocked the door and they stepped into a bright entryway. Two large closets adorned the narrow hall, which led into a large kitchen. Rachel stood in awe as she looked at the almost new appliances and the numerous cupboards and counter space. The kitchen led into a spacious carpeted living room with a huge fireplace as its focal point. Off of the living room was a hallway leading to an updated bathroom and next to it an enormous bedroom. On the other side of the hall were two big linen closets and a smaller bedroom.

"This room can be used as a guest bedroom, den or home office," Angela said motioning toward the smaller room. "The previous tenant used it as an office."

"Why did he move? It's such a beautiful and perfect apartment."

"Oh, he didn't want to leave, but his company

transferred him to the West Coast."

Rachel took her time walking through the rooms and marveling over every little detail.

"So, what do you think?"

"Oh, my, God! What would anyone think? I'm in love with this place!" she exclaimed. "But I could never afford something as beautiful as this in a million years," she reasoned, her mood suddenly sinking. "I'm sure the rent is way out of my budget."

"What if I told you that you can? It's practically a steal."

Rachel's eyes narrowed. "Okay, what's wrong with it? Why aren't there hoards of tenants waiting in line to snap up this place? Is it haunted or something?"

Angela laughed. "No, it's not haunted. And yes, there are several who'd love to live here and would be willing to pay any price, but let's just say that I have an in with the owner. She's not interested in just the money...she'd like someone who will love and take care of the place. She'd rather have someone who truly thought of this place as his or her own because then it would be well taken care of. You'd be shocked at how some tenants live. It's unbelievable!"

Rachel's eyes brightened. "If I only knew for certain that it could be mine I would be the happiest woman alive!"

Angela gave her a hug. "If you want it, you've got it. I told you that I've got an in with the owner." She handed her the keys. "I can help you with furnishings until you can afford some things of your own."

Rachel wasn't sure she'd heard her correctly. "Are you serious?"

She nodded.

"I can't believe how lucky I am to have met you, Angela. I don't know what I would do without you."

Angela shrugged. "I like helping people, Rachel. That's what life is all about to me."

"I don't know how I'll ever be able to repay you for everything you've done for me."

Angela blushed. "I don't want anything in return. Friends help friends and I consider you my best friend."

"I care about you, too."

Angela cleared her throat. "Okay, so you're sure you want the apartment."

"Of course!" She swept her arms dramatically around the room. "Who wouldn't? Are there more apartments besides this one? The house is huge!"

"This is the only apartment. The owner lives in the rest of the house."

Rachel's eyes clouded.

"Don't worry...you two will get along fine. I assure you that she'll love you."

"I hope so. Okay, when can I sign the lease? I don't want anyone else to snatch this apartment away from me." She grinned.

"Can you come back here to the main part of the house about seven o'clock tonight? I'd pick you up, but I'm showing a house and I don't know how long it'll take. I'll meet you here and we can have dinner afterwards to celebrate."

\* \* \* \*

At five minutes to seven, Rachel exited her taxi, took a deep breath and walked up the sidewalk to the front door of the brownstone. She smoothed her jacket, and then rang the bell. Seconds later the heavy door was opened.

"Please come in, Rachel."

Rachel's eyes widened in surprise. "I didn't expect you to be answering the door, Angela, but I'm relieved you're here." She stepped into the tastefully decorated entry hall. "This is exquisite," she murmured following Angela into the enormous living room, which contained two large sofas, several chairs, end tables, conversation tables, and a fireplace that was merrily crackling. "Wow!" Rachel exclaimed. "Now I know what the inside of a mansion looks like." She looked around the room. "Isn't the owner here?"

Angela set some papers on the coffee table in front of one of the sofas. "Please sit down. I have the lease papers here waiting for your signature," she cheerfully said.

Rachel sat on the sofa and took the pen Angela handed her. She glanced over the contract, and then suddenly stopped. "I don't believe it!" she exclaimed, as her eyes grew wide. "Angela, you're my landlord!"

Angela grinned sheepishly. "Not until you sign on the dotted line."

Rachel quickly signed the papers. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"I like surprises."

Rachel smiled. "I think I should be paying you fair value for the apartment."

"You are. Besides, now that we've become friends we won't have so far to go to visit one another." She pointed a slender finger at Rachel. "And I'll expect a home cooked meal once in a while."

"You've got it! You would have gotten it whether you were my landlord or not." She quickly got up, ran over to Angela, and threw her arms around her neck. "You're something else, do you know that?"

Angela looked into her eyes and Rachel saw that it was a look different from the way Angela had ever looked at her. It momentarily unnerved her, but Rachel quickly gained her composure. "So, tell me how did you come to buy this place?"

"The listing came through our office about ten years ago. I came out to tour it and simply fell in love with the place. I was ready to give up apartment living. I'd lived in apartments my entire life, and as much as I love Manhattan, I was ready to leave. It took some finagling, but I was fortunate to have made a couple of lucrative sales a few months before. Of course, for the time being, I share ownership with the bank, but in about another ten years it'll be all mine lock, stock, and barrel."

"You're an amazing woman Angela Consanti." She cleared her throat. "Okay, I'm getting all emotional here, but I can't seem to find the right words to express how happy you've made me."

"Just seeing the look on your face gives me great pleasure." She clapped her hands together. "Let's go out and celebrate. I'll buy dinner and then we can go to The Barstel."

"No, Angela, you've all ready done so much for



me. Tonight is my treat."

"You've got a deal!"

Two hours later as they sat listening to the music and watching couples on the dance floor at The Barstel, Angela spotted Jaylene heading towards their table. She nudged Rachel. Rachel's forehead furrowed as she watched Jaylene boldly coming closer a big smile pasted on her full lips as her eyes stayed focused on Rachel. Without being invited, Jaylene pulled up a chair and sat down.

"Together again, I see," she said with a slight smirk. "People are beginning to wonder if you two are a couple. It's been a long time for you hasn't it, Ang?"

"I don't recall either of us asking you to join us," Angela retorted with blazing eyes.

Jaylene peered at Rachel. "Do you want me to leave?"

"I think it would be better if you did," Rachel quietly replied.

Jaylene nodded. "Catch you later." She patted Rachel's shoulder, then left.

Rachel noticed Angela's demeanor as her friend sat rigid with her lips tightly pursed in disgust. "Okay, level with me, Angela. What is it with you two?"

Angela's eyes flashed angrily. "She's bad news. She enjoys chewing people up and spitting them out. She's a user and she's dangerous. No one's feelings, but her own are of any importance to her," she bitterly replied.

Rachel's eyes clouded. "Did she do something to hurt you?"

Angela looked down at her folded hands and seemed to be concentrating on the simple ring she wore on the pinkie finger of her right hand. Finally, she raised her eyes to Rachel's. "Yes. She almost destroyed my life."

"I'm sorry," Rachel gently said. "Do you want to talk about it?"

Angela ran a hand through her hair. "I may as well tell you the whole ugly story."

Rachel watched as Angela's eyes filled with pain. "No, Angela, I don't want you to drudge up something that has caused you so much pain."

She took a deep breath. "No, it'll be good for me to talk about it. I've held it inside for way too long. Besides, if I can't trust my feelings with my best friend, then who can I trust?" Her bottom lip trembled.

It tore Rachel apart to see her in such emotional pain. She didn't deserve it. "You can always trust me, Angela."

"I know, and you'll never know what that means to me." She took another deep breath. "I've known Jaylene for almost twenty years. We ran with some of the same crowd in high school. She was always outspoken and not afraid to go after what she wanted no matter whom she trampled in the process. She definitely had different values than I did so after high school we drifted apart and only occasionally ran into one another."

Rachel sipped her drink thoughtfully watching Angela's facial expression turn to contempt.

"I knew that Jaylene slept with anyone she could

get her hands on, but I started hearing rumors about how she'd practically bankrupt her conquests both emotionally and financially before abruptly leaving them."

"That's terrible! Rachel exclaimed as her eyes drifted to the bar where Jaylene sat facing them. Jaylene caught Rachel's eye and held her bottle of beer up as though in a toast. Rachel quickly looked away.

"It is. I wanted to give Jaylene the benefit of the doubt so one night I ran into her, bought her a drink and told her about the rumors. She neither admitted nor denied the rumors. She just sat there with a smug look on her face. I wanted to scratch her eyes out." She picked up her glass and took a drink, then set it back down. "Jaylene has always had one thing to her credit - she can put on the charm in the blink of an eye and make anyone believe that she's the most gentle, sweet, caring woman one would ever hope to meet. And she does have the looks to back her up. What she doesn't have is a conscience."

"Did you and Jaylene ever have an intimate relationship?" Rachel gently asked.

She shook her head. "No. We never even came close. It was a mutual unspoken decision on both our parts. We had no physical attraction to one another and even if we had, our views were too different."

Rachel's eyebrow puckered. "What happened?"

"Do you remember my telling you about my breakup?"

She nodded. "Jaylene caused it?"

Tears formed in Angel's eyes. "I truly believed

Karen and I had it all. I had no reason to mistrust her. She was my present and my future. We were on our way and very much in love and were financially secure." She let her breath out slowly. "Karen and I ran into Jaylene often and at the time Jaylene was dating a very nice woman. Jaylene appeared to have cleaned up her act so she and I renewed our friendship. The four of us hit it off fabulously and began socializing together frequently." She bit her bottom lip. "One day everything just blew up in my face. I'd forgotten my briefcase and had to come back home to retrieve it. Karen should have already left for work so I was surprised to see her car in the driveway. I immediately became alarmed thinking she'd become ill or worse. My hands were shaking so badly I could barely unlock the door. I tore through the house calling her name. As I neared our bedroom, I could hear the shower running. I called out to her again and she quickly replied that she'd be right out. Well, the romantic that I am, I thought I'd pop in and wash her back for her. When I opened the bathroom door, I realized that she wasn't showering alone. My knees grew weak and I felt like someone had just squeezed the breath out of me."

"My God! That's horrible!"

"I don't know how I found the strength, but I pulled the shower curtain aside and who should I find in the shower with Karen?"

"Jaylene?" Rachel softly asked.

"Yes. Jaylene looked at me like I was the one at fault for unexpectedly returning to my own home."

"What did Karen say?"

"At first nothing, but then she admitted that she and Jaylene had been having an affair for months."

"What about Jaylene's partner?"

"Jaylene dumped her the week before. Well, to make a long story short, Karen moved out of my house that day and in with Jaylene."

Rachel frowned. "There's one thing I don't understand."

"What's that?"

"If Karen is living with Jaylene then why doesn't she ever come here with her?"

Angela's face darkened. "Karen called me several weeks ago. It seems that Jaylene drained her savings and then tossed her out on her butt. I tried to muster up some sympathy for her, but all I could think about was the pain she and Jaylene had caused me. In all the time she'd been with Jaylene, she'd never spoken to me or even acknowledged me when I'd run into them together. It was like she was mocking me. Her coldness towards me ripped my heart out. She'd betrayed everything I had cherished with her." She rapidly blinked, but not before a tear escaped from her eye.

"Where's Karen now?"

Angela shrugged. "I think she moved out of the city. When I told her that she couldn't move back in with me even in a platonic capacity she called me a few choice names and that was the last time she spoke to me. The last I heard was that she was considering moving back to the mid-west."

"I can certainly now understand how seeing Jaylene upsets you," Rachel sympathized.

"That's why I warned you about her." Angela studied her. "You're a beautiful woman, Rachel, and new to the city. To Jaylene, you'd be new fresh pickings."

Rachel stiffened. "I have no intention of getting involved with Jaylene or anyone for that matter. My romantic life is too complicated at the moment."

Angela nodded. "You left someone behind when you moved here, didn't you?"

Rachel inhaled deeply then slowly let her breath out. "Yes, I did."

"You never told me much about your past."

"There's not a whole lot to tell. I still love Kerri and will remain faithful to her, but I have no way of knowing where I stand with her."

"Have you asked her?" Angela gently prodded.

"Several times, but she refuses to discuss us unless I come back home. I know I appear very selfish for just up and leaving, but now that I'm here, it's everything I dreamed it would be. I've never before felt so alive and free to be me. I know if Kerri got out of Wilson Point she'd see what I've been talking about. I feel like I've missed out on so much being cooped up in a small narrow minded town all of my life," Rachel resentfully retorted.

"Have you asked her to come to New York?"

"Yes, but she won't."

"I'm assuming that you discussed your feelings with her before moving here?"

"I tried to, but she doesn't seem to be as bothered by the isolation in Wilson Point as I was. Until I came here I never realized how opposite we are in our

wants and needs."

"They say that opposites attract," Angela reminded her. "Did you two have any gay friends there to get together with?"

She shook her head. "No, it's a very strait laced conservative community and acceptance there if one is gay is almost non-existent. A gay person will barely be tolerated let alone respected. To be safe we stayed in the closet. There were a few gay bars out of town we'd go to once in awhile, but that was about it. We never developed any friendships just acquaintances."

Angela looked intently at her. "It's not fair to either of you to leave your relationship up in the air. You need to talk it out."

"I know and I've tried, but she won't listen. She says that in a couple of years we can move, but so many things can happen in a couple of years and as much as I love her, I can't wait. Besides, I'm afraid that she'll come up with yet another excuse not to leave after she finishes design school."

"If your love is strong enough you can wait," Angela counseled. "But the real problem, in my opinion, seems to be communication. You both need to compromise. You know, one gives a little on one point and the other on another point. It can't be all one-sided. You both appear to be set in what you want without actually seeing the effect it is having on the other. Talk to her. I can see in your eyes that you're afraid," she softly said. "Don't be afraid. If you two don't talk, you'll never be able to totally move on with your life with or without her."

## CHAPTER SEVEN

**K**erri sat at the bar slowly sipping her beer. She hadn't planned to go anywhere tonight, but the unbearable loneliness had stifled her to the point that if she didn't get out of the apartment she'd lose her mind. She watched couples laughing, dancing and sharing intimate kisses. She felt a stab in her heart and missed Rachel even more. The last time they'd been here they were celebrating their two-year anniversary. She tightened her grip on her beer bottle.

"Hi, Kerri? Where's your other half?"

Kerri slightly turned her head. "Hi, Bonnie."

The pretty young blond propped herself on the stool next to Kerri. "So, where is Rachel tonight?"

Kerri shrugged. "Roaming around New York City."

Bonnie's eyebrows shot up. "What's she doing there?"

"Finding herself," Kerri sullenly replied.

"You two didn't break up or anything like that did you?" she prodded.

Kerri sighed heavily. "I have no idea."

"Hey, let me get you another beer."

Kerri didn't protest even though she knew she'd



already had way too much to drink. But the alcohol seemed to lessen the pain in her heart and right now, all she wanted to do was escape that pain in whatever way she could. She glanced at Bonnie. "Thanks."

Bonnie nodded as she picked up her rum and coke. "You look like you could use a friend."

"Tonight this beer is my friend. So are you flying solo tonight?"

Bonnie grinned her sparkling blue eyes gleaming in the dim light. "Aren't I always?"

Kerri chuckled. She liked Bonnie. She and Rachel had run into her almost every time they came in here. They'd never exchanged more than a few sentences with her, but Bonnie had always been friendly towards them and they had both agreed that they liked her bubbly personality. Each time they'd seen her, she had someone new on her arm. She'd indicated that she wasn't ready to commit to any one woman, but instead enjoyed playing the field. She'd know when the right woman came along and until that happened she was content.

"No one's caught your eye?" Kerri motioned to the crowded dance floor.

"Maybe one or two, but since they have partners they're definitely off limits."

Bonnie's soft hair fell loosely about her shoulders. Her features were delicate and perfectly accentuated her petite body. She was wearing a short skirt and low cut blouse that showed enough cleavage to tease one into wondering what those full perky breasts would look like set free. Kerri's eyes stayed riveted for a few seconds on Bonnie's breasts. Abruptly she

brought her eyes back up to Bonnie's. If Bonnie had noticed, she didn't let on which relieved Kerri.

"There's a lot of nice looking women here tonight," Kerri observed.

Bonnie's eyes narrowed. "There always has been; you just never noticed before." She laughed. "But who can blame you. If I had a partner like Rachel then my eyes wouldn't have looked at another either."

"You mean if Rachel had been single you might have been interested in her?"

"Not exactly," Bonnie explained. "Rachel's a beautiful woman, but I've got to admit if you would have been single I would have definitely been interested."

Kerri cocked an eye. "In me?"

"You seem shocked."

"Maybe just a little. I never thought of myself as the type too many women were interested in."

"Ah...see there you go. You don't give yourself the credit you deserve."

Kerri took a large swallow of beer.

"I used to sit and watch the way you'd look at Rachel with so much love and adoration. That was the type of woman I was looking for. Not just the usual one night stands."

"There's someone out there for you, Bonnie. And mark my words, when you find her she'll be one hell of a lucky woman."

Bonnie sipped at her drink, and then set her glass down on the bar. "Did you and Rachel have a fight or is she just away on a visit to New York?"

"She moved there."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be. It was her decision."

"How long has she been gone?"

"Too long." Kerri finished off the bottle of beer and Bonnie quickly got her another.

"That explains why I haven't seen you in here for awhile. Maybe she'll come back soon."

"I doubt it. She's not happy here. She wants me to move there."

"Are you going to?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"I have my life here right now." She went on to explain about her design classes and her hopes and dreams. Bonnie listened hanging onto every word she spoke. Kerri's eyes drifted again to Bonnie's chest and lingered there.

"Would you like to dance?"

Kerri slid off the barstool. "I'd love to."

A slow sensuous song was playing as Kerri held Bonnie in her arms and slowly moved on the dance floor.

Bonnie held tightly to Kerri, her body pressing as close as she could. She rested her head on Kerri's shoulder.

Kerri closed her eyes enjoying the warmth of Bonnie's body next to her own. Her arms wrapped tighter around Bonnie as though she were hanging on for dear life. Maybe I am, she thought.

The song ended too soon and the band announced last call. She took Bonnie's hand and led her back to the bar. "My turn." She ordered another beer for

herself and a rum and coke for Bonnie.

"Are you staying in Buffalo tonight?"

She shook her head. "No. I'll find a diner and have a gallon of coffee to sober up before I hit the highway," she said with a laugh.

"Why don't you come over to my place? When you're sober, I can drive you back here for your car."

"I don't know..." Kerri hesitated. "I'm not so drunk that I don't know what I'm doing."

"But drunk enough that if you get pulled over you'll get arrested for drunk driving," Bonnie cautioned.

"That's all I'd need," Kerri agreed. "But I don't know if it's a good idea to go to your place."

"I don't bite."

\* \* \* \*

Kerri stared into the cup of steaming coffee. "Do you always ask strangers over? It's not a wise idea in this day and age."

"You're not exactly a stranger. Besides I saw the way you were with Rachel so I know you're not some kind of psycho."

"Well, thank you for rescuing me from a night of loneliness sobering up in some strange diner."

"You're very welcome." She stifled a yawn.

"God, I didn't know it was this late," Kerri said staring at her wristwatch. "I should be going. I've had enough coffee so I should be okay now."

"It's a long drive. Why don't you stay here?"

Kerri swallowed hard. "I don't know if that's such

a good idea."

"I understand," Bonnie softly said.

Kerri looked at the young woman's beautiful face and then down to her long legs, which showed plenty of thigh from where her skirt had ridden up. "Are you asking me—" her voice trailed off.

"If anything happens between us tonight, Kerri, I don't want it to be a one night stand," she whispered.

"I hate one night stands," Kerri said rising from her chair. She took Bonnie's hands in hers. "But I'm not free."

"From what you've said earlier it sounds like you are. Rachel rarely calls. Do you think she's sitting home alone every night...in New York City?"

"No," Kerri admitted. "I just never thought I'd get involved with anyone again.

"I'm not just anyone, Kerri. Maybe we've only spoken briefly for the past year and a half, but you don't know how I'd anxiously wait for you to come in. I didn't care that you had Rachel with you. I just wanted to see you and be able to speak to you for a few minutes. Call it a crush if you like, but I couldn't stop thinking about you."

Kerri didn't know how to answer. She never dreamed she'd have this kind of affect on anyone. She was flattered and afraid at the same time.

"You never knew the effect you had on me," Bonnie continued, "and you never would have if I hadn't seen you alone tonight. You don't know how I worried that something had happened to you when I didn't see you for all these weeks. I would never do anything to come between you and Rachel and if you

think that there is any chance that you two will get back together again then we'll end this before it even begins." Her eyes searched Kerri's.

Kerri pulled her into her arms. "Yes, I want you," she moaned against her hair. "And, no, not just for a one night stand."

Bonnie led her into her large bedroom. She held Kerri at arms length as she slowly removed her blouse.

Kerri's breath caught in her throat as she saw Bonnie's beautiful breasts straining against her bra.

Bonnie slowly undid her bra then removed her skirt. Her black-laced panties held the magic to her womanhood and Kerri could barely contain herself as she watched with mounting pleasure as Bonnie slowly slid them down her long slender legs.

"I need you," Kerri hoarsely whispered as she grabbed Bonnie's hands and gently led her to the edge of the bed. She positioned Bonnie and gently laid her back on two pillows, then spread her legs and took her time exploring Bonnie's firm young body.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

Angela's words echoed in Rachel's mind. Was Kerri's and her love strong enough or had they only been fooling themselves? If they truly did love one another as deeply as they professed then why were they apart? Neither of them would budge an inch and they'd reached a stalemate. Was it pride or were they really drifting apart? Was she being selfish by expecting Kerri to uproot herself to follow her or was Kerri being selfish by not wanting to have the type of freedom they deserved? Weeks had rapidly passed by and the longer they continued without communicating and were physically apart the more like strangers they seemed to become.

Rachel swallowed hard. It was time to find out one way or the other what they were going to do. Before she could change her mind, she grabbed the phone and dialed Kerri's number.

"Hello," Kerri groggily answered on the fourth ring.

"It's me, Kerri. How've you been?" She kept her voice light and cheerful.

"I've been getting along," she coolly replied. "Do you know what time it is? You could have called

earlier."

"Kerri, we really need to talk and lay everything out on the table once and for all. This separation is driving me crazy."

"Have you forgotten that you were the one who brought it on?" she demanded.

"I did what I had to do. You know how I felt." Rachel replied. "I needed your love and understanding."

"Nothing's changed, has it, Rachel?" Kerri tiredly asked. "This will get us nowhere and I'm just too exhausted to argue with you tonight. We've said all we need to say."

"Kerri, I love you. If you love me even half as much you'd at least try to understand what I'm going through, for God's sake."

"Don't even try to lay this on me, Rachel. What I'm hearing is that it's your way or no way. There's never been any middle ground or compromise. I agreed to leave Wilson Point, but unless I did when you wanted to, then forget my reasons for wanting to wait."

"Yes, I admit that I'm being selfish, but it's not just for me. I want the best for both of us. I need you in my life, Kerri. I've been going crazy with missing you."

"You miss me so much that you haven't called in weeks?" she coldly questioned.

"I should have. I'm sorry that I didn't, but I didn't want to argue." Rachel chewed her bottom lip. "I've kept busy with my job. I'm doing all of this for us. I checked out a couple of design schools and I don't think you'll have any trouble transferring. It won't be



as difficult as you think."

"You just don't get it, do you? Did it ever occur to you that I like my classes and teachers here just fine? I intend to finish here."

"I thought you said it would be too difficult to transfer. You led me to believe that was the reason you were reluctant to move."

"It probably would be difficult with my loans and everything but since I have no intention of doing so, I don't know for certain."

"So, you don't want to be with me? All of your excuses were lies just to pacify me?"

"I never said that. You were the one who couldn't wait to leave me...and you did."

"Kerri, this isn't getting us anywhere."

"I agree. All we do is argue."

"Don't you care about me even just a little, Ker?"

"Dammit, Rachel, my love was never enough for you and I doubt it ever would have been."

"Why are you talking in the past tense?" Rachel asked as her heart thumped furiously in her chest. "I'm sorry for all the pain I caused you. I wish you'd at least come for a visit. Come for a week and we can talk face to face and try to straighten everything out." Rachel grew nervous by Kerri's long silence. Something was terribly wrong and she had only herself to blame. She had to get things back on track with Kerri. She loved her and couldn't stand the thought of being without her. "Please, just come. I've got a fantastic apartment. You'll love it. It has a fireplace and everything!"

"It looks like you've put down roots."

"The hotel was too expensive to stay in indefinitely."

"I thought you had a good paying job."

"I do, Kerri, but it's more expensive to live in New York than it is in Wilson Point."

"So, it wouldn't have actually made sense to live there when we'd financially be no better off there than we were here. What would we have gained if I would have moved with you?"

"More than you can imagine," Rachel reasoned. "The big difference is that we can be ourselves and not have to hide, acting as though we're only good friends instead of lovers."

"You just don't get it, do you? When we were together, I shut the outside world out and all that mattered to me was the two of us. I don't give a damn what anyone else thinks about me. I have enough confidence in myself to say the hell with the rest of the world."

Rachel fell silent.

"It's late, Rachel, and I've got an early class tomorrow," Kerri stiffly said.

"Just say you'll come. I'll send the money for a bus ticket unless you prefer to fly."

"I don't know, Rachel."

"Please. Just come for a week."

"I'll let you know, but if I do I can pay my own way. I'll talk to you later."

Rachel hung up the phone with mixed emotions. Kerri was so distant not like her usual loving self. They'd only been apart for a couple of months, but to Rachel it seemed like years. How could only a few

weeks apart cause them to act like strangers not even able to carry on a normal conversation? What if Kerri had already moved on with her life leaving no room for Rachel? No, Kerri would never hurt her that way. She'd tell her that it was over first, but then maybe that was exactly what she'd been saying and Rachel had been blind to her words. Kerri had talked in the past tense when she spoke of them as a couple. And she had taken off her ring. Was she wearing it now? Rachel squinted. It was late. Maybe she'd been having trouble sleeping and only wanted Rachel to suffer for all the pain she'd brought to her.

Rachel would make it all up to her. She perked up when she thought of all the places she'd show Kerri. She'd make her fall in love with the city. Kerri would never want to go back to Wilson Point after a week here.

## CHAPTER NINE

Bonnie threw her arms around Kerri's neck. "What time is your flight tomorrow?"

Kerri looked at her with tears in her eyes. "Two o'clock."

"We have the whole night to be together," she said with a twinkle in her eye. "And I'm going to drive you to the airport."

"I don't want to go. I want to spend the weekend with you. God knows how I yearn for every weekend when we can be together. I never thought I could love anyone again. And there you were."

Bonnie smiled. "I finally know what it means to be in love and it's a feeling I'll have for the rest of my life as long as we're together."

"You know I'm an old-fashioned girl," Kerri grinned. "It is forever."

"You owe it to Rachel to tell her about us, Kerri."

"I don't owe her anything anymore," she bitterly retorted.

Bonnie patted her shoulder. "You're hurt, honey, and I understand that, but you'll feel better telling her face to face. She deserves that from you and I know how kind and gentle you are. You know I'm right."

Kerri threw her arms around Bonnie. "Yes, you are," she said nuzzling her ear. "Thank you for being so understanding."

"I have nothing to worry about. I'm secure."

"Don't ever forget that, baby. I've never cheated in my life and I never would."

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"So, does my spaghetti sauce pass your high standards?" Rachel teased as she refilled their wine glasses.

"As usual, it is fantastic!" Angela exclaimed. "You know how much I enjoy your cooking...I eat here enough." She smiled.

"I'm glad you like it. I love to cook and I will be happy to cook for you anytime." She saw a light quickly come into Angela's eyes then disappear as quickly as it had come. "Let's finish our wine in the living room. I built a fire." She laughed. "I know it's too warm to have a fire, but I couldn't resist."

"Sounds like a great idea to me." Angela followed her to the sofa. Her eyes stayed fixed on the flame merrily crackling. "You are happy here aren't you?"

"More than you can imagine." She grabbed Angela's hands. "I owe so much to you. If I hadn't run into you on my first day here I'd have missed out on meeting one of the most wonderful people in the world."

"Now I think many would disagree with that evaluation," Angela said turning her attention to Rachel.

Rachel saw the same look in Angela's eyes she'd seen on several occasions. "Angela," she softly said. "Does it still hurt?"

"Does what hurt?" Angela asked releasing her hands from Rachel's and then picking up her wine glass.

"Karen."

Angela laughed a low bitter laugh. "I think it's damaged me, but I'll survive. It makes it easier that she and I aren't living in the same city. Running into her was torture, but all in all, I'm over her."

"I don't know what I'll do if Kerri and I can't work through our problems. I can't imagine not having her in my life."

"If that happens then you'll do as I did and take it one day at a time. That's all you can do."

Rachel sighed. "Do you know what a comfort you are to me?"

Angela smiled. "The feeling's mutual. You've added so much zest to my life. I didn't realize how shut away I'd allowed myself to become until I met you."

"I want you to know that I'm always here for you whenever you need me."

"I know and I'll always be here for you, too. After all, that's what best friends do." She stared into her wineglass. "Tomorrow is a big day for you."

Rachel nervously turned her wineglass in her hand. "I'm scared. I know I shouldn't be, but I am. I feel like I'm meeting Kerri for the first time."

"You've been apart for awhile. That's natural. I'm sure once you two see each other all of the old

feelings that made you two fall in love will come rushing back and it'll seem like you were never apart. Do you have any special plans for tomorrow night?"

Rachel cocked an eye. "Do I ever. It's been awhile."

Angela laughed. "That's not what I meant."

Rachel feigned surprise. "Well, I thought after she gets here I'd let her rest for awhile. Then maybe go for a walk in Central Park. I'm planning a romantic dinner and then hopefully nature will run its course."

"Sounds like a good plan." Angela set her wineglass down. "It's getting late and I'm sure you have a million things to do."

"It's funny how time flies when we're together," Rachel noted consulting her wristwatch.

Angela nodded. "What time will she be arriving?"

"She's calling me in the morning. She's trying to catch an earlier flight than the one she scheduled, so I'm not sure."

"I hope I'll have a chance to meet her before I have to leave for my convention."

"Me, too. I still wish you didn't have to go."

"I'll miss you, Rachel, but you'll be so busy with Kerri that I'm sure you won't give me a second thought."

"Don't count on it."

Angela gave her a hug, then left.

## CHAPTER TEN

**K**erri threw a few things into a suitcase."

"Let me pack for you," Bonnie said, grabbing the suitcase and removing the items, then neatly folding them before setting them back inside.

Kerri encircled her in her arms. "I still don't want to go," she whispered against Bonnie's soft, fragrant hair.

"I know, honey, but she deserves to know that it's over."

"I could have told her over the phone. Besides she's the one who ended it when she left."

Bonnie frowned. "From what you've told me she doesn't think that she ended anything."

Kerri's forehead furrowed. "That's just it. She can't run off half-cocked and expect everything to be the same."

"She obviously still loves you."

"I think she loves the idea of being in love. Hell, she's in New York. She's got everything at her fingertips. I'm a country girl...okay with the exclusion of Buffalo," she said with a wry smile. "And, of course, you. Everything I could possibly want is right here. The more I get to know you the more we have in



common."

Bonnie kissed her cheek. "Does that mean someday we can find some property and get a few animals?"

"That's my dream." Kerri grinned at her. "I'm going to try to make all your dreams come true."

"You already have." Her eyes sparkled as she looked at Kerri. "Now you go catch that plane so you can get this over with and come back to me."

"You are the sweetest most understanding woman I've ever met."

"That's because you and I share something very special and unique," Bonnie replied.

"And the best is yet to come." She held her tightly as though she were afraid to let her go. "God, I miss you already." She kissed her passionately

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"What time is Kerri's plane getting in?" Angela asked.

"Two o'clock. She managed to get an earlier flight after all." Rachel's eyes swept over the apartment. Over the past month Angela had completely furnished it for her with pieces she'd had stored or no longer had use for. At least that was what Angela had told Rachel, but Rachel suspected otherwise. The apartment was cozy and inviting. Kerri would love the space after being cramped up in her small apartment. Rachel contemplated turning the spare bedroom into a study for Kerri where she could work uninterrupted on her designs. That was one of the surprises she had for her.

"Are you going to meet her at the airport? I could

give you a ride," Angela offered.

"Thanks, but she said she'd take a taxi." Rachel clenched her hands into fists.

"What's the matter? You're so tense. You're supposed to be thrilled." Angela smiled. "This is the moment you've been waiting for."

"I am, but it would be easier if things weren't so stiff between us."

"Once you see one another I'll bet you'll forget all of your problems. We talked about that last night, remember?" Angela winked.

"I know, but I can't shake my uneasiness." She looked intently at Angela. "I wish you weren't going away this week. I need you for moral support. Besides I was hoping that you could talk to Kerri and convince her of all the opportunities the city has to offer...especially for her with a design career."

Angela patted Rachel's shoulder. "You don't need a third wheel. This is a fresh start for the both of you. Look at it that way. You are the one who needs to show her around and soon she'll see all the prospects at her fingertips. Come on now lighten up! This is the woman you love. You should be beside yourself with joy not acting like you're going before the firing squad."

Rachel grimaced. "I just want everything to be the way it was before between Kerri and me and I'm afraid I'm asking for too much." She ran a hand through her hair. "I blew it."

"You seem to be forgetting that she did agree to come so that is a major breakthrough on her part. Think positive thoughts and get rid of that gloom and

doom face." She tossed her head. "I've got to pack, but I promise to pop in for a minute before I leave for the airport to meet Kerri. I've written down my hotel and the phone number. Call me if you need to talk. Promise? But I expect you to be so busy that I'll be back before you even realize I've been gone."

Rachel threw her arms around Angela's neck. "What would I ever do without you?"

"I hope I never find out," Angela softly murmured as she patted Rachel's back.

When Angela released her, Rachel stood back gazing at her friend. "Are you okay?" Again, Angela had held her closely and made a comment that made no sense to Rachel. Or did it? Was Angela feeling more than friendship for her? Rachel shook off her silly supposition. Angela would never do to another woman what had been done to her. She wouldn't hurt Kerri even though she'd never met her because hurting Kerri would hurt Rachel. And Angela knew how deeply in love Rachel was with Kerri.

Angela nodded. "I'm just concerned about you. You deserve to be happy and I know that Kerri is the woman who holds the key to your happiness. I want everything to work out for you the way you want it to."

"Some day, Angela, you're going to find a woman to make you happy, too. She'll treat you with all the love, kindness and respect you deserve." A telltale sign of sorrow came into Angela's eyes. "Is something wrong?" she worriedly asked. "You look so sad."

Angela flashed a weak smile. "I'm fine, really I am. You worry too much."

Rachel's eyes narrowed. "I don't believe you and when you return we're going to sit down and have a long talk. I've been so absorbed with my own problems with Kerri that I'm afraid I haven't even given you the chance to lean on me for a change."

Angela's face flushed. "Don't worry, I'm fine. You've been the best friend I've ever had. These past weeks knowing you have been some of the happiest times of my life. And it's nice to have someone do all the kind things that you do for me like cooking dinner a couple of times a week and taking care of Shugie when I'm working late, so don't ever think you lean too much on me."

Rachel took Angela's hands and held them gently in her own. "Still you deserve to be happy. We need to find you the perfect woman." She watched as the same glimpse of pain came back into Angela's eyes. She squeezed Angela's hands affectionately. "What do you say?"

"I don't think I'm ready for the dating game again."

"I know you've been deeply wounded but you've got to move on with your life. Remember you're the one who told me that when things don't work out you have to pick yourself up and move on. It's time for you to take the bull by the horns. Once word gets out that you're looking, I'll bet you'll have to beat off all the women with a stick."

Angela laughed. "I love the way you put things. But still, that's easier said than done," she admitted.

Rachel studied her for a few seconds. "Wait a minute...you've already found someone, haven't

you?" she squealed. "Come on...out with it. Who is she? Have I met her?"

"Wow! Your imagination is running in high gear today."

"Nah, I don't think so."

Angela laughed again. "Well, I've got to run. I'll pop in for a minute to meet Kerri."

Rachel slowly released Angela's hands. "Wish me luck?"

"Sweetie, you're in love and that's all you need not luck." She opened the door. "Don't worry," she said, then closed the door.

Rachel stared at the closed door for a few seconds. She wished she could put her finger on what was troubling Angela. She sighed. Angela might tell her in due time unless it was something she didn't feel comfortable sharing with anyone. But she couldn't bear to see the tortured look that was coming with more frequency to Angela's eyes. As soon as she got back on track with Kerri, she was determined to help Angela find the happiness she was so deserving of.

Rachel sighed. Right now, she needed to focus all of her attention on Kerri's impending arrival. She walked into the bedroom and for what must have been the hundredth time, fluffed the pillows. She looked at the bed imagining how wonderful it would be lying naked in Kerri's arms. Her breath caught in her throat as she closed her eyes and could almost feel Kerri's masterful hands exploring every crevice of her body.

\* \* \* \*

When the doorbell rang, Rachel could barely contain her enthusiasm as she rushed to it flinging it wide open.

Kerri silently stood there with a suitcase clutched tightly in her hand.

"Come in, Kerri." Rachel beamed as she grabbed the suitcase and set it inside the door.

Kerri slowly walked inside. "Wow! This is some place!"

"Thank you." Rachel shut the door then turned to Kerri. "I missed you," she said enclosing her in her arms. She felt Kerri stiffen.

"I missed you, too," Kerri said quietly.

Rachel tilted her head as her lips hungrily sought Kerri's. Kerri's lips didn't respond. "Is something wrong?" she anxiously asked searching Kerri's eyes.

Kerri let her breath out in a rush. "I'm just tired."

"Why don't you take a nap? I could join you if you'd like," she slyly offered.

Kerri flashed a weak smile. "I'm so tired that I'll probably fall asleep the minute my head hits the pillow."

"Okay, then." Rachel tried to hide the hurt in her voice. "When you get up I have some things planned." She picked up Kerri's suitcase and walked to the bedroom door with Kerri at her heels. She set the suitcase inside the door and watched longingly as Kerri walked past her then silently closed the door.

Confused, Rachel walked back to the living room and sank onto the sofa. The tension was so thick between Kerri and herself that she wasn't certain

where to even begin to patch things up. Kerri didn't want to be here. That much was obvious. But Rachel was determined that by the time she showed Kerri the city she'd be glad she'd made the trip.

Still it bothered her that Kerri hadn't shown her any affection, not even returning her kiss. It wasn't that long ago that Kerri couldn't get enough of her making slow passionate love to her for hours. Had these months apart killed the passion Kerri had once felt or was she still angry that Rachel had left so abruptly and felt the need to punish her further?

Seeing Kerri made all the familiar feelings come rushing back. How could Kerri use such self-control? They should be in bed right this minute with their bodies entangled making up for lost time. She craved Kerri's touch and needed her now more than she'd ever needed her. She thoughtfully ran her fingers through her hair. Maybe after she rested Kerri would be her normal familiar self again. She could hardly wait. The passion inside of her only burned deeper as she thought about Kerri right now with her head on the pillow in Rachel's bed.

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Kerri sat on the edge of the bed with her head in her hands. She felt sick inside. Rachel believed they were still a couple. She had to let her down as gently as possible. She groaned. Why did she come here? She needed Bonnie. That's where she wanted to be.

She raised her eyes and swept around the bedroom seeing all of Rachel's familiar things. Rachel expected

her to share her bed with her. She couldn't stay here tonight. She'd find the perfect opportunity to talk to her then get a taxi back to the airport and with any luck tonight she'd be back where she belonged safe and contented in Bonnie's bed.

She grabbed her cell phone and pressed speed dial. In a few seconds, Bonnie's bubbly voice came over the line. "I'm here, honey. I wish I wasn't."

After chatting for a few minutes, she clicked off the phone, removed her shoes and sprawled on top of the covers.



## CHAPTER ELEVEN

Rachel smiled at Kerri who sat silently across from her. "I hope you don't mind having dinner early, but I'm anxious to show you some of the city tonight."

Kerri silently picked at her food. "I don't mind." She glanced at Rachel and smiled weakly.

Rachel was hurt. She'd spent two hours in the kitchen making Kerri's favorites while Kerri rested and Kerri barely tasted what was on her plate. "Aren't you hungry?" she finally asked masking the hurt in her voice.

Kerri placed a forkful of seasoned rice in her mouth. "Yes. This is delicious. Thank you for all of this, but you didn't have to go to all this trouble."

"It was no trouble. I know you probably haven't been eating very healthy so I wanted to make your favorite dishes for you while you're here."

"I've been getting by," Kerri replied matter-of-factly.

Rachel's face flushed. "Well, that's good then. I'm glad you are."

Kerri nodded as she sipped her glass of wine. "I didn't mean it the way it sounded. I've been trying to

eat at least one decent meal a day."

Rachel stabbed at her steak. Her appetite had ebbed and swallowing the small amounts of food she placed on her fork, made her throat constrict. Finally, she gave up and set her fork down. She racked her brain trying to think of some light dinner conversation, but nothing came to mind. She stole a glance at Kerri whose head was slightly bent over her plate. What was wrong with her? Rachel wondered. Not once since they'd met had she and Kerri ever had a loss for something to talk about, but now this almost deadly silence was unbearable. She'd hoped that after Kerri had rested she'd be more like her normal self, but instead had withdrawn even further into herself. Why hadn't Kerri swept her into her arms the moment she'd arrived? Why was she so uncomfortable and treating her like a stranger instead of her lover?

The ringing of the doorbell was a welcome relief to Rachel. "Excuse me," she said jumping up from the table. "It must be Angela."

"Angela?" Kerri raised an eyebrow.

"I told you about her."

"Yes, I know. I was just surprised that you invited her over."

"I want you to meet her."

"Okay."

"I'll be right back." Rachel practically flew to the door.

Angela stood grinning at her from the other side. "I promise to only stay a minute," she said with a sly wink. "I'm not interrupting anything am I?" she

teased.

Rachel blinked rapidly. "No. It's not going well, Angela." She saw the concern in her friend's eyes. "Come on, I want you to meet her."

"Maybe now is not a good time."

"No, please. Come on."

Angela followed her into the kitchen.

Kerri looked up and smiled when she saw Angela, her eyes quickly giving her the once over.

Rachel noticed the odd expression on Kerri's face. It wasn't jealousy, it was more like relief. "Kerri, I'd like you to meet Angela Consanti. She's been so much help to me since I got here. She's also the owner of the house and a very good friend," she said.

"It's nice to meet you, Angela," Kerri said sincerely.

"The pleasure's all mine, Kerri. Rachel talks about you so much that I feel as though I already know you."

"Oh?" Kerri cocked an eyebrow. "It better be good," she said with a smile.

"Yes, she never stops talking about you. Trust me, I thought I was going to meet a saint," Angela said with a laugh.

Kerri grinned.

Rachel laid a hand on Kerri's shoulder. "When you've got the ideal partner by your side you can't help but brag just a little." She felt Kerri stiffen. She looked into Angela's eyes wondering if Angela saw Kerri's reaction. Angela looked back at her with troubled eyes. It was obvious that she saw and felt the tension between them. Even though Kerri's comments

were friendly, her words sounded wooden to Rachel. And now it appeared that even her touch repulsed Kerri. How would she ever get through to her? What could she do to show her how much she wanted and needed her? Was there anything she could do?

Angela looked at the time. "Well, I'd better get going if I'm going to make my flight. It was nice meeting you, Kerri, and I hope to see you again."

"It was nice meeting you, too, Angela. It makes me feel better knowing that Rachel has someone here to help her out."

Rachel felt Kerri's eyes focused on them as she led Angela out of the room. At the door she turned to Angela wishing her friend could stay longer.

"I'm so sorry I interrupted your dinner," Angela apologized. "I didn't realize you were going to eat this early."

"You didn't interrupt anything. I was planning a cozy dinner tonight in front of the fireplace with candles, soft music and..." She took a deep breath. "Kerri didn't want that." She bit her bottom lip fighting back tears. "She's not interested in anything that concerns me. The most I've heard her talk since she's been here is to you."

"What's the matter?" Angela softly asked.

"Everything. Kerri has barely said anything to me since she got here and when I try to get close to her, she pushes me away. She acts like I have the plague or something." Her lips trembled.

Angela wrapped her in her arms. "I wish I knew what to say to make you feel better, but all I can think of is she's still upset for your abrupt departure. Give

her some time. You've got the whole week together. Take her out tonight and show her a good time. I'm sure in a day or two everything will be back to normal."

Rachel was surprised at how safe and secure she felt in Angela's arms. She didn't want Angela to let go of her. Angela's light fragrance as she nestled her head against Angela's chest was comforting and calming. She felt like a child clinging to her mother knowing that the closeness would make everything all right again. She closed her eyes enjoying this brief reprieve from Kerri's hostility then abruptly pulled away. "I'm going to miss you, Angela. Promise me that you'll call and let me know that you arrived safely?"

Angela tenderly touched Rachel's cheek, brushing away the tears. "I promise."

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Kerri looked in amazement at the conglomeration of buildings. "My, God!" she exclaimed. "I'd get lost in a heartbeat. How the hell can you drive in this city? How can you do anything without bumping into tons of people?" she asked as pedestrians hurried by bumping into them as they hurried to their destinations.

Rachel laughed. "Public transportation isn't so bad once you get used to it. As for driving, Angela does it all the time. She says you get used to it after awhile. But believe me, you won't get lost. At first, I was overwhelmed, too, but the magic of the city just made

me want to experience everything. I never even worried about getting lost. I know the pace is hectic, but I still manage to stop and smell the roses."

"But you met Angela your first day here so you had someone to help you get around," Kerri pointed out.

"Well, that's true," Rachel admitted. "But I didn't know I was going to meet her. Before I did, I had set out on my own exploration. And you won't have to worry either because you have me as your personal guide. Well, at least to and from the parts of the city I've become familiar with."

"Have you been to Greenwich Village?"

Rachel brightened. "No. I've been saving that for when you got here. It's on my list of things we're going to do this week. There are tons of places I haven't seen yet because I was waiting for you to get here so we can see them for the first time together." She was relieved that Kerri was finally talking.

Kerri looked at her with a puzzled expression on her face. She opened her mouth as though to say something then abruptly seemed to change her mind.

Rachel grabbed Kerri's hand giving it an affectionate squeeze. "Is there anything special you'd like to do right now? I have several things planned for this week, but we can do whatever you'd like. I'm just so happy you're here with me."

"Whatever you want to do is fine with me," Kerri distractedly answered not looking at Rachel but keeping her eyes riveted on the throngs of bustling people on the street.

"Well, we could take a walk through Central Park

or go for a horse drawn carriage ride. I've always wanted to do that," Rachel suggested.

"I don't think I'd feel comfortable walking through the park this time of night," Kerri uneasily replied.

"It's not that late."

Kerri looked at her and frowned. "I don't think it's a good idea."

"Okay. Then we'll have a romantic ride in a horse drawn carriage."

"If that's what you want to do."

"Kerri, I want you to have a good time." She was talking to a stranger not someone she'd spent two years of her life with. This person standing next to her was not the woman she'd left behind in Wilson Point.. That woman had been her best friend, lover and confidante. Kerri was acting as though they had just met and it was a bad first date. She stared at Kerri, but could read nothing in her stony expression. What was she thinking? How long was she intending to punish her? "Kerri, what's wrong? Please talk to me. You're so distant," Rachel pleaded. "I'm sorry for everything I've done to make you feel shut out of my life. I want everything to be perfect for you." She blinked back hot tears. "What can I do? Just tell me and I'll do it."

Kerri met her eyes. "I'm sorry. I don't mean to be distant," she quietly answered. "I've got a lot on my mind. This term has been difficult and I've taken on a couple more tutoring assignments. I guess the nap wasn't long enough. I'm still exhausted." She posted a phony smile on her face. "This city is so unreal. Too many people and buildings all meshed in together.

There's no breathing room. I'm afraid this city would suffocate me in no time at all. I'm a country girl at heart and I need wide open spaces and grass beneath my feet, not concrete."

Rachel grinned. "There are plenty of parks and neighborhoods with grass and trees. Look at my apartment."

"It's too close to other homes. There isn't much privacy."

"It's not that close. Besides, it cuts down on maintenance," Rachel said nonchalantly trying to lighten the mood.

Kerri grimaced. "The pace is too hurried here. I could never get used to this."

"What are you really saying, Kerri?" Rachel was afraid to ask the question, but knew that she had to. She pushed an errant strand of blond hair from her brow.

"I think you already know."

A pained look crossed Kerri's face. Rachel's heart sank. "I'm not sure what I know anymore, but I hope what I'm thinking is not what you mean."

Kerri stopped suddenly and stood in the middle of the sidewalk looking pointedly at Rachel as people hurried by them. "This is not the proper place to discuss it, but we need to talk."

"Let's go back to the apartment and we can talk." As Rachel hailed a taxi, an icy foreboding enveloped her. Her heart was frozen in her chest. She prayed that she'd find the sudden wisdom and words to bring the old Kerri back to her.



## CHAPTER TWELVE

**K**erri sat on the sofa with her head propped in her hands looking up at Rachel who was standing in front of her. Her eyes briefly glanced past Rachel to the fire crackling in the fireplace. "This isn't easy for me to say."

Rachel knelt down in front of her and took her hands holding them tightly as though she were holding on for dear life. Maybe she was. "Kerri, give it a chance. You've only been here for a few hours. I have so much to show you. I'll show you the trees and grass and the wide-open spaces. Just give me a chance. Monday, I want you to come to work with me. My job isn't very glamorous, but you'll be surprised at some of the clients that come in and out. Wait until you see the place. It'll blow you away. Please talk to me," Rachel pleaded. "What can I do to make everything right?"

"I shouldn't have come here, Rachel." She peered into Rachel's eyes.

"Kerri, please don't say that. Tell me what I can do to make things right between us again. Please?"

"It's too late for that now, Rachel," Kerri whispered. "I'm sorry. Too much has happened and

nothing we once shared can ever be the same."

"No, I don't buy that for one minute," Rachel choked. "I love you and I'll do whatever it takes to set things right. Just please tell me what I can do. I don't want to lose you. You're my soul mate."

Kerri sighed heavily as her eyes drifted again to the fire. "You love it here. I can see it in your eyes. This is you. This is everything you've ever wanted." Her eyes swept around the room. "You've got a beautiful apartment, a good job, and at least one very close friend."

"I'd give it all up for you, Kerri," she cried. "None of this means anything without you. I didn't realize how much I missed and truly needed you until I saw you standing in my doorway. God, why won't you touch me? I ache for you!"

"That's what we need to talk about." Her eyebrows knitted closely together. "So much has changed between us."

Rachel felt hot tears forming behind her eyelids. "I'll give it all up and go home with you if that's what you want. I mean it, Kerri."

Kerri shook her head. "What about what you want? In a week, a month, or six months you'd only become miserable and restless again and want to move. You aren't happy in Wilson Point and you never will be. It wouldn't be fair for me to have you relinquish your happiness for mine. It wouldn't work. In a relationship two people need to both be happy. Just like you can't expect me to relinquish my happiness to move here just to make you happy. I'd be like a fish out of water in this city. Do you

understand what I'm trying to say?"

"No, I promise. I'll force myself to be happy."

Kerri laughed weakly. "What good is it if you have to force yourself to be happy, but really aren't? That's no way to live. Look me in the eye and tell me honestly that you wouldn't miss all of this if you came back home." Her eyes bore into Rachel's.

"Maybe I would miss it, but the point is that you are more important to me. I would miss you more, Kerri."

"You're only kidding yourself. You'd grow to resent me and maybe even someday blame me for your unhappiness. If not outwardly you'd still be seething inside."

Rachel scrambled to her feet and tugged at Kerri's hands. "Come on, let me show you how much I need you. It's been so long...too long. Make love to me, please!" she pleaded.

Kerri pulled her hands free. "No, Rachel, I can't."

Rachel's breath caught in her throat. "Why not?" she sobbed. "Please make love to me, Kerri." A tear slid down her cheek.

"Have you forgotten that we are no longer a couple?" Kerri's voice was firm, but not unkind.

"Don't say that! We never broke up!"

"Didn't we? I'm not going to rehash what happened. All I know is I waited night after night for you to call, but you didn't. When I took off my ring it was over." She swallowed hard. "I thought my life was over. You'll never know the hell I went through."

"I'm sorry," Rachel moaned. "Everything is my fault and I'm not denying that. I was a fool. I didn't

think when you removed your ring that you honestly in your heart believed it was over between us. We never said it."

"At first I didn't want to believe it, but when you didn't call and seemed to happily settle into your new life I had to face the truth." She sighed. "I remembered what I said to you that day...right before you went inside and boarded the bus. I assumed that you took me at my word and that I was history."

"The truth is that I love you. Doesn't that matter at all to you?"

"Rachel, I loved you more than I thought it possible to love someone," she quietly replied.

"And you don't now? I can make you love me again the way you used to," she choked. "It'll be even better this time. You'll see. People just don't fall in and out of love that easily."

"No, they don't. Rachel, please don't do this to yourself." Kerri ran a shaky hand through her short hair. "I'll spare you the details. I didn't want to tell you over the phone. You deserve to hear it from me face to face."

"Are you sick?" Rachel worriedly asked.

"No." She hesitated briefly. "I never expected for it to happen and I certainly wasn't looking for it."

"What?" Rachel demanded.

"I met someone. I was so lost and lonely. We talked for hours one night. She wants all the same things I do out of life."

"What are you saying?"

"God, Rachel, please don't make this any harder than it is."

"Have you cheated on me? Is that what you're trying to tell me? If you did, we'll get through it. We can go to counseling. I'll try to understand."

"There's nothing to understand. I didn't cheat on you," Kerri said bluntly.

"But you just said —"

Kerri sighed in frustration. "We were no longer a couple. The rare times we did speak on the phone I knew it was over." Her voice softened. "Night after night I cried myself to sleep until I just couldn't take the emptiness any longer. I knew in my heart that it was over between us for good. We'd never be able to get back what we once had and I didn't want to face that. It ended when I took off my ring and you walked through that door and hopped onto that bus. Still I prayed that you'd change your mind and rush back to me. But you didn't. I had to accept the fact that you'd moved on without me."

"Why didn't you call me? Why didn't you tell me how you were feeling?"

"Why? You knew how I felt. All we did was argue the rare times we did try to have a decent conversation. You didn't want to come home and I didn't want to come here. Besides, you didn't exactly rush to the phone to see how I was handling everything. I felt abandoned by you."

"Kerri, you had a one night stand. It doesn't have to be the end of the world. We'll get through it together. I won't lose you over it. I don't want to lose you."

"It wasn't a one night stand," Kerri quietly said. "You need to understand that. It means more to me

and goes way beyond sex.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I told you that I met someone. We didn’t have a one-night stand. I fell in love with her. I never expected it to happen but it did. We’re a couple. I want to spend the rest of my life with her.”

“No!” Rachel cried. “I know you, Kerri. I know what we had together. We can get what we had back again.” Tears splashed down her cheeks.

Kerri slowly shook her head back and forth. “No, Rachel. I don’t love you like that any longer. You’ll always have a special place in my heart, but we can never be anything more than friends. I’m committed to someone else now.”

“No, Kerri, I won’t accept that.” Rachel didn’t care that she was humbling herself. She had no pride left. All she cared about was being with Kerri again. She wanted to feel Kerri’s hands softly moving over her body setting her on fire. She wanted to feel Kerri’s tongue caressing her clit as she brought her to the edge and back again. She’d fight for her. She couldn’t lose her.

“You have to accept it, Rachel.” She looked pointedly at Rachel. “I never believed in destiny, but since I met Bonnie I’ve changed my opinion. This is the way it’s supposed to be. I don’t think you and I were ever destined to be together, but with Bonnie, I feel like she and I are. I wish I could explain it so you’d understand how I feel, but I can’t.”

“So, her name is Bonnie?” Rachel drew a shuddering breath. “This destiny stuff doesn’t make any sense. It sounds like you never truly loved me

then, not the way I love you," she said with her voice quivering helplessly.

"Yes, her name is Bonnie and under any other circumstances I think you'd like her. Right now I don't expect you to be happy for me, but I hope someday you will be."

"So you believe that in the end you and Bonnie are supposed to be together?" She stared at Kerri's sensuous mouth, the mouth that had brought her so much pleasure now giving that pleasure to another woman. How could that mouth she loved so much betray her? How could Kerri give herself so freely to another woman?

"I know it sounds crazy, but that is exactly how I feel."

"If I wouldn't have come here then you would have dumped me anyway. Is that what you're telling me?"

Kerri frowned. "We can't be certain that we would have stayed together after I finished school. We would have still argued because we want different things out of life." She threw her arms up. "You enjoy this hectic pace of life with all the hustle and bustle of the city, but that's not me. I'd be like a fish out of water here. I love the country and wide open spaces." Her eyes misted. "Rachel, I hope that someday you can be as happy as I am. The reason I came here was because Bonnie felt I owed it to you to see you in person and tell you about us. She's kind, trusting, and caring."

"So do I know this Bonnie? How did you two hook up?" Rachel sniffed.

"That's not important. What is important is that someday you'll look back on this part of your life and realize that you and I were not destined to be together. We shared something beautiful together and that's the part I'll always remember and treasure. We were never a mistake." She walked over to Rachel and patted her shoulder. "Haven't you given Angela a second look? Tell me the truth. Have you ever thought about her as more than a friend?"

"Of course not! We're just good friends," Rachel angrily retorted. "I resent your implication."

Kerri placed a hand on Rachel's chin and tilted her head until Rachel's eyes were level with her own. "I saw the way she looks at you," she softly said. "Don't tell me that you never noticed."

"She's only being a concerned friend. She knows how lonely and upset I've been about our shaky relationship. That's the only way I've ever seen her look at me...as a friend and nothing else."

"She's a beautiful woman, Rachel, and she's got the hots for you."

"You're only saying that to ease your own conscience," Rachel said her voice rising slightly.

"My conscience is clear, Rae. It's not like I went looking for someone the day you left. You'll never know my suffering, but the suffering is over for me and it can be over for you, too. Now's your chance to find true happiness and contentment with a woman who shares all of the same qualities and values as you." She squeezed Rachel's shoulder. "I'm telling you the truth. You're too damned blind to see what's right in front of you. Angela has feelings for you that



go way beyond just friendship. Let her know you're interested."

Rachel wiped her eyes. Kerri was trying to pacify her, would say anything to justify her betrayal, but to assume that Angela had any feelings other than friendship for her was going too far, and angered her. She stood back from Kerri shaking with rage. "How dare you accuse me of sinking to your level!" she lashed out. She hadn't even realized that her sorrow had suddenly turned to anger, anger so red and hot that her eyes blazed.

Kerri winced. "You're hurt and angry right now, Rae, and that's understandable, but it doesn't change the fact of what I saw in Angela's eyes when she looked at you. It definitely wasn't the way a friend looks at a friend. She's special, Rae. She cares too much about you to act on those feelings when she obviously knows you planned a happy reunion for the two of us." Her eyes grew bright. "You obviously have feelings for her, too, Rae but you're too stubborn to admit it. She has class. Don't let her go or you may live to regret it."

"I can't believe my ears. Why are you saying these things, which obviously have no truth in them? I never looked at Angela or any other woman that way. Fidelity is something I treasure in myself and thought I could trust in you," she snapped.

"I also believe in fidelity, Rae. You know that. I didn't cheat on you. I never cheated on you."

Rachel's eyes burned. "I never thought you of all people, Kerri Tabor, would ever hurt me like this." She trembled, and then once again broke into tears.

Her body shook with sobs. "How could you hurt me like this?" she moaned. "I love you, Kerri! I don't deserve this."

Kerri hugged her. "I'd never intentionally hurt you. Can't you see that? I was hurt. We were finished and it took me a long time to accept that fact. Can you honestly tell me that for all these weeks you sat home alone every night waiting for the phone to ring?"

"No," she answered through muffled sobs, "but I wasn't doing anything wrong."

"I stayed home night after night until one night I couldn't bear it any longer. The phone never rang and I knew it wasn't going to."

"I called and asked you to come here."

"To try to convince me to move here. Rae, it is a beautiful city, but it's not for me. Enjoy it with someone who loves it as much as you already do."

Rachel pushed Kerri away from her. "I've made such a fool out of myself," she sniffed.

"No, you haven't," Kerri said softly. "Call Angela. She cares about you more than you know." Kerri eyed her sharply. "I'm right, Rae. Maybe you don't believe me right now, but someday you'll see."

"You're wrong, Kerri. Angela doesn't care about me like that."

"I'm going to call the airport and see if I can get a flight home tonight."

Rachel numbly nodded. Her heart was bleeding and nothing would fill the gaping hole in her chest. She sat stiffly on the sofa watching as though in slow motion as Kerri made her phone call to the airport and another one for a taxi and then carried her

suitcase to the door. Kerri stood silently by the front door and Rachel stayed frozen to the sofa neither of them speaking.

When the taxi finally honked, Kerri turned to Rachel. "I'm sorry, Rae, but you'll see that this is for the best. Angela cares for you. Go to her. You'll regret it if you don't."

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Rachel threw herself across her bed. This was where Kerri and she were supposed to be together right now making hot passionate love. Now she was alone...totally alone. There were no more anxious moments waiting for Kerri to arrive. It was over. Kerri had said so and there was nothing she could do about it. She'd lost her. Kerri was dead to her and she didn't know how she'd get over the loss. Her heart ripped into a million pieces with the pain almost unbearable.

The scent of Kerri still permeated the room and the bed where she'd briefly lain that afternoon. Sobs caught in her throat. How could Kerri hurt her like this? It hadn't been over. Kerri was the one who'd decided it was. Now she had someone new. Rachel knew by the look in Kerri's eyes that she was in love. It was the same way Kerri used to look at her.

The phone rang and she quickly blew her nose and swiped at her eyes. Maybe Kerri was calling to say that she'd made a mistake and wanted Rachel after all. She grabbed the receiver.

"Hey, I made it all in one piece," Angela's bubbly voice said.

"Good," Rachel sniffed.

"I don't want to keep you from your romantic evening, but I did promise to call."

"I'm glad you did, Angela," Rachel said through trembling lips.

"Rachel, what's wrong? Are you crying?" Angela worriedly asked.

Rachel tried to control her wobbly voice. "Kerri left," she sobbed. "It's over."

"What happened?"

"She only came to see me to tell me that she's found someone else." She couldn't control the tears splashing down her face and splattering the receiver.

"Oh God, I'm so sorry. I hate for you being alone right now. I wish I was there."

"Me, too. I don't know what to do, Angela," she cried. "I can't believe this really happened. I'm so confused."

"What did she say?"

"Just that when I left Wilson Point so quickly and then rarely called, she knew there was nothing left between us. She wouldn't listen to my explanation. I want her back," she sobbed.

Angela sighed heavily. "Please don't take this the wrong way, Rachel, but put yourself in Kerri's shoes. You did leave her hanging all this time. What did you expect her to do, honey?"

Angela's words even though not spoken harshly stung Rachel. "I know it's all my fault. You don't need to remind me. What I need now is an understanding friend not someone telling me I told you so." Even through her tears, her voice was cool.

"I'm sorry if I gave you that impression. I am your friend. I'm only trying to look at this objectively," Angela softly said. "I care about your feelings and I wish there was something I could say or do to ease your pain."

"It doesn't matter now...it's over."

"Why don't you take a long hot bath and go to bed early?" Angela suggested.

Rachel looked at the bed. The last thing she wanted to do was sleep on this bed alone tonight. "I feel like getting drunk."

Angela laughed. "You're not much of a drinker, but if it'll make you feel better, pop open a bottle of wine."

Rachel sighed dejectedly. "I think I'll go to The Barstel and drown my sorrows. I don't want to be alone tonight."

"Please don't do that. It's late. Don't go out alone. Wait until I get home," Angela nervously said. "We'll sit down and talk everything through."

"It's not that late."

"It will be by the time you get there."

Rachel shrugged her shoulders. "I need to get out of here. Don't worry about me; I'm a big girl and I can take care of myself."

"Rachel, you're scaring me. Damn I wish I could get the next plane back, but I can't. I have to stay."

"I know. Besides, I didn't ask you to come back. I'll be fine. I can't keep depending on others to take care of me."

"I never meant to imply that you couldn't take care of yourself. I'm just worried about you. I'm your

friend and friends worry.”

“Well don’t.” Rachel was still hurt by Angela’s obvious siding with Kerri.

“I still wish you wouldn’t go alone. Please don’t.”

“What am I supposed to do? Wait a week for you to come home?” Rachel asked sharply.

“I have no right to ask you to do that. Just be careful. I’ll call you later,” Angela promised.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Rachel looked around the smoky crowded room of The Barstel. She was uncomfortable. Tonight she was here all alone. There would be no Angela rushing through the door to meet her. There would be no intimate conversations here with Kerri as she had planned. She made her way to the bar. She climbed onto a barstool and ordered a whiskey sour. She took a sip and the liquid immediately burned her throat. She was only used to wine and beer and had never cared much for anything stronger, but tonight she needed a quick release from her pain and the sooner the better.

The music pounded in her ears, but she was grateful for it, because it interfered with her being able to think. There really was nothing to think about. She needed to concentrate on alleviating the throbbing pain in her chest. She finished her drink and quickly ordered another. She kept her back to the room and her eyes focused on the bottles behind the bar appearing to be deeply intrigued by them.

"Waiting for Angela?"

She turned her head. Jaylene propped herself on the stool next to hers.



"No, she's out of town on business," Rachel replied wishing Jaylene would go away. She wasn't in the mood for company. She'd just lost her lover and her best friend hadn't offered her sympathy she felt was warranted. She was crushed and Jaylene was the last person she felt like talking to tonight.

Jaylene peered into her face. "No offense, but you look like hell. Have you been crying? Your eyes are all red and puffy."

Rachel shrugged her shoulders hating Jaylene's bluntness. Why didn't the woman take a hint and find someone else to talk to?

"Do you want to talk about it? I'm a good listener." Her voice was low and quiet.

"Not really." She wasn't about to bare her soul to Jaylene especially after what Jaylene had done to Angela.

"Mind if I sit here?"

"Suit yourself," Rachel answered distractedly.

"So, did you and Ang have a disagreement?"

"I told you I don't want to talk about it," Rachel firmly replied. "But no, Angela and I did not have a disagreement. Besides we are only friends." She watched Jaylene's eyebrows shoot up in surprise.

"Oh? Could have fooled me. I thought you two were a hot item." She grinned.

"Well you thought wrong. We've never been anything more than friends and never will be."

"It never looked that way to me. I saw how cozy you two looked always in your own private world laughing and talking. You two are always in here together. So what was a girl to think?"

"Look, Jaylene, I don't mean to be rude but I'm not in the mood for company tonight. I just want to be left alone."

"How about if I just sit here quietly? I promise not to say a word." She smiled broadly. "I promise to be as quiet as a mouse."

Rachel nodded and then finished her drink. Before she could order another, Jaylene had ordered one for her. True to her word, Jaylene sat silently, but her dark eyes were fixed on Rachel.

Finally in exasperation Rachel spoke. "Why don't I ever see you in here with anyone?"

She nonchalantly shrugged her broad shoulders. "I haven't met anyone I care to be with. I'm waiting for that special woman to someday walk through that door," she said pointing her beer bottle in the direction of the door. "Until she does, I'm free and single."

Rachel studied the attractive woman. As usual, Jaylene was clad all in black with a gold chain around her neck. Rachel bet that hidden underneath that leather jacket were arms heavily tattooed. Jaylene was cocky and abrasive, but Rachel sensed a softer side to her.

"What about you? I mean since you said you and Angela aren't a couple."

"I had someone, but it's over now." She bit her bottom lip to keep it from trembling or worse yet to prevent bursting out in tears in front of Jaylene.

"It must be recent. That explains your red eyes."

Rachel nodded. "It just happened. Now you can see why I'm not in the mood for company." She

sipped at her drink.

"I'm sorry. I won't give you all the usual clichés. Everyone heals differently and in his or her own way and time."

"Thank you."

"Do you want to talk about it? I promise not to be judgmental. I know what that's like."

"No," she started to say, but when she saw the genuine concern on Jaylene's face, she began to pour out all of her pent up emotions. She felt like a dam had burst within her.

Jaylene sat silently as Rachel talked about the first day she met Kerri up to Kerri's heading back to the airport. The only time Jaylene spoke was to replenish their drinks. True to her word, she wasn't judgmental, but listened sympathetically.

When the bartender announced last call, Rachel was surprised at how quickly the time had sped by. She'd talked for hours pouring out her heart and soul to this stranger, only now Jaylene didn't seem like such a stranger.

"I'd better get home," she said. Her tongue felt thick and her voice didn't sound like her own. She knew that the whiskey was taking hold of her.

"Let me help you," Jaylene offered.

"No. You've done enough. I must have bored you to tears. Thanks for the drinks and for listening to me." Her words came out slow and slightly slurred.

"I think you'll change your mind once you step off that stool," Jaylene said knowingly.

Rachel placed her hands on the bar and slowly slid off the stool. Her legs felt like jelly. She tried to

remove her hands from the bar but her legs refused to support her and buckled.

Jaylene's strong arm quickly came around her shoulder steadying her. "Let me give you a ride home."

Rachel wanted to protest, but the room began to spin and she would have collapsed to the floor if Jaylene hadn't been there to steady her.

"Come on," Jaylene said holding her firmly by the shoulders and guiding her to the exit.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Jaylene eased Rachel onto the bed and gently laid her head against the pillows, then removed Rachel's shoes.

"Are you going to be okay?"

"I don't know. If this damned room would stay still long enough for me to focus." She closed her eyes, but it didn't seem to help only making her stomach violently lurch. "I feel so sick!"

Jaylene laughed. "It will eventually quit spinning. I promise."

The phone rang, but Rachel didn't care. Right now, the way she felt, she didn't care about anything except getting rid of the burning in the pit of her stomach. Maybe that would make the room stop spinning. She quickly covered her mouth, knowing she was going to throw up. Even though violent upheavals raced through her body, searing its way up her throat, her stomach refused to let go of its contents.

"You've got dry heaves. Those are worse than actually throwing up." Jaylene handed her the wastebasket. "Just in case." She winked.

The phone rang, but Rachel didn't move.

Jaylene picked up the receiver.

"Rachel, thank God you're home! Are you all right? I've called at least a dozen times. I've been worried sick about you."

"It's not Rachel. It's Jaylene, but Rachel's home and safely tucked into bed. She had a little bit too much to drink tonight."

"Keep your filthy hands off her, Jaylene," Angela warned. "If you hurt her I swear I'll —"

"You'll do what?" Jaylene taunted. "She's the one who let me bring her home. Why do you care anyway? According to Rachel, she's free and single. She needed a friend tonight and guess what? I was there and you weren't."

"Dammit, Jaylene. Rachel knows I'm out of town on business. I would have been there for her if I could have been. You don't know what she's been through. Don't take advantage of her in her condition."

"She told me everything. Sounds like you didn't offer her much in the way of friendly support in her time of need. What kind of friend are you, Angela?"

"Just stay away from her. She's too good for you. I swear if you hurt her in any way —"

"You'll what? Your idle threats don't scare me, Angela." Jaylene laughed. "Don't hurry home, Ang, on Rachel's account. You're not needed around here." She noiselessly placed the phone in its cradle.

"Who was that?" Rachel mumbled.

"Nobody important. Just a wrong number," Jaylene replied as she took a cool washcloth and laid it over Rachel's eyes. "Try to rest. You'll feel better in the morning."

"I hope so," Rachel moaned.

"I promise you will. Now try to get some rest," she said.

In the morning, Rachel opened her eyes to a harsh bright sunlight streaming into her room making her quickly shut them again. Her head throbbed dully feeling twice its normal size.

Jaylene tiptoed into the room carrying a tall glass. "Here. Drink this. It'll make you feel better."

Rachel tried to sit up. "Oh my head," she moaned. Her hands shook as she reached for the glass.

"Let me hold it for you."

"What is it?" Rachel grimaced at the strange looking concoction. Her stomach was still queasy and looking at this strange mixture made her feel even worse.

"Just my own invention. It's guaranteed to cure any hangover. Drink up. I promise it'll make you feel like your old self in no time."

Rachel hesitantly sipped at the drink, shuddering at the taste. "It's terrible!"

"Come on. Drink all of it," Jaylene prodded.

When Rachel succeeded in finally draining the glass, Jaylene set it on the night side table.

"Thank you for helping me out last night."

"No thanks necessary. You were a friend in need and I'm just thankful that I was there."

"Me, too. I don't know what would have happened to me if you weren't."

"Well, I was so we needn't worry about the what-ifs."

Rachel agreed. "Where did you sleep last night?"

Jaylene grinned. "On your sofa. It's not too bad," she teased. "A little bit lumpy here and there but I managed." She stretched her long arms. "Do you mind if I grab a shower?"

"No, of course not." Rachel laid her head back against the pillows. She hoped that Jaylene's concoction would soon kick in. Her eyes were heavy and still refused to focus to their full capacity. Her head continued to pound, but at least her stomach felt slightly better, but sore after she'd spent most of the night combating dry heaves. The only bright side to her physical discomfort was that she felt too rotten to think about Kerri or much of anything for that matter. All she wanted to do was sleep. She closed her eyes and was drifting off when the ringing of the telephone jangled her nerves searing into her pulsating temples. "Damn," she mumbled. She heard the shower and knew that Jaylene wouldn't hear the phone. She didn't want to pick it up. It suddenly stopped. She waited for the answering machine to pick up, but whoever was on the other end of the line didn't leave a message. She sighed heavily, but then it rang again. She had to stop the incessant ringing. If she didn't answer it would probably continue until she did.

She groaned as she reached for the phone. It slid from her hand and she quickly retrieved it.

"Rachel, is that you?" Angela anxiously asked. "Are you all right?"

"Yes. Sorry, I dropped the phone."

"You sound awful. You must have really tied one on last night."



"My first and last time," Rachel pledged.

"I'm relieved that you got home okay." She hesitated briefly. "Rachel, this might not be the proper time, but there's something I need to tell you."

Jaylene stepped into the room with a towel draped around her body. Rachel's eyes traveled to the firm and muscular legs then to Jaylene's bare arms. Two small tattoos adorned Jaylene's wide shoulders. Both were of small birds. Rachel squinted, but couldn't make them out.

Jaylene saw where Rachel's eyes had rested and moved closer. "They're love birds," she said with a grin. "I'm going to get a big one across my back."

"Rachel! Are you still there?" Angela's voice called.

"I'm sorry. Jaylene was just telling me about her tattoos."

"Jaylene's there?"

"She just got out of the shower," she explained. "I don't know what she fixed for my hangover, but I'm feeling better than I was a little while ago." She smiled at Jaylene.

"She spent the night then?" Angela's voice grew quiet.

"Yes. If it weren't for her, I don't know how I would have gotten through the night. She was a lifesaver."

"I...I'll let you get back to what you were doing. I was just worried about you. Goodbye."

"Angela, wait!" Rachel heard the dial tone in her ear.

"How's Angela doing?" Jaylene asked.

Rachel's eyebrows drew together. "She didn't

sound like herself. Maybe I should call her back. She wanted to tell me something. She sounded upset."

"Why call her back?"

"I'm concerned about her."

"She wasn't concerned about you last night," Jaylene quickly reminded her. "You even told me that."

"I probably misinterpreted what she said considering I wasn't exactly in a very stable emotional state when I talked to her. After all, what was she supposed to do? If she was home she would have been here in a flash."

"Don't count on it."

Rachel's eyes narrowed. "I think I know her well enough to know that she would have been," she said defensively. "She's a good friend."

Jaylene sat on the edge of the bed. "But she wasn't here and I was." She took a strand of Rachel's tousled hair and ran it through her fingertips. "Any woman in her right mind would give her eye teeth to be with you."

Rachel grew uncomfortable with Jaylene's close presence. She put her hand on Jaylene's and gently tugged it away from her hair. "I don't know about that, but even so I can't have the woman I want."

"Kerri?"

Rachel nodded. "After everything sinks in and I can sort it all out maybe I'll be able to understand what she was telling me."

"And in the meantime?"

"I'll take things slow and try to heal. That's all I can do."

"I'd like to help you if you'll let me." Jaylene moved closer letting the towel drop from her body exposing her firm round breasts. "I can help you to forget all about Kerri."

Jaylene's breasts were much smaller than Rachel thought they would be, but since Jaylene was always clad in her leather jacket, she'd never seen much of her form. She looked into Jaylene's eyes and realized that she didn't care what Jaylene's body looked like clothed or unclothed. She wasn't interested plain and simple.

Jaylene's eyes smoldered with lust as she moved even closer her naked breasts seductively brushing up against Rachel's arm.

Rachel stiffened.

"What's the matter? I can help you forget all about everything." Her voice was low and husky. "I can make you feel good again," she whispered running a fingertip over Rachel's arm.

"No."

Jaylene smiled. "I can tell by the way you're looking at me that you really mean yes." Her finger moved to Rachel's cheek, down her neck and to her chest where it lingered lazily between her breasts.

Rachel roughly grabbed her hand. "When I say no I mean no." Her eyes sparkled. "You'd better go."

Jaylene sat staring intently at her, but made no effort to move. "Why?"

"Because if all you're trying to do is get me into bed it's not going to work."

"What do you want? Flowers and candy? Do you want to be courted? Come on, I like you, Rachel, and I

can tell that you like me, too."

"I need a lot more than liking someone before I sleep with her."

She laughed. "Come on. Are you telling me that you're just an old-fashioned country girl? I don't buy that."

"What if I am?"

"Then maybe it's time you changed."

"I don't want to change. I value my morals and integrity."

"Ah, what you mean is that you have the hots for Angela. Is that it?"

"That's not what I mean, but since you brought Angela's name up, tell me the truth about your involvement in Karen and Angela's relationship. I want to know what happened."

"I'm sure Angela has already filled you in with her twisted version."

"Tell me your version," she demanded. "I want to hear it from you what really happened."

Jaylene ran a hand through her short wet hair making it spike up. "Karen and I were attracted to one another and we acted on our feelings. There's nothing more to tell. It's all in the past."

"How could you do that to Angela?"

Jaylene let her breath out in a rush. "Karen wasn't exactly an unwilling partner. I gave her what she craved. Obviously Angela wasn't satisfying her in that department or she wouldn't have come panting to me," Jaylene said defensively.

"Did you love her?"

She squinted. "No. It was never about love with us."

We just filled one another's sexual needs. There's nothing wrong with that," she said pointedly.

"There is when the people involved are in a relationship with someone else. It's not morally right. Angela was your friend."

Jaylene shrugged. "That's a matter of opinion besides it was Karen's decision to start something with me."

"You were also involved with someone."

"Yes, but she was too needy. She suffocated me."

"Why did you ask Karen to move in with you if you didn't love her?"

"What is this...the third degree. I feel like I'm on trial. Let's knock off the questions and get down to business."

"Answer my question."

Jaylene rolled her eyes. "Karen had no where else to go. I'm not so cold-hearted that I'd see her living on the streets. She wanted to stay with Angela, but Angela has this crazy notion that once a cheat always a cheat. She doesn't give second chances."

"Why should she?" Rachel's cheeks burned. "They'd been together for years. If I were in her situation I would have reacted the same way Angela did."

A puzzled expression crossed Jaylene's face. "That's not what you said last night. You were pining for Kerri after you told me she'd cheated on you."

"My situation is entirely different."

"How so?"

"Kerri believed that we were broken up."

"Even if that were the case, you were willing to

take her back. Wouldn't it have bothered you even just a little knowing she'd slept with someone else?"

She took a deep breath. "Yes, once I cleared my head enough to really think about it, it definitely would have caused problems in our relationship. I suppose I would have wondered about her and the other woman and if it had meant more to her than she was saying. But none of that matters now because she has moved ahead and is building something with this woman. So whatever I think here on in is moot."

"So now that you've thought about it just a little you're saying that it will be easier to get over her?"

"No, it's never easy to get over someone who shared so much of who you are. I'm hurt, but I have to look at everything objectively. Last night I was too emotional to even think straight. My heart was broken and all I wanted to do was escape the crushing pain. Kerri has moved on and I have to accept that she will no longer be a part of my life. Deep down I'm crushed because she did sleep with someone else so I intend to spend the day trying to put myself in Kerri's shoes as Angela suggested last night I do. I couldn't think straight last night, but now my mind isn't so foggy."

Jaylene shook her head back and forth. "Angela again. It always comes back to her. What is it about her that makes you constantly defend her?"

"I wasn't fair to her. I don't know what I expected her to do. I was acting like a selfish spoiled child and I had no right to jump down her throat." She picked up the phone.

Jaylene gently placed her hand over Rachel's.

"Don't call her. You and I can start something special together and make our own memories. We'll forget all about Kerri and Angela and just concentrate on ourselves." Her eyes turned sultry. "I want you, Rachel. I wanted you the first time I saw you at The Barstel."

"For how long would you want me, Jaylene? Maybe for a few romps in the sack until someone new comes along? Could you offer me total fidelity and honesty? Can you offer me a future?"

"How do you know how you'll feel in a year from now?" Jaylene countered. "People change."

"Yes, they do and some not for the better," she replied sharply. "I know that when I'm with someone I want and hope it will be forever. Sometimes things do happen to prevent that, but the bottom line is that I enter into a relationship with the proper expectations. I couldn't be with that person if I didn't feel love in my heart for her. I won't be a one-night stand for anyone. I want true love. I want the woman I'm with to only have eyes for me and not be scanning the room for a new conquest every time we go out."

Jaylene chuckled. "You don't know what you're missing. Experience isn't a crime. Neither are harmless flings."

"I don't need experience, Jaylene. When I'm with someone I'm totally in love with all our lovemaking comes from the heart and all the experience in the world can't come close to exploring and learning together. That's what being in love is all about. I don't think you've ever experienced that and I feel sorry for you."

"One night with me and you'll be begging me for more," Jaylene boasted. "I'm deadly serious. Why do you think women want to be with me?"

"Luckily I'll never find out. Where are all of those women who want you so badly? Go get one of them. The funny thing is that every time I've seen you at The Barstel I've never seen anyone swarming all over you. You only prey on those you can't have. It's all a game to you." Her eyes narrowed angrily. "Please get dressed and leave."

Jaylene stood up and let the towel fall from her body. "You're making a big mistake. Tell me you're not tempted."

"I'm not." Rachel looked away in disgust.



## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

All week Rachel left messages for Angela, but Angela never returned her calls. She threw herself into her work even volunteering for extra hours just to avoid coming home to her lonely apartment. Each night she looked at Angela's darkened windows her own heart feeling as empty as Angela's home was. She missed her. She didn't realize how much until she couldn't get in touch with her. She was cut off from Angela's soft soothing voice.

She still mourned Kerri but it was different now. She'd had plenty of time to think. They had drifted apart long before Rachel had come to the city, but she'd been so wrapped up in her own life that it had never occurred to her that she was the one who had shut Kerri out. Then when she moved and after they'd been apart for weeks, she'd selfishly expected Kerri to leave her life behind to follow her without giving a thought to how Kerri really felt.

Kerri was right. Forcing her to live where she wasn't happy would have damaged their relationship just as her living in Wilson Point or even Buffalo to please Kerri would have. She wouldn't have been able to find true happiness there even if Kerri had

wanted her back. She'd become restless and miserable again and they'd be back to square one. They had broken up even before she'd left only she was too self-absorbed to see it. All this time she'd been holding on to something that no longer existed.

Destiny. Kerri had talked about destiny. Kerri was right about that, too. Rachel knew her destiny was here in New York. Her soul had tugged at her almost forcing her to come here. She'd never deny that she loved the city and wanted to spend the rest of her life here. She loved Kerri enough to finally let her go. She deserved everything good in life and Rachel prayed she'd get it. She was happy that Kerri had found someone who wanted the kind of life she did and prayed that they'd have a long beautiful life together. Kerri deserved it.

She sat in front of her crackling fire. Angela was coming home tonight. Her heart beat excitedly surprising her. She stared into the bright flames, but Angela's image invaded her mind. She missed Angela's beautiful smile, full lips, her long black hair, long slender legs, her soft comforting voice, her sparkling laughter and the warmth of her embraces. She sat for a few minutes pondering her emotions, knowing what they meant, but fearful of them at the same time.

She glanced at her wristwatch. Angela should be home in another hour allowing for traffic. She showered, and then selected a short black dress, which accented her curves and was cut low enough to tastefully show plenty of cleavage. She carefully applied her makeup, ran a brush through her blond

hair, and then dabbed a touch of perfume behind her ears and on her wrists. When she finished, she looked at her appearance in the mirror. She was pleased with the image smiling back at her.

Ten minutes later, she stood outside Angela's door. Angela was home! Her heart raced excitedly. The lamps glowing brightly inside cast a soft glow in the darkness outside her door. Rachel inhaled deeply trying to steady her frazzled nerves. Why was she so nervous? They'd had a misunderstanding. She'd set things right between them. Angela and she had spent countless hours together sometimes talking until the wee hours of the morning sharing all of their hopes and dreams for the future. But tonight was different. This was not just a friendly visit to apologize to her friend. Tonight Rachel's destiny was beckoning her. Everything she wanted was right behind that door. Her blinders were off and she was seeing clearly for the first time in a long time. She took another deep breath.

Her hand shook as she rang the bell.

Angela slowly opened the door.

Rachel's heart thumped uncontrollably at the sight of her. She watched as Angela's eyes swept over her with an approving look in her eyes. But she saw something else in those beautiful eyes. The painful haunted look was also there.

"Angela, I'm so glad you're home. I've been going crazy without you this week. Didn't you get my messages? I called so many times that the desk manager must have thought I was a stalker." She smiled anxiously.

"You look stunning," Angela said in a low voice.

"Thank you."

"Where's Jaylene?" Angela asked in a wounded voice.

Rachel frowned. "I don't know and I don't care."

Angela bit her bottom lip as her large eyes filled with tears. "I got your messages, but I couldn't bear to hear all about what you and Jaylene were doing. I'm sorry," she whispered. "I wasn't being a supportive friend."

"We need to talk, Angela. Can I please come in?"

Angela moved back and closed the door after Rachel was inside.

"Don't worry, I'm not going to say anything about Jaylene. And if you're worried about the apartment then don't be because everything will stay the same as it was."

"I don't want everything to stay the same."

"What do you want?" Angela asked in a shaky voice.

"Please, can we talk?"

Angela nodded and led her to the living room. Rachel sat on the sofa and Angela seated herself across from her. Rachel couldn't stand the haunted look in Angela's eyes. She wanted to chase all of that pain away and replace it with love and happiness. "Nothing happened between Jaylene and me and nothing ever will. She tried to get me as another notch in her belt but it didn't work."

"But I thought when I called the night I left and she answered the phone—"

"She lied to me. She told me it was a wrong

number."

"She spent the night with you," Angela said in a trembling voice.

"On the sofa. I was sick all night long and believe me, nothing would have happened even if I hadn't been sick. I never have been and I never will be attracted to Jaylene. After I talked to you that morning, I really took a long hard look at her. She's shallow and self-absorbed. She's not capable of caring for anyone's feelings except her own. She essentially admitted to me that she wanted me for a sexual fling until someone new came along. When I refused, she ridiculed me for my morals and values. I let her know in no uncertain terms how I felt about women like her and kicked her out. I haven't seen her since that morning and I hope I never do again." She saw a faint smile come to Angela's lips.

"How are you dealing with the breakup with Kerri?"

"I'm okay with it. Sometimes I think my head is as thick as a brick wall. Everything Kerri said was correct. We had broken up a long time ago, but I didn't want to face it. If we'd truly been meant to be together then I would have traveled to the ends of the world to be with her and she would have done the same for me. Neither of us wanted to see the gaping differences between us and if we saw any, we brushed them away too set in our ways to do anything about it at that time. I'm rambling and probably not making any sense."

"No, you're making perfect sense. I'm listening," Angela softly said.

"I see clearly now that Kerri and I weren't meant to be together. I'll never regret the wonderful times we did share together, though."

"You shouldn't," Angela agreed. "Just take all of those good lessons you learned into your next relationship and leave the bad behind."

"Kerri said something to me that made me think a lot this long lonely week without you."

"I'm glad you missed me. It's nice to be missed."

Rachel saw the light come back into her eyes. "You'll never know how much."

"What did Kerri say?"

"She told me to go after my destiny."

"You should."

"What were you going to tell me that morning, Angela?"

Angela's face flushed. "It doesn't matter now."

"It matters to me. Please tell me now."

Angela looked down at her tightly clenched hands. "I was going to tell you that my feelings ran deeper than friendship for you." She raised her eyes.

Rachel beamed. "Kerri told me that she'd seen something in your eyes when you looked at me. I saw that same look several times and just a little while ago when you answered the door." She kept her eyes fixed on Angela who'd turned a deep shade of red. "I was a fool, Angela, not to have understood what that look meant." She stood up and walked over to her pulling her to her feet.

Angela's eyes longingly searched hers.

"My heart knew I was in love with you all along, but I didn't know what to do with my feelings. I was

holding onto Kerri out of fear. I love you, Angela."

Rachel felt the shudder that rippled through Angela as Angela's arms reached around Rachel drawing her close. "I love you, too," she whispered. Her lips hungrily sought Rachel's.

Rachel's nerve endings came alive at Angela's touch. She pressed her body closer feeling Angela's hardened nipples against her chest.

Angela parted her lips allowing Rachel's tongue to slip inside. A soft moan escaped from Angela's throat as she wound her fingers through Rachel's hair.

Rachel thrust her pelvis tightly against Angela as her hands pressed longingly into her back. "Make love to me, Angela. I need you," she hoarsely whispered.

Angela led her to the rug in front of the fireplace. Her lips eagerly sought Rachel's again.

Rachel cupped Angela's large firm breasts in her hands becoming aroused at the heat penetrating through Angela's clothes. She wasted no time in removing Angela's clothes, their eyes fixed passionately on one another. Her breath caught in her throat at the sight of Angela's firm voluptuous body. Angela's breasts begged to be caressed and suckled. Rachel was only too pleased to oblige.

As Rachel's mouth moved from one breast to the other, Angela slowly removed Rachel's clothes stopping to explore the exposed flesh as each article dropped to the floor. Her gentle loving fingers traveled over Rachel's bare flesh setting her on fire. When Angela slipped a finger inside of Rachel's moist vagina, she screamed out with pleasure.

Angela gently pulled her down to the rug and laid down pulling Rachel on top of her as her lips met Rachel's again. Rachel pressed her clit to Angela's, softly swaying from side to side while Angela's hands gripped Rachel's buttocks pressing her even closer. Waves of ecstasy shot through Rachel's body. She was lost in Angela's love becoming one with her.

She screamed out again as her entire body shuddered then erupted in an explosive climax followed seconds later by Angela's release. Angela tenderly turned Rachel over until she was laying on her back then suckled Rachel's breasts as her fingers softly patted Rachel's still throbbing clit. Rachel arched her back, her clit begging for more as she rode Angela's fingers, forcing them deep inside of her. She dug her nails into Angela's back, then felt her warm mouth leave her breast and travel quickly to her waiting clit. Angela flicked her tongue back and forth, almost driving Rachel into a frenzy. Rachel raised her buttocks as Angela's mouth clamped over her clit, sucking hard.

Rachel moaned as Angela brought her to an explosive orgasm that rocked her body. Angela planted soft kisses on her inner thighs and tenderly caressed her body devouring every inch of her.

Rachel reached for Angela pulling her down on top of her as she sought Angela's moist lips. Angela shifted her body to an almost sitting position as her burning clit once again sought Rachel's.

They made love for hours then finally exhausted lay entwined in one another's arms.

"Please don't ever stop loving me," Rachel



whispered. "I love you so much."

Angela contentedly nuzzled her neck. "I could never stop loving you."

Rachel ran a slender finger between Angela's breasts. "Remind me to thank Kerri for forcing me to see my destiny."

Angela pushed Rachel's hair from her brow. "What do you think about renting out your apartment?"

Rachel smiled contentedly. "I never want to be away from you again."

"Never," Angela promised as she held Rachel tightly to her.

**THE END**

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kira Chase was born and raised in western New York State and moved to New Jersey several years ago. When she is not writing, Kira enjoys reading, hiking, gardening, cooking and traveling.