

Crystal's Heart

Crystal Sheridan - professional stripper, straight, alcoholic, drug user. Laura Taylor - professional writer, lesbian, obsessive tidier, control freak. Two women who have absolutely nothing in common and yet when they become improbable housemates, are amazed to find they can actually live with each other. And not only live. As Laura helps Crystal to come to terms with her traumatic past, romance blossoms between them. And the writer finds healing for her own wounds as Crystal recovers her life and shows Laura another side to love.

Part 1

The crowd became louder as the lights went down. Behind the curtain, Crystal double-checked the fittings on her peel-away outfit. She listened to the stage manager, Rick, welcome everyone and go through the list of women performing that evening. All were familiar names to her, having worked at the Tom Cat lounge for almost six months now. Two women dressed in skimpy costumes brushed past her to take their positions on stage. Crystal nodded and waited next to the center pole.

"And so, without further ado," Rick said, "Here are the Tom Cat Kittens starring the kitten of the month, Crystal Peaks!"

The crowd became louder as the lights went down. The curtain went up and the music began. Crystal wrapped her left calf around the pole, waiting for the right moment. The driving, sexy beat was designed to capture the carnal mood of the show and the blonde stripper knew how to use that mood to her advantage. As she gave her fake smile to the audience, her eyes scanned the tables nearest the stage. Experience had taught her well and Crystal was able to quickly pick out the prime candidates for tips. Facing the most promising prospect, a middle-aged man holding several bills in his hand, she gave him a wink and spun around the pole. The girls on either side of her did likewise and they fell into the oft performed routine. As the music changed, Crystal tugged on the corset, pulling it away from her body. Giving a false smile to the cheers, she shook and wiggled her breasts as she had so many times before. Keep looking, she thought to herself coldly. Look all you want, you'll never have it. She shimmied and shook, causing her oiled mounds to bounce and sway in time with the music.

Tonight, however, fate had other plans for the young stripper. As she moved along the *e.g.* of the stage, bending down to let the patrons stick money along her G-string, a large hand reached out and pulled her off the stage. Crystal found herself on the lap of a balding man, his hand still gripping her arm.

"I want a little more than shaking for my money, baby," he said lecherously, using his free hand to paw at her exposed breasts. His iron grip made it impossible for her to get away, forcing her to put up with the fondling until the bouncers arrived to remove the offending patron. As much as Crystal wanted a minute to recover, a glare from Rick forced her back upon the stage.

Several rows back, the waiter placed a drink on the table. "Will there be anything else?" he asked.

"I'm all set," the man said, turning towards his strikingly beautiful companion. "What about you, Laura?"

She held up her half-finished glass. "I'm still working on this one, Peter." She put her pen down on the notepad and smirked. "Remember, getting me drunk doesn't help your cause at all. Better to spend your money on Studley over there." She pointed at one of the bouncers.

"Oh yeah, fat chance of that," Peter replied. He ran his fingers through his thinning red hair and looked at the bouncer again. "You think he is?"

"Well

" Laura took another sip of her scotch and soda. "If he is, you'd better hope he's into receiving and not giving or you'll be sore little man tomorrow."

"Oh but for a man like that," Peter sighed, earning a chuckle from her. "And what about you?" He motioned with his eyes at the stage. "A set like those could smother you."

"Yeah but what a way to go." Laura finished her drink and motioned at the waiter. "Besides, that's not what we're here for."

"Yeah, yeah

I know you're just getting the layout right for the story. Jeez, you gonna pine away forever?"

"I'm not pining away," she said frostily. "I just don't think a stripper is exactly what I'm looking for in a mate, that's all."

"Who said anything about lifelong commitment? I'm talking you taking Miss Big Tits back to your place and rocking her world for the night." He leaned back and lit a cigarette. "Come on, Laura. You need more in your life than your computer and your stories. You gotta admit she's a good looking package."

"Thanks but no thanks, Peter. We're just here so I can get the details right." She sipped her drink, letting the liquid burn down her throat.

"It's your choice," he said, shaking his head. "Nothing wrong with a little tumble in the hay once in a while."

"You are such a slut, Peter," she said with a smile. "You live with Michael and run around like single man. You must buy condoms by the case."

"At least I don't need a calendar to remember when I last had sex." Laura gave him a death glare but the young man smirked and looked back at the stage. "Say what you want, my dear. I say you're still pining away for her."

"I am not," she hissed, jabbing his arm with her elbow.

"Then why haven't you found a new roommate? You know you can't afford that place on your own."

"You're my rental agent. How am I supposed to get someone in there when you won't show the place?" she retorted, twirling the swizzle stick in the drink.

"I have yet to find anyone who meets your high standards, Laura. I don't think the Pope himself would meet your requirements."

"You think I'm being unreasonable?"

"Unreasonable?" Peter threw his head back and laughed. "You want a non-smoker, non-drinker, first and last month's rent plus an additional month for security. No pets, no kids, no

"

"I get it," she grumbled. "I'm not that bad, but I have to be able to live with the person." She sighed and picked up her drink. "Don't you know any gay guys looking for a place?"

"You wouldn't want any of the ones I know, trust me." He smirked and drained his glass. "They're all neurotic or hopelessly hung up on either their mothers or their ex's."

"Oh, you mean like you?" she teased.

Peter feigned a hurt look for a second before grinning. "Well at least I'm getting it from someone other than Rosy palm and her five friends."

"Touché." Laura said as she glanced at her watch. "It's getting late and I have to meet with the editor early tomorrow."

"They still won't move your deadline?"

Laura shook her head. "You'd think I asked for a million dollar bonus and a one year extension." She rose to her feet and reached for her jacket. "Thanks for coming with me tonight." She picked up her notebook and purse after Peter helped her get her jacket on. "Call me as soon as you hear anything about the apartment."

"I will." As they headed toward the front door, he spotted a corkboard with dozens of business cards held in place by multi-colored thumbtacks. "Ah, there's a good idea." Reaching into his pocket, he found one of his cards and put it up in the middle of the board.

Entering her apartment, Crystal threw her keys on the coffee table and sorted through the mail on her way into the kitchen. "Junk mail and bills," she grumbled, tossing the pile on the counter. She opened the refrigerator to reveal little more than outdated condiments and a nearly empty container of milk. She briefly considered having something delivered but the late hour ruined that idea. "Fuck it." Opening the freezer, the stripper pulled out a small pizza. She put it in the toaster oven and took a glass from the cabinet before heading to the living room. Next to the couch was a half-empty bottle of whiskey purchased the night before. Crystal filled the glass before reaching for her lighter and the joint sitting next to it. The pungent smoke burned her lungs but she held her breath for as long as she could before letting it out slowly. Almost instantly she felt a fuzziness, her body relaxing

under the marijuana's influence. Another long toke followed by several sips of whiskey and the stripper was too stoned to remember the cooking food. She turned on the television, pressing the buttons on the remote until she found the music videos. She paid no attention to the band on the screen, caring more for the pounding rhythm that numbed her senses in concert with the pot and booze.

Crystal's nose twitched as the foul smoke brought her back from unconsciousness. "Wha-what the hell?" Her mind still fuzzy, it took several seconds for her to realize that something was wrong. By then the fire from the toaster oven had spread up into the cabinets and across the kitchen. The fire was too much for her to even think about putting out with an extinguisher. Throwing a lamp off of an overturned milk crate, Crystal began filling the container with her most prized possessions; a small trophy, a ceramic figurine, an old photo album, a folder with her important papers and as many clothes as she could stuff on top. As an afterthought she hooked her pocketbook around her neck, fearing she wouldn't be allowed back in to get it. She was right.

The fire department was already there, having been called by one of the neighbors. As soon as Crystal exited her apartment, they moved in with hoses to douse the flames. The stripper stood by helplessly as gallons of water poured into her apartment, saving the structure but ruining everything she'd left behind. It was either cry or be mad and Crystal chose the latter. After putting her I.D. and money in her pockets, she found someone willing to watch her lone crate of belongings for the night. After making sure she was no longer needed, Crystal went off in search of the nearest bar.

The blonde stripper was well into her second twenty dollar bill when a heavysset but pleasant looking guy walked up to her. "Can I buy you a drink?"

"Do I look like I need another drink?" she snapped. "Go waste your lines on someone else."

"Hey, I was just trying to be nice," he protested. "You just looked so alone over here in the corner."

"Did it occur to you that it might be by choice?" Crystal banged her empty glass on the counter, catching the bartender's attention. The would-be Romeo gave up and returned to his companions while she numbly took the fresh drink.

"Last call," the bartender said as he walked away. The stripper drained her glass as quickly as she could and forced a wink and a smile to get one more drink before he officially closed the bar.

Staggering out into the late night air, Crystal stumbled her way towards her burned out apartment and the parking lot that her car was parked in. She would spend the night curled up in her back seat, too drunk to notice the cold until morning.

"No Laura, I haven't found anyone yet," Peter said into the phone as he waved in the woman standing in his doorway. "I'll put an ad in the paper tomorrow, okay? Yes, I'll call you as soon as I hear something"

Okay

bye." He hung up the phone and nodded in the direction of the empty chair. "Please, take a seat, Miss. What can I do to help you today?"

"I need an apartment," she replied.

"Well then you've come to the right place." He smiled and pulled out a large binder full of pictures. "We have several apartments available within eight different complexes throughout the area. Are you looking for furnished or unfurnished, Miss

?"

"Sheridan. Crystal Sheridan. I'm looking for furnished. But it needs to be less than five-fifty plus utilities."

Well

"Peter gave his best smile and clasped his hands together. "I'm afraid the least expensive one-bedroom we have goes for six seventy-five."

"Oh." She tossed the business card she had taken from the board at the club and tossed it on his desk. "I'll look somewhere else."

Noticing the thumbtack mark on the card, it took only a second for Peter to figure out why the blonde woman looked so familiar. "Wait!" he said excitedly, clenching his hands tight to keep his emotions inside. "Would you be interested at all in a roommate situation? I know this absolutely adorable two bedroom townhouse with a balcony and reserved parking. It's renting for four-fifty plus half of the utilities." He opened the file drawer and pulled out the folder for Laura's apartment.

Crystal hesitated. "I don't do well with roommates."

"Oh, but this is perfect for you," he replied. "The woman who lives there now, Laura, is a writer and spends most of her time locked up in her room working on her story." He took the sheet of paper listing Laura's rules out and was looking over it when Crystal took a pack of cigarettes out of the pocket of her jean jacket. Smiling, he discreetly put Laura's list in the can next to his desk. "She's very easy going," he assured.

"Good. I can't live with someone who bitches about every little thing."

"Of course not." Peter used his foot to slowly push the waste can under his desk. "Just take a look at this." He pulled out one of the pictures of the townhouse. "Have you ever seen a more breathtaking place? Right here is the breakfast nook, a wonderful place for Sunday morning brunches and over here

"He handed her another picture, "

is a better view of the layout. The bedrooms are upstairs as is the full bath. See? Privacy and convenience all in one."

"I still don't know." Crystal bit her lower lip and looked again at the pictures. The apartment was better than the one she had just lost and the cost was substantially less. "Is there a laundry room on site?"

"Better than that." He pointed at one of the pictures. "See those louvered doors? The washer and dryer are in there. All you need to do is buy your softener and detergent." He pushed the first picture in front of her again. "Did you have a dishwasher in your old apartment?"

"No."

"Maintenance just installed a new one in this townhouse not two months ago. Surely a busy woman such as yourself would appreciate the convenience of having a dishwasher and laundry facilities."

"Four-fifty plus half the utilities?"

"Exactly. Of course you do need first, last, and your security deposit," he said sweetly.

Crystal sighed and stood up. "This just isn't going to work."

"B-but this would be perfect for you," the red haired man protested as he rose to his feet. "I've been in this particular apartment and let me tell you it is absolutely gorgeous." He waved his hands excitedly. "What could possibly be wrong?"

"I don't have that much money."

"If you need a week or two, I'm sure I can save it for you."

"I can't wait a week or two. My apartment burned down last night. I need a place now."

"Oh you poor dear," Peter gasped, bringing his hands to his face. Crystal rolled her eyes and opened the door. "Wait." He stepped around the desk and closed the door. "I'm sure we can work something out. We can take payments on the last month and security." He reached over and picked up the pictures. "Take another look and tell me that isn't the dream apartment. Did I tell you that it was within walking distance of the Super Mall and Bragg Lake?"

Watching Crystal stare at the pictures, it was all Peter could do not to giggle with excitement. "Before you turn it down, Miss Sheridan

it is Miss, isn't it?" He smiled at her nod. "Let's go take a look at it, shall we?" Without waiting for an answer, he picked up the phone and dialed Laura's number. To his intense delight, the writer wasn't home. "Well now," he said as he hung up the phone. "If you'd like to ride with me, we can be there in five minutes." He took the key taped to Laura's folder and put it in his pocket.

"I'll take my own car," Crystal said firmly.

Um

sure, that's fine. Would you mind dropping me back off here when we're done?"

"My car is a mess," she lied. "It's best to take both cars."

Peter shrugged his shoulders and smiled. "Miss Sheridan, I guarantee you will adore this place."

Once they arrived at the complex, Crystal had no choice but to agree with him. Fifty townhouses were scattered about the property, winding roads and trees helping to create a sense of privacy between the buildings. Following Peter's lead, she pulled her car into a parking space.

"Have you ever seen a more exquisite place?" Peter asked as she stepped out of her car. "We have a full time grounds crew and maintenance is just a phone call away." He led the way up the walk to the front door. The door opened into a tastefully designed living room. Abstract art pieces hung on the walls and cactus plants graced each end table. The couch and matching chair were made of soft brown leather and a rather formidable television took up most of the entertainment center.

"Laura has the best taste when it comes to decorating," Peter sighed. "Let's go see the kitchen, shall we?"

"Is this where the washer and dryer are?" Crystal asked as they passed by a louvered door.

"Yes. Now look over here, Miss Sheridan. This is a chef's delight. Spice rack, lazy susan, and this stove has detachable burners that you can replace with a griddle or grill."

"I've never seen a stove do that," she admitted, looking at it carefully. One wall of the kitchen was nothing but glass with a sliding door that led to a comfortably-sized deck. Peter opened the door and led the way outside. A round white table with cushioned chairs took up one side while a gas grill sat on the other side.

"Those trees are mostly oak and maple," Peter said, pointing at the half-acre of trees that buffered the complex from the nearby lake. "They're very pretty in the fall when they change colors."

"Uh huh," Crystal replied disinterestedly as she stepped back inside.

"Well, I suppose there's nothing left to show you but the bedroom." He walked toward the stairs. "You'll absolutely adore the balcony." He put his foot on the first step and stopped when he realized that she wasn't following him. "Miss Sheridan?"

The stripper was still standing in the middle of the kitchen, nodding with approval. "Four-fifty plus half the utilities?"

This time Peter couldn't contain his excitement. He clapped his hands together and smiled broadly. "I'll just go get the paperwork out of the car."

"Wait a minute. Shouldn't I meet this Laura person before I make a decision?"

Well

I suppose if you feel that's really necessary..." He picked up the black book next to the phone and began flipping through the pages. "I'm sure Miss Taylor is at her editor's. I'll just give her a little call."

But Laura wasn't with her editor. She wasn't at her brother's or mother's any of a dozen other places that Peter called. Crystal was getting more nervous as time passed. Peter had given her the rental application to fill out while she waited and with every question the stripper felt more nervous. She had fallen in love with the place and worried that the writer wouldn't approve of her. The townhouse was ten times better than her previous apartment. When Peter went outside to retrieve the papers, Crystal went upstairs and found the bedroom that she hoped would soon be hers. It was larger than she had imagined, with a good sized walk-in closet and a sliding glass door that led to the balcony shared with Laura's bedroom. Despite her apparent disinterest in the view, Crystal found herself looking forward to waking up to the sight of trees and sky. It would be a welcome change from the billboards and brick walls that had been the view from her old apartment.

Peter was about to give up when the phone rang. "Hello?"

"Peter?" Laura's voice sound far away. "What's going on? My mother said you've been looking for me."

"Where are you?"

"At a pay phone downtown. What's so important and why are you at my place?"

"I have the absolute best news for you. I found a roommate for you and she loves the place. How fast can you get home?"

"Home? Peter I can't come home right now. I have to meet Jenny for lunch and be at the school by three. Can't we do this tomorrow?"

"Actually she needs immediate occupancy. Her apartment burned down last night."

"I just can't get there." She sighed and rubbed her forehead. "Did you check all her references and get the deposit?"

"Yes, yes, everything's taken care of," he lied. "My dear, I guarantee she's perfect for you, I mean the perfect roommate for you."

"What about later tonight?"

"That'll be too late. She'll look elsewhere and who knows how long it'll be before I can find someone." Peter knew he was pushing his luck but he just had a feeling about the pairing. "Laura, trust me."

"No smoking, no drinking, no loud music, no

"

"None of that," he assured her, looking upstairs to make sure the blond woman wasn't within earshot. "I think you'd be surprised at how well you two will get along."

"Peter, I have to get going." She hesitated for a moment. "Are you sure she's what I'm looking for?"

"Positive," he replied enthusiastically.

Laura gave another sigh. "I guess I'll have to trust you on this," she said. "But if this doesn't work out

"

"It will, it will," he said quickly, hearing Crystal coming down the stairs. "That's just fabulous, Laura. I'll tell Miss Sheridan the good news." He hung up the phone before she could say anything else. I think Michael and I better go on that trip to the mountains soon.

"Were you able to reach her?"

"Not only was I able to reach her but I arranged everything. Laura said if I like you then it's fine. And if you can ask me any questions you have about her, since I've known her forever. If you'll follow me back to the office, we'll finish up the paperwork and I'll give you your key."

It was after dark when Laura arrived home. The first thing she noticed was that the only room not lit up was her bedroom. Oh no, you're not going to be leaving every light in the house on, she thought to herself as she headed up the walkway.

Opening the front door, Laura found herself assaulted by the smell of cigarette smoke. A blonde woman was sitting on her couch, an ashtray with several butts and three empty beer cans lying on the coffee table next to her. "You must be Laura," the woman said as she rose to her feet.

"And you must be Crystal," the writer replied, holding her hand out. "I don't want to get off on the wrong foot or anything but didn't Peter go over the rules with you?"

"Rules?"

Laura brought her forefinger and thumb up and pinched the bridge of her nose. "I don't allow smoking."

"You're kidding." The stripper picked up her beer and took several swallows. "Mister Knight didn't say anything to me about smoking or rules."

"I'll kill him," Laura muttered, tossing her keys on the counter. "I'm sorry but that's just something I can't live with." She picked up the empty beer cans and walked over to the sink to rinse them out before putting them in a plastic bag to store them until they could be returned to the store for the deposit. "Well, it's not the end of the world. You can always go outside to smoke."

"This is going to be fun," Crystal grumbled. "I'll look for someplace else tomorrow." She drained her beer and picked up the newspaper. "Mind if I look through your paper?"

"Help yourself." Laura opened the refrigerator and peered inside. "Have you eaten yet? I have some leftover pasta salad

" She didn't see the gagging face Crystal made at the suggestion. "

tofu hot dogs or pizza."

"You a health nut?"

"I believe in eating food that doesn't destroy my body." She set the cardboard box on the counter. "The pizza's from Pizza Shed."

"I've had their stuff before," Crystal said, rising up from the couch and crossing over to the counter. "What's on it?"

"Not much, mushrooms, peppers, grass

" Laura teased, laughing at the grimace on the blonde woman's face. "Just kidding. Mushrooms and peppers, that's all." She opened the box and showed Crystal. "One or two?"

"Two, I'm starving." The stripper leaned her elbows on the counter and used her foot to hook the leg of the nearby bar stool. "Thanks."

"You're welcome." The writer wiped her hands on the dish towel. "Let's try this again. I'm Laura Taylor."

"Crystal Sheridan."

"So Crystal, Peter said something about a fire?" She put the slices on the rack and turned the oven on. At the blonde woman's nod she continued. "That's too bad. We had a fire when I was a kid. Were you there when it happened?"

"I was sleeping."

"You were lucky to survive."

Crystal grunted an unintelligible reply and reached for another beer. "You know where Humphrey Street is?"

"I think it's over by Union, why?"

"There's a one bedroom listed in the paper."

"Ugh, you wouldn't want anything on Humphrey."

"Gotta go where I can afford," Crystal said simply. "Look, if Mister Knight had said anything to me about smoking, I wouldn't have taken the place."

"It must have just been an oversight on Peter's part." And when I get my hands on him

She let the thought go unfinished. "We can work something out."

"Like what? I smoke and you don't want a smoker."

"So we compromise. You can smoke on the deck and balcony, just not indoors."

"You mean if I want a smoke in the morning I have to get dressed and go out on the deck?" Crystal shook her head. "I'll get one of those air filter things but I should be able to smoke in my bedroom if I want to."

"But nowhere else," Laura cautioned. "He did tell you half of all utilities and you pay for your own long distance calls."

"Don't worry. I'm not one for making lots of phone calls."

"So we'll give it a try and see how it goes." She shut the oven off and pointed at the far cupboard. "Would you please get the plates?"

Minutes later they were sitting at the breakfast nook, eating their pizza. Laura took a sip from her glass of water and glanced at the woman sitting across from her. Crystal was being extremely quiet, only the sound of newspaper rustling coming from her side of the counter. There was something vaguely familiar about the blonde to Laura but she couldn't figure it out. "So Crystal," she began, "I'm a writer. What do you do?"

"I'm

a dancer," she replied.

"Oh? Ballet?"

Crystal snorted and shrugged her shoulders. "Something like that." At that moment her beeper went off. Retrieving it from her waist, the stripper held it up and frowned at the familiar number on the display. "I need to use the phone."

"In the living room next to the couch," Laura said. When Crystal turned around, the writer was treated to the sight of tight-fitting jeans framing well-toned cheeks and thighs. It was then that she was able to figure out why the blonde woman looked so familiar. The stripper. Oh Peter, you are really in for it this time.

The call lasted only a few minutes but it was enough for Laura to finish her pizza and put her plate in the dishwasher. "I have some writing to do so I'll say good night now," she said as Crystal hung up the phone. "Please make sure all the lights are off and the doors are locked."

"Night."

Crystal watched as her new roommate went upstairs, leaving her alone for the evening. Retrieving her pizza and beer from the counter, she picked up the remote and settled down on the couch. She flicked through the channels while nibbling on her pizza, eventually settling on an inane comedy. The show failed to keep her interest and she was soon channel surfing again. "Fuck." The remote landed on the coffee table and the beer can was quickly emptied. A cigarette was lit without thought and only after several drags were taken did she remember Laura's rule. Cursing again, Crystal walked into the kitchen, picked the up last two cans of beer, and opened the sliding glass door.

Settling down into one of the white plastic chairs, the stripper put her feet on the railing and stared out at the night sky. What the hell am I doing here? I can't live with Miss Straight-Laced. She threw the cigarette away and opened a beer. Off in the distance an owl hooted its greeting to the other creatures of the darkness. Swallowing quickly, Crystal guzzled half the can before setting it back down. Good night to get drunk, she thought sourly. She decided that Laura must have had the door to the balcony open upstairs because she could hear the other woman typing away at the computer. Draining her beer, Crystal stood and went inside.

Laura heard the sliding glass door close, followed soon after by the sound of footsteps on the stairs. Her door ajar, she saw the blonde woman walk past with a can of beer in her hand. Great, she's probably got a drinking problem. Sighing audibly, she shook her head and turned her attention back to her story. She typed a few sentences before the sound of furniture being moved about distracted her again. I'm not going to get any work done with all that noise. Pushing away from the computer, Laura stood and walked over to Crystal's room. "Do you need any help?" she asked through the closed door.

"No, I got it," came the reply.

"Okay, night then." She waited a few seconds for a reply before giving up and returning to her own room. Once inside, she shut the door and picked up the phone. Dialing the familiar number, Laura waited through several rings before the answering machine came on.

"Hi, this is Peter and Michael. We can't come to the phone right now, please leave a message
beep."

"Peter, this is Laura, I know you're home so pick up the phone." She waited a moment, then continued. "Fine. Call me when you get in. It's very important." She pressed the receiver down for a second, then released it and dialed another number. This time she was greeted with a pleasant voice.

"Hello?"

"Hi Jenny, it's Laura."

"Hi hon, what's up?"

"You busy?"

"No, not really, just watching TV. What's going on?"

Laura looked at the door. "I can't talk about it over the phone. Can I come over?"

"Is something wrong? Laura, are you okay?"

"I'm fine, Jen, I just need to talk."

"Okay, come on over. I'll be here."

"Thanks, I'll see you in about fifteen minutes or so." Laura said her goodbyes and hung up. She thought about letting Crystal know she was going out but decided against it. She'll figure it out when she hears the door close, she thought as she tied her sneakers and changed out of her T-shirt in favor of a light blue short sleeved one.

Laura pulled her Jeep into the driveway, smiling when she saw the outside light come on and Jenny open the front door. Their breakup two years before had been an amicable one and the two women enjoyed a closeness that only ex-lovers could share. Jenny was a therapist and as such

always a safe place for Laura to go and get things off her chest. "I'm glad you were home. You wouldn't believe what's been going on," she said as she approached the door.

"What on earth happened between lunch and now?" Jenny asked as they entered the house.

"I'm going to kill Peter." She sat down on the couch, tucking one leg beneath her to face her ex-lover, who sat at the opposite end. "You won't believe what he did."

"I thought he found you a roommate?"

Laura snorted. "A roommate? A roommate from hell, maybe. She smokes and like to take beers into her bedroom at night."

"A smoker?" Jenny shook her head. "What was he thinking? Didn't you tell him that you needed a non-smoker?"

"Of course I did. I gave him an explicit list of rules." She ran her fingers through her dark hair and sighed. "She's a stripper."

"A stripper? You mean a take-it-all-off, money-down-the-crotch stripper?"

"Exactly," Laura said.

"And this is what you're so upset about?"

"This just isn't going to work out."

"And you know this from one day?"

"Don't you start that psychology stuff with me, Jen," the writer warned. "It only took a few minutes, actually." She reached over and put her hand on Jenny's knee, an old, familiar gesture between the ex-lovers. "She never says please and it's like pulling teeth to get a thank you out of her."

"So she's not little Miss Manners. Does she know you're gay?"

Laura shook her head. "I don't think so unless Peter told her."

"So does this roommate from hell have a name?"

"Crystal."

"Well, look on the bright side. If Crystal is a stripper, maybe she'll give you a private show." Jenny's teasing earned her a playful swat on the thigh.

"Don't you start. It's been too long."

"For me too," the therapist agreed, letting her fingertips lightly brush over Laura's forearm.

"You know there's no law that says that ex's can't sleep together once in a while."

"True," Jenny agreed. "But do you really think it's such a good idea?"

"Oh, I think it's a splendid idea," Laura said huskily, scooting forward on the couch until her lips were near her ex-lover's ear. "Consider it rekindling old memories."

"Consider it you're horny, you mean," Jenny replied.

"Well, lack of sex was never a problem in our relationship, if I remember correctly." The writer continued to press for her side of the argument by nibbling Jenny's earlobe. Her voice took on a smoky timber. "How about sharing your bed with me tonight, hmm?"

"Damn, I hate when you talk to me in that tone of voice," Jenny replied, arching into the wandering lips.

"Yeah, I can tell," she murmured, moving her fingers down to undo the buttons of Jenny's shirt. Soon the two halves separated, revealing creamy white skin, her breasts too small to bother with a bra. Laura pressed her down on the couch and began running her lips along the exposed collarbone. She felt Jenny's fingers sink into her hair and guide her lower. "A bit eager, Jen?"

Stop teasing me

oh!" Whatever else the therapist might have wanted to say was lost when soft lips closed around her nipple and began suckling.

Laura moaned against the breast she was playing with and pressed her hip against the body squirming beneath her. "I miss this," she murmured, kissing her way across Jenny's chest to lick and kiss the other nipple. Feeling a tugging on her shirt, she sat up and stilled the therapists wandering hands.

"You're not gonna fold it, are you?"

Laura stopped unbuttoning her shirt and looked down at her ex-lover. "You know I don't like wrinkles." Removing the shirt, she folded it neatly and set it down on the coffee table. The bra came next, the cups folded one within the other. Jenny tugged her own top off and let it go sailing across the room.

"You know I hate that," Laura said, looking pointedly at the rumpled shirt.

"And I hate the way you have to fold everything." Jenny let her fingers comb through Laura's black hair.

"I am a bit neurotic about that, aren't I?" She leaned down and let their lips brush together. "How did you ever put up with me?"

"Well, you could have worse faults than being an obsessive compulsive."

"Is that like being anal retentive?" the writer teased as she pressed her thigh between Jenny's legs, pleased with the resulting moan. She planted kisses along the therapist's jaw until her lips found an ear framed by soft brown hair. "I think we can find something better to do than bring up each other's faults, don't you, my little analyst?" Laura flexed her thigh muscles to further her point.

"Y-yes, I think we can," Jenny agreed, her breath coming in short pants. "Don't tease me."

"I thought you liked being teased." Laura grinned devilishly before lowering her lips to her ex-lover's breast. "And teased and teased

"

Crystal whimpered and thrashed about in her bed for several minutes before the nightmare became too great to bear and she scared herself awake. Heart pounding, she looked around in the darkness, momentarily confused by the unfamiliar surroundings. The red numbers of the alarm clock glared at her, taunting her with the later hour. Fuck, not tonight, she silently pleaded as sleep continued to elude her. Frustrated, she sat up and reached for her cigarettes and lighter. Seconds later the bluish gray smoke swirled around her head. It's just because it's my first night in a new place, she told herself. The thought failed to give Crystal any comfort and she found herself turning on the lamp, letting the pale yellow light cast away the shadows and help dissipate some of her fear. She looked at the clock again. Guess Laura isn't coming back tonight. Setting her cigarette in the ashtray, she opened the drawer of her night stand. A small metal pipe and film canister were removed along with an incense cone and holder. After making sure the incense was lit, Crystal filled the pipe with the marijuana hidden in the film canister. The urge to numb out her feelings was too strong to resist. As her body finally relaxed under the pot's influence, the images from her nightmare eased in their intensity. Her vision blurred and she wiped her the back of her hand angrily across her eyes as the tears began to fall.

It had been almost two months since she last had a nightmare and there had been a tiny sliver of hope that they were gone forever. Should've fucking known, she thought sourly as she repacked her pipe. The bad dreams

and the memories that caused them, had been with her for over twelve years now and Crystal feared they would never leave her. The drug kicked in hard after her third bowl and when sleep finally reclaimed the stripper, it was without the nightmares.

Laura arrived home the next morning to find Crystal sitting on the deck, smoking a cigarette and reading the morning paper. "Good morning."

"Morning," the stripper replied, setting the paper on the table.

Laura frowned at the haphazard way the sections of the newspaper were stacked. Doesn't anyone believe in putting things back the way they were? she silently mused. "Are you done with this?"

"Yeah." Crystal took a long drag of her cigarette and flicked the butt over the railing. "Hey, you mind if I get a new shower curtain? I don't like the one you have."

Um

sure." Laura shrugged her shoulders. "That one's only a few months old."

"Yeah but I can't stand all those frilly flowers and stuff." The stripper stood up and tucked her cigarette pack into the pocket of her jeans. "I'll pick one up this afternoon on my way to work."

Looking at the bust straining against the cotton shirt, Laura flushed at the memory of Crystal swaying her breasts for the crowd at the Tom Cat Club. "So where is it that you work at?" she asked, hoping to start something resembling a conversation between the two of them.

"Downtown," Crystal replied, swallowing down the rest of her coffee.

Laura let the deliberate evasion slide, sensing that the topic was not a comfortable one for the younger woman. "I'm picking up tacos tonight for dinner. Would you like me to pick some up for you as well?"

"Naw, I don't do rabbit food." Crystal glanced at her watch. "Gotta go."

"Well, have a good day." Laura received a noncommittal grunt in reply as the stripper walked past her and into the townhouse. I can't believe I agreed to this, she thought to herself. Her eyes fell upon the mess on the table. Crystal had left behind her coffee mug, a small plate filled with crumbs, a bunched up paper towel, and the disorganized newspaper. Unable to leave a mess, Laura took the dishes to the dishwasher and straightened out the newspaper. When she poured herself a cup of coffee, she spotted a ring on the kitchen counter. You can't take the dishrag and wipe down the counter? Laura muttered curses for several minutes while cleaning up the counters and stove. When her task was finished, she picked up the phone and called Peter's office only to find that he had taken the day off. She called his house.

"Hi, this is Peter and Michael. We can't come to phone right now, please leave a message

beep."

"Peter, where are you? Call me when you get in." Unable to vent on the one person she wanted to, Laura dialed the number to Jenny's office.

"You're lucky Mrs. Cranston cancelled," Jenny said when Laura walked into her office. "I've got forty minutes before my next appointment. What's up? Still having problems with the roommate from hell?"

"She's driving me nuts, Jen. The woman doesn't know the meaning of cleaning up after herself." Laura flopped down on the couch and sighed. "She messed up my paper and I swear she's allergic to putting dirty dishes in the dishwasher."

Jenny nodded, familiar with her ex-lover's obsession with cleaning. "Is she really a slob or is she just not as neat as you are?"

"I'm not asking her to mop the floor every day," the writer defended. "But would it kill her to wipe down the counter? You should have seen the bathroom." Not giving Jenny a chance to interrupt, she continued. "Do you think she could have draped her towel over the shower rod to dry? No, of course not. She left it bunched up on top of the hamper. Not that there was any room on the rod to put the towel."

Jenny closed her eyes, not really wanting to ask. "What was on the rod?"

"Panties, if you can call a little triangle and dental floss panties. How can she be comfortable with that thing stuck up between her cheeks like that anyway?"

"I don't think those are designed for comfort, Laura. They're probably for her job."

"I don't care, they don't need to be hanging off the shower rod."

"Would you prefer she put up a clothesline and hang them from there? Obviously they aren't the kind that should be put in a dryer. Not everyone wears sensible white cotton panties," Jenny reasoned. Laura frowned at the obvious logic in the therapist's words.

"Well she can't leave them there," she said finally, her agitation deflated somewhat.

"Then suggest someplace else she can hang them. So she doesn't pick up after herself and hangs her wet clothes over the shower curtain. What other horrible things does she do?"

"You think I'm being unreasonable, don't you?"

"You're not unreasonable, Laura. You have some valid points, especially about Crystal picking up after herself. However, you have to be a bit flexible here, too. She does pay half the bills now. You can't have complete control over the place anymore."

"I'm going to kill Peter when I find him, you know."

"I know," Jenny said, knowing full well it was an empty threat. Peter and Laura had been friends since high school and there was little, if anything, that one could do to the other that wouldn't be forgiven. "So you're not going to bitch at her about the undies in the bathroom."

Laura sighed in resignation. "Fine, but she has to be more responsible about picking things up around the place. I'm not going to be her personal maid."

"Is she going to be there tomorrow night?"

"I don't know," Laura shrugged. "I hadn't thought about it. I think she's working."

"You might want to check that out before everyone arrives." Jenny smirked. "Or at least you should warn her about your mother."

Laura rolled her eyes and groaned. "Now there's a meeting I'd rather not witness. Can you imagine if my mother found out she's a stripper?"

"She'd flip

probably worse than when she found out about us," Jenny said. "Speaking of which, does she know I'm coming?"

"No. I thought I'd surprise her with your presence. You know what a special place you have in her heart."

Jenny gave a derisive snort. "Don't get me started, Laura. I try very hard to remember that your mother is just set in her ways and nothing will change the way she thinks. I'm only going because Bobby expects me to be there."

"What'd you get him, anyway?"

Jenny smiled. "You know those speakers for his stereo system that he wanted for his car? I thought that'd make a great graduation gift."

Laura's eyes widened. "You're kidding. That had to have cost well over two hundred dollars."

"Two eighty-seven and change, actually." Jenny shrugged her shoulders. "What can I say? I told him if he aced his Physics exams I would get him something special."

"No wonder he studied so hard. Mom and I both told him flat out no to the speakers."

"Well, your mother did get him that computer and printer."

"And I got him the programs he needed so he should be all set."

"Except for his internet access, his email address, and an unlimited supply of single college aged girls from all over the country," Jenny added.

"I don't think he'll have to look far for a girlfriend, Jen. He already has girls calling Mom's place a dozen times a night looking for him."

"I told you, didn't I? When he was thirteen and his eyebrows started to darken, didn't I tell you then that the girls would be all over him?" The therapist smiled smugly. "There's just something about you Taylor's that women can't resist."

"Yeah? Then why am I single?" Laura asked with a smile.

"Because Ms. Right hasn't come along yet. Who knows? Maybe you and Crystal

"

"Don't even think about it," the writer warned. A quick knock on the door was followed by Jenny's secretary opening the door and poking her head inside.

"Miss Foster? Your eleven o'clock is in the waiting area and appears quite upset."

"Really?" Jenny raised her eyebrows in surprise. A quick glance at her watch revealed that her client had arrived a full half-hour before their usual appointment time. The therapist smiled apologetically at Laura. "I think we'd better stop now. I'll see you tomorrow night."

"Okay hon." They shared a quick hug and kiss before Jenny escorted Laura out of her office and the teary-eyed Mrs. Duncan in.

Laura was sitting in front of the computer, cleaning up the ever-growing pile of unanswered email when she heard the key in the downstairs' lock. A quick glance at the clock on the lower corner of the screen alerted her to the time, a few minutes shy of midnight. She left her room and headed down the stairs, entering the kitchen in time to see Crystal remove a can of beer from the refrigerator. Do you drink anything else? she wondered to herself before speaking. "Ahem

" She waited until the stripper turned to face her before continuing. "Are you working tomorrow evening?"

The blonde woman opened her can and took several swallows before answering. "No. Why? You need me to split for the night or somethin'?"

"My little brother is graduating from high school with honors and we're having dinner for him over here tomorrow night." In the back of Laura's mind, her mother's strict rules about following proper etiquette fought with her desire to not have her family meet her new roommate. In the end, the long-instilled training from her mother won out. "You're welcome to come, of course. It isn't anything fancy, just him, my mother and Jenny. I don't know if Peter and Michael will be here or not. I haven't been able to reach him lately." Laura made a mental note to try calling them again.

"Don't worry about it," Crystal waved her hand dismissively. The can went to her lips again for several more swallows. "I'm not into family get-togethers anyway. I'll make myself scarce." She turned and opened the refrigerator, pulling out the remaining three cans. "Shit," she cursed softly, only now remembering she meant to stop on the way home and pick up more beer. She thought about the small baggie in her pocket and resigned herself to making the three beers last for the night. She brushed past Laura and headed up the stairs, shutting herself in her room without another word to the writer.

Laura checked the locks before shutting off the downstairs lights and returning to her room. Peeved at the way Crystal ignored her, she found herself too keyed up to go to sleep. Sitting in front of the computer once again, Laura closed the email program and brought up her word processor. A few seconds later and her newest story appeared on the screen. Resting her finger on the Page Down button, she watched her words flash past her until she reached the bottom. Lacing her fingers together, she cracked her knuckles and reached for the keyboard. She reread the last few sentences to familiarize herself with what was happening within the story and began typing.

Less than ten minutes later Laura found herself lifting the hair off the back of her neck and groaning. I hope there's a nice breeze tonight. After making sure there were no loose papers that could fly about, she crossed over to the sliding glass door and opened it. A full length screen kept the insects out but let what turned out to be a wonderfully gentle breeze in. The scent of a nearby lilac bush caught her nose along with something else.

Laura stepped closer to the doorway and sniffed again. Oh great, a druggie. Moving to the inner door, she opened it and crossed the landing to knock on Crystal's door.

"What?" came the annoyed voice.

"We need to talk," the writer replied. She heard the sounds of drawers opening and closing before Crystal came to the door. It opened to reveal the stripper dressed in a pair of sweats and a faded cotton tee. The odor of marijuana was all around the young woman and Laura's nose crinkled in disgust. Crystal's eyes were mere slits, looking extremely tired were it not for the goofy smirk on her face. "You can't be doing this here," she said firmly.

"What I do in my room is my own fucking business. I'm not a drug addict and I'm not a dealer."

"It's still illegal," Laura pointed out. "The police

"

"The police won't care about the little amount I have," Crystal cut off the older woman. "Jeez Laura, you're so fucking uptight maybe you should take a few hits. You know, help calm you down a little?" Make you less of a pain in the ass.

"No, thank you. I don't believe in clouding my brain with illegal drugs."

"Naw, it's just okay to fuck it up with alcohol, right?" The stripper shook her head. "Fucking hypocrite," she mumbled as she shut the door.

Laura stood there in shock, not believing what she had heard. I'm uptight? Just because I don't want to do drugs? "Alcohol is different, Crystal," she yelled loud enough to be heard through the closed door.

"Whatever," came the reply. "If the smell bothers you I'll light an incense, okay?"

"Why do you think that hiding something makes it all right?" Laura asked.

"What makes you think I care what you think?" Crystal snapped. "I told you

I'll light a fucking stick if the smell bothers you. Other than that, deal with it." Laura heard the sound of a drawer opening followed soon after by the flick of a lighter. Grunting in frustration, the writer returned to her room, shutting the door with a resounding bang.

Laura shut down the computer, deciding she was too aggravated to give writing a serious try and not feeling like working on her email. Once the computer was shut off and the dust covers in place, she crossed over to the sliding glass door, preparing to shut it for the night. She caught a whiff of burning incense and frowned. Peter, I'm going to kill you, she silently vowed as she slid the door closed.

Across the hall, Crystal sat on her bed, her eyes staring at the worn photograph in her hand. It showed two small girls standing in front of an old mobile home. Where are you, Patty? she asked silently, her finger running over the familiar picture. I could really use you now. She emptied another beer and reached for her pipe. Letting the photo rest on her lap, Crystal held the pipe in one hand and her lighter in the other. She inhaled deeply, pulling as much smoke as she could hold into her lungs. Only when she felt as though she would burst did she slowly let the smoke out, her head already feeling the effects of the deep hit. Putting the lighter and pipe on the nightstand, Crystal laid her head back on the pillows and stared up at the stucco ceiling. Images of childhood played in her head

two sisters, hair blonder than the sun, bicycling through the trailer park, laughing and enjoying a warm summer day. As it always did, a darker memory surfaced. Crystal angrily sat up and reached for her pipe. No fucking way I'm going through this tonight, she vowed, lighting up the marijuana and sucking as hard as she could. She recognized the feelings for what they were and desperately wanted to avoid having any nightmares tonight. The pot made that possible, taking her to a place where her father's anger and violence couldn't reach, where nothing mattered except the temporary peace offered by the weed. But some nights the memories refused to be numbed out by the drugs and this night proved to be one of them.

Lying in bed, fourteen year old Crystal listened to the muffled sobs coming through the wall separating her room from the one her older sister slept in. She cried at the helplessness she felt, the inability to help Patty. She had tried twice to protect her sister from their father and both times earned a beating so severe that it kept her home from school for days. The last time had been less than a week ago and her eye still bore the bruising from his fist. Patty's cries became more frequent, intermixed with her father's carnal grunts. Crystal buried her head in her pillow and cried even harder, sharing the pain her sister was going through and fearing that this would be the night her father stopped at her door.

Minutes later she heard the familiar sound of her father walking down the hall. Suddenly the footsteps stopped outside her door. Crystal's heart beat rapidly for several seconds before the steps started up again, not stopping until the door to his bedroom closed. The bathroom separated her room

from her parent's, making eavesdropping impossible. However, it also made it easier for the two siblings to have their own private conversations.

Once she was certain her father wouldn't leave his room, Crystal slipped out of bed and slowly opened her door. She peeked down the hall at her parent's door and carefully crept into her sister's room.

Patty was lying on her bed, curled up in a ball and sobbing helplessly. Crystal climbed in the bed and hugged her older sister. "Y-y-you should get back to bed before he finds you in here," Patty warned.

"No, he won't come back," she said, holding her sister tighter. "We need to run away." It was a discussion they had at least once a week for the last few months. "Please Patty, we can't keep living like this. We can go away

to the city or something."

"We can't, you're too young," Patty replied. "The police would find us and we'd be in even worse trouble than if we just stayed here."

"But he keeps hurting you," the young teen pleaded. "And she won't stop him. I know she hears but she never does anything."

"What can she do, Crystal? He'd just hit her again and then it'd be worse."

The sisters sat together in bed for several minutes before Crystal spoke.

"How old were you when he

?" she let the question hang, not wanting to actually put a name on the horrible act. Patty hesitated for a moment before answering.

"Fifteen."

"How much longer do you think he's gonna wait until he comes for me?" Crystal asked in a timid voice. "I can't go through that, Patty, I just can't." She sniffed and wiped away her tears. "Please."

There was silence in the room for several minutes before the elder sister spoke. "Go in your room and empty out your backpack. Put warm clothes and your underwear in it. Put your sneakers on and a warm sweater." Patty stood up and quietly opened her top dresser drawer. Hidden in the back was a pair of black socks. She unfolded them to reveal a small wad of cash. "I was hoping to finish high school and get us a place after I graduated," she whispered. "We'll go north, to Berlin. It's a college town. We can get a small place there and hide out until we figure out what to do."

Despite their fears of him suddenly waking up and discovering their plans, the sisters were able to escape the mobile home without being caught. Deciding that their bicycles would be too obvious, they left on foot, sticking to back roads and shadows until they reached the downtown area. Both girls were tired but that feeling was overshadowed by fear. Block after block they walked, talking about how wonderful life would be once they ran away. The bus station was several miles away and it was close to midnight by the time they reached the brightly lit place. Patty made Crystal hide in the shadows while she went inside to get the tickets. As the bus pulled up, the fourteen year old believed that they were going to make it, that freedom was finally within their grasp. Feeling somewhat confident, Crystal crossed the brightly lit parking lot in search of her sister. She found Patty coming out proudly displaying two one-way tickets.

"You got them," she said excitedly. "Which bus is ours?"

"Easy Sis," Patty replied. "Our bus doesn't leave until seven. These buses are all done for the night."

But

"The thought of staying in the city for another seven hours when she knew her father would discover them missing within five didn't make her feel any better. "What about Daddy?"

"Hopefully the bastard has a heart attack in his sleep," the elder Sheridan replied, knowing her sibling shared her sentiments. "He won't find out we're missing until at least five or five-thirty if we're lucky. There's no way he'll figure out where we are before our bus leaves at seven."

Trusting her older sister's words, Crystal relaxed and allowed herself to be led to the shadows where the girls rested on the cool grass near a chain-link fence. The young teen was glad Patty told her to wear a sweater as the night air took on a slight chill. The long walk was more than enough to exhaust the two teens and they fell asleep within minutes.

When Crystal woke it was to the harsh brightness of the morning sun and the sound of her sister's voice. "What time is it?" she grunted as she wiped the sleep out of her eyes.

"Six. The bus will be here within an hour. I don't have much money but I thought we could get something cheap at the diner over there."

Crystal agreed, hoping more for the bathroom than food. For the first time in years the girl was happy, certain that an hour from now they'd be leaving the city and with it, the horror that was their father.

But freedom was not to be for Crystal. It was ten minutes to seven when they decided to head over to the bus station. They had just exited the diner and were crossing the street when Patty heard the sound of screeching brakes. She turned to see her father jerking the wheel to the side and head in their direction. "It's him!" she shouted. Running directly to the bus station was out of the question. He would simply pull them off the bus. They only had one chance left. Patty reached in her pocket and removed one of the two bus tickets. "Here." She thrust it in Crystal's hand. "We have to split up and double back in time to catch the bus. He can't chase both of us and he'll probably follow me first." They began running away from the station, their father hampered from direct pursuit by the other morning traffic. "Go up Central until you can cut over and come back down Hudson. You should end up right in front of the station. I'll go this way."

Crystal nodded her understanding as tires squealed and they saw their father heading for them. The sisters separated, Patty running across the busy street and heading north while Crystal turned the corner and headed south as her sister instructed. Absolute horror filled the young teen's heart when she saw the car turn and follow her.

The young teen was no match for a speeding car. She managed to buy some time by suddenly doubling back, forcing him to pull over and turn around, but it wasn't enough. She knew she'd never make it back to the station in time. She knew her father wouldn't settle with just catching her and thought about the bus ticket stuffed in her pocket. It was a dead giveaway to where Patty would be going. As she ran past a garbage can, Crystal made her decision and threw the ticket away. Less than a block later the chase was over. Her father pulled the car onto the curb, blocking off her escape. He was upon her in seconds. Crystal screamed as he grabbed a handful of hair and jerked her towards him.

"Where is she?" he screamed.

"I don't know."

"You're lying." She was punished with a resounding slap to the face. "Where the fuck did she go?"

She knew that there was nothing she could say to avoid punishment. All she could do was the one thing she had never been able to do before protect her older sister. "I don't know," she repeated.

"You lying bitch!" He smacked her several times before slamming the door shut and getting behind the steering wheel. As he sped home, they passed a blue and gray bus on its way out of town. Crystal dared to look out the window and saw a figure looking down at her. The tinted windows made it hard to see her clearly, but there was no doubt that the hand pressed against the glass was Patty's. Taking a chance, Crystal mimicked the gesture. The bus turned onto the highway, forever separating the two sisters.

Crystal's father remained quiet during the ride home but his dark eyes constantly flicked from the road to the rear view mirror where he leveled deadly glares at his youngest child. The fourteen year old tried desperately not to cry in front of the man who saw tears as a weakness but she was absolutely terrified of what he would do to her once they returned home.

Crystal thrashed about, mumbling incoherently as the line between dreams and reality blurred. "No

no Daddy, please stop. I'll be good

"The words gave way to whimpers as she relived the nightmare of that morning eleven years ago. "No Daddy, please

No!" With a final cry, she scared herself awake. It was several seconds before she realized where she was. "Shit." She fumbled about in the dark for the lamp, then for her cigarettes. She no sooner lit one than she heard a quiet knocking on her bedroom door.

"You okay?"

"Fine, Laura. Just a nightmare."

"You sure?"

"I said I'm fine," Crystal replied testily. She looked at the clock and sighed. It was too late to go to a bar and the stores weren't allowed to sell beer

after midnight. "Sorry to wake you." She reached for her incense and put a fresh stick on the holder.

Um

Crystal?"

"What?"

"If you need to talk

"

"Yeah, thanks but I'm all set. Good night." Now go away and leave me alone.

Laura hesitated for a moment before answering. "Good night then." She returned to her room, her mind replaying what she had heard. She opened the sliding glass door and within seconds the smell of incense floated through the air. Intending to close the door, the writer reached for the handle only to pause and withdraw her hand. Doesn't smell that bad, she thought as she sniffed the air again. Like cherries. She knew that the incense was covering up the smell of pot but decided to let it go for the night. She heard the terror in Crystal's cries and had no doubt the young woman was shook up, despite words to the contrary.

Part 2

Laura was not surprised to find no sign of Crystal the next morning. Twice during the night she had been awakened by the sound of the toilet flushing, the last time being shortly before sunrise. Guess I'll put off vacuuming until later, she thought as she headed into the kitchen to make coffee.

While waiting for the coffee to brew, Laura went upstairs and stripped her bed, gathering the dirty clothes out of her hamper at the same time. She had the laundry sorted and a load started by the time the coffee was ready and drank her first cup between trips around the townhouse emptying waste baskets and noting which areas needed to be visited by a dust rag.

Crystal ambled down the stairs two hours later, looking very hung over. Dark circles rimmed her eyes and her blonde hair hung limply about her face. "Coffee smells good," she said.

"Good morning. How are you?" Laura asked from behind her coffee cup.

Crystal walked over to the cupboard and removed the first mug she could reach. Accepting the offered pot in her roommate's hand, she waited until the cup was full before speaking. "Sorry about last night."

Um

if you ever need to talk

"

"Nothing to talk about," the stripper shrugged. She picked up the paper and nodded in the direction of the deck. "You done with this?"

"Help yourself." Laura watched as her unread newspaper was quickly opened and folded upon itself so Crystal could hold it with one hand while she sipped her coffee. A cigarette was soon lit, the wind blowing the smoke back into the kitchen. The writer frowned and walked over to close the sliding glass door.

"Don't bother, I'll move over here," Crystal said as she moved her clutter over to the other side of the table. The change in position caused the smoke to curl up the side of the building instead of entering the kitchen. Laura watched as a smirk came to the stripper's lips before being hidden by the coffee mug.

"Guilty as charged," she admitted, sitting down in the chair recently vacated by the other woman. She took a sip of her coffee before continuing. "I just really can't stand the smell of smoke in my house. Bobby has taken up smoking and I don't let him do it in there either."

"Who's Bobby, your boyfriend?"

Laura set the coffee cup on the table and smiled. "Um

no. He's my younger brother. I don't have a boyfriend. You?" She did not expect an answer and was surprised when Crystal shook her head.

"No boyfriends. Men are pigs."

"Well, not all men, Crystal. Peter and Michael are perfect gentlemen."

"Peter and Michael are queer. They don't count."

"I don't know what's so hard about putting the toilet seat down. One time the boys were over here and I forgot to check and ended up with a wet bottom." She laughed at her own story, hoping to force a smile to the young woman's face. Instead Crystal continued to stare into her coffee, her eyes taking on a faraway look. The writer felt her stomach rumble and remembered that she hadn't eaten yet. "I think I'll make some e.g. and toast for breakfast. Would you like some?"

"Naw." Crystal stood abruptly. "I'm about to head out anyway."

"Going out for the day?" Laura secretly hoped that would be the case. She didn't want the pot smoking, beer drinking stripper around when her mother showed up.

"Yeah, I'm not into family get-togethers. Have fun."

Laura had just sorted out her newspaper and was about to begin reading when she heard the front door slam and a string of expletives fly out of her roommate's mouth. "I can't fucking believe that starter went again!" Crystal angrily tossed the keys across the room. "I don't care what Rick says, that mechanic friend of his doesn't know his ass from a hole in the wall." She pressed her hands against the short half-wall separating the kitchen and living room and finally locked eyes with Laura. "I guess I'm not going anywhere after all," she sighed.

"Michael is a mechanic. Maybe he can take a look at it for you."

"Fat lot of good that does me today," the stripper grumbled. She had hoped to get some beer and replenish her dwindling supply of marijuana. "I'll try to stay out of the way."

"You know the cable is hooked up to the TV in your room," Laura said. She was glad Crystal didn't hint about borrowing her Jeep. "Um

may I ask a favor of you?" The stripper looked at her warily. "Would you mind not smoking pot while my brother and mother are here?" She raised her hands to forestall the protest she saw forming on the blonde woman's lips. "I know what you do in your room is your business but even with the incense, my eighteen year old brother will know what you're doing behind closed doors."

The words struck an unintended nerve as Crystal's mind flashed back to hearing her sister cry out through the wall separating their bedrooms.

"When are people showing up?"

"In about four hours."

Plenty of time to get stoned before they get here. "Fine. Where's the nearest liquor store?"

"Martin's on Fourth. About three, three and a half miles." She realized Crystal's intentions and was secretly pleased that the store was so far away. She still wasn't happy with the *i.e.* that her family might meet the stripper but she knew it would be even worse if alcohol was added to the mix.

Crystal knocked her knuckles on the countertop. "Of course it is. What's the temp out there now? Eighty, ninety degrees?" Laura was certain it was closer to seventy but she didn't see any point in mentioning it. "I'll be in my room." The stripper went upstairs, fishing her cigarettes out of her pocket in the process.

Good. Stay there, Laura thought to herself as she watched the temperamental woman climb the stairs. She looked at the clock and groaned. Time to get moving.

First came the dusting, then the vacuuming. Polishing and window washing was next and she Laura was just filling up the mop bucket with hot water when the doorbell rang. She opened it to find Jenny standing there, her face hidden by the brightly wrapped box in her arms. "The other parts are in the car," she huffed as she gratefully handed over her burden.

"You do remember that he drives a compact, not a minivan."

"These are the ones the man at the store said were right for Bobby's car," Jenny protested as she retrieved the rest of the stereo parts from her car.

"You asked the salesman which ones to buy?" Laura asked incredulously. "Jen, you know better."

"Don't you start," the brown haired woman warned gently. "Not everything I buy has to be approved by Consumer Reports."

But

"Whoops, Laura thought when she saw the look in Jenny's eyes. "I'm doing it again, aren't I?"

"Yup," the therapist agreed.

"It's a good thing I have you around to point out all my little neuroses," she said, taking advantage of the empty street to lean down and give Jenny a quick kiss. "By the way, Crystal is here."

"Did you warn her about your mother?"

Laura reached into the car and pulled out the last box, bumping the door with her hip to close it. "No. She was supposed to be gone all day but her car broke down."

"You should before General Patton arrives," Jenny said as they reached the threshold.

"My mother is not that bad."

"Not that bad? Laura, do you remember Thanksgiving four years ago? The one and only time you brought me to your mother's home?" She held the door open as Laura stepped inside.

"I honestly didn't think she'd walk in on us." Laura winced at the memory of her mother walking into the kitchen and finding the two of them locked in a passionate kiss.

"You know she blames me for corrupting you."

"Of course she does," Laura agreed with a playful grin. "After all, I was just an innocent young woman before I met you."

"Somehow that's not quite the way I remember it, Love." Jenny walked over to the cupboard and grabbed two glasses. "How long do we have before she gets here?"

"About two hours." Two hours to get this place cleaned up and ready for inspection, Laura thought to herself as she opened the refrigerator and retrieved the pitcher of ice water. As it did every time her mother came for a visit, Laura's nerves were on edge. Her father and both grandfathers had been career military and her mother was the perfect officer's wife. There was a nagging feeling in the back of her mind that she was missing something

something that her mother would be certain to notice. "Does everything look all right?"

Laura

everything is perfect. The pictures are straight, the dishes are all put away, the tablecloth is pressed. Stop worrying."

"I can't help it," she replied, leaning into Jenny's gentle touch on her shoulders. "I just want everything to go right. Jen, promise me you won't start?"

The hands gently massaging her shoulders paused. "Your mother needs to move into the nineties."

Laura turned and slipped her arms around the shorter woman's shoulders. "Jen, you gotta understand. Grandpa Matthews was a staunch Republican and my father was as conservative as they come. The *i.e.* of her only daughter in bed with another woman wasn't exactly an easy pill for her to swallow." She gave a small smile. Jenny's parents were the most open-minded people she had ever met and it was hard for her ex-lover to accept intolerance. "Please?"

"Change is good for the soul, you know," Jenny tried one last time. Laura knew she had won and gave the smaller woman a kiss on the forehead.

"Spoken like a true therapist. I'll do my best to keep her away from you." A thought occurred to her. "Speaking of therapy

"She walked over and shut the sliding glass door, not wanting her voice to carry. "I wanted to talk to you about something that happened last night."

"You okay?" Her ex-lover's concern was evident and Laura smiled.

"I'm fine, hon. Crystal had a nightmare last night."

"Did you talk to her about it?"

"I tried but she didn't want to talk."

"If she doesn't want to talk about it, you can't push her, Laura."

"I didn't but maybe you

"She left the thought unfinished but Jenny had no problem picking up on it.

"You want me to talk to her? Laur, she doesn't even know me."

"But it's what you do, isn't it?"

"I do one on one and group counseling with survivors of sexual abuse. I don't interpret dreams."

"From what I heard, it doesn't take much interpretation." She lowered her voice, as if to speak the words out loud was taboo. "She was crying out for her father to stop it, whatever 'it' was."

"Oh." Now Jenny understood why Laura brought it up. "How did she sound when she talked to you afterwards? Was she scared, angry, numb?"

"She didn't say much, just that she was fine." Laura paused, trying to remember more details. "She sounded mad but I think she was really upset."

"It could be a lot of things," Jenny said. "Try talking to her again." She looked around the room, seeing everything perfectly organized as usual. "I see she hasn't been the roommate from hell down here."

"She stays in her room most of the time." She looked at her watch and her eyes widened. "It's getting late. I need you to go find something to do while I get this floor mopped." She waited for the usual argument that the floor was clean enough but Jenny simply shrugged and carried her glass of ice water into the living room. "And don't forget to use a coaster," Laura called out before turning on the tap to get add more hot water to the half-full bucket of sudsy water.

Crystal's lungs burned as she inhaled deeply before setting the remains of her joint on the *e.g.* of the ashtray. It was a beautiful day and she had her glass door open in favor of letting the warm breeze filter through the screen. On top of her dresser, the incense holder released the scent of lavender throughout the room. Seeing no reason to meet her roommate's family, she had decided to stay in her room and get stoned all day. She heard the faint sound of the doorbell followed by the sounds of people trading welcomes and striking up conversation. Oh goodie, John Boy and the rest of the Waltons have shown up. She had meant to stop smoking before Laura's family arrived but with each puff, her resolve faded. She removed a sheet of rolling paper from its package and reached for the sandwich bag and her dwindling supply of marijuana.

"I can't believe these are all for me," Bobby said as he looked at the table of presents." He stepped past his sister to get a hug from Jenny. "How's my favorite sister-in-law?"

"Ex-sister-in-law," she reminded him. "I can't believe how tall you've gotten. I remember when you were only up to here on me." Jenny held her hand level with her shoulder to demonstrate.

"I grow a lot in a year," he replied. Looking up into the boyish face, Jenny had to admit that it was true. More than just height, Bobby had grown in bulk, his muscles showing beneath the pressed white shirt. His respectably short blond hair was offset by his brown eyebrows, making him look

much like a young Robert Redford. His face bore little sign of acne although his chin did show a nick from shaving. He was no longer the pimply faced fourteen year old that was more interested in Nintendo than girls.

"That you have, Tag-a-long," Jenny said affectionately. "Come see the cake your sister got for you." Grabbing hold of his elbow, she tugged him into the kitchen, leaving Laura alone with her mother.

"You didn't tell me she'd be here," Mrs. Taylor admonished.

"Jenny and I are still friends, Mom," Laura said. "Just because we're not lovers anymore

"

"Well now," her mother interrupted, obviously wanting to change the subject. "You're going to have to come over and help your brother set up that computer."

"I will, Mom. Does he have a phone jack in his room so he can get online?"

"Online?" Mrs. Taylor frowned. "Now you know I don't understand all that computer talk of yours. Yes, he has a phone in his room. With the number of girls that call him, it's a wonder I get to use it at all."

"Hey Mom, come see my cake," Bobby called out excitedly. Laura and her mother entered the kitchen.

"That looks very nice," Mrs. Taylor said. "Did you get it from Henderson's Bakery? Marge Carmichael bought a cake there for her daughter Katherine's coming out party. It was beautiful. Of course that was just before Katherine ran away with Billy McCormick."

Laura didn't bother to answer her mother's question, knowing that where the cake was purchased was immaterial. She nodded knowingly. "Uh huh."

"I saw her at the VFW two weeks ago and she was very quiet when it came to what her daughter was up to. If you ask me, I think she's pregnant." Mrs. Taylor glanced at Jenny. "But that's what happens when families have loose morals, I suppose."

"Or are driven away by their overbearing mothers," Jenny muttered low enough that only Bobby could hear. The teenager snorted, drawing a dirty look from Jenny and a quizzical one from his mother.

"All you all right?"

"Just swallowed wrong, Mom," he replied, trying very hard to keep the smirk off his face.

"You shouldn't gulp. I've told you about that," she admonished, her fingers absently brushing over the countertop in search of dust. Noting none, she rewarded her daughter with an approving nod. "You see how clean your sister keeps her home? I don't understand why you can't keep your room looking as respectable."

"I have too much stuff for my room," he explained.

"Your father would never have stood for such a mess," his mother continued. "He believed in packing light and keeping only what was important. We never knew when he would be shipped off to another base and we would have to move quickly."

"Mom, we haven't moved since I was three," Bobby said. "You still have cowboy wallpaper in my closet."

"That's not the point, Bobby. There's just no reason to allow clutter to build up."

Laura decided it was time to change the subject. "Mom, have you seen Mrs. Reynolds lately?"

"I saw her just last week at the Commissary. Her son was arrested last year for burglary, you know." Laura opened her mouth to speak but her mother wouldn't stop long enough for her to interrupt. "I tried to get away without her seeing me but she has eyes like an eagle, you know. She was all smiles telling me about her daughter, Marcia. She married a stock broker and has two girls now."

"Good for her."

"Janice Crenshaw's daughter had a little boy just last week."

"I didn't know Susan got married," Laura said.

"She didn't. She was going with Captain Henry's son but once he found out that she was pregnant, he shipped the boy off on a six month training session in Saudi Arabia."

"Why did he do that? I always thought Susan was a nice girl."

"If she was a nice girl, she wouldn't be pregnant," Mrs. Taylor pointed out.

"And of course it's not the boy's fault at all, right?" Jenny asked in a biting tone. Laura flashed her a warning look but it was too late. Mrs. Taylor seized the opportunity to step up on her proverbial soap box and give her sermon.

"There was a time when a young woman prided herself on being able to keep her virginity until marriage."

Mom

" Laura tried but her mother refused to be silenced.

"No Laura. It's time someone stood up for decency." She said. "These young girls now days think nothing of hopping from bed to bed and if they get pregnant, so what? You and your feminist friends have put abortion clinics on every corner."

"Would those be the same feminist friends who made it possible for women to own property and vote?" Jenny ignored the warning look she was getting from Laura and continued. "To hold office?"

Laura hooked her arm around Bobby's and gave it a tug. "Come on, bro. Let's go see how generous I was with the dead presidents in your graduation card."

"Ah, money. The gift that always fits," he said with a smile.

"Now wait a minute," his mother said. "You have to open my present up first or your sister's gifts won't make any sense." Mrs. Taylor ignored Jenny's comment in favor of watching her son open his gifts. "And Laura I hope you didn't spoil him by giving him too much money."

The laughter and voices carried upstairs, much to Crystal's annoyance. She had given up on the television and the radio stations were also a disappointment to her. The pot had made her tired but she didn't want to waste the whole day sleeping. No, it's better to sit here locking in my room getting stoned, she thought as she reached for her pipe and lighter. The sound of someone coming up the stairs made her change her mind and put her paraphernalia away. The door to Laura's room opened and closed, followed a few seconds later by the sound of the sliding door opening. A brown haired woman stepped onto the balcony and leaned her arms against the rail. A bright, beautiful day, Crystal had left her vertical blinds pulled back, allowing her a clear view of the outside. Of course it also meant that anyone on the balcony could look in and see her. Damn, why didn't I think of that, the stripper mentally cursed. It was too late to do anything about it and much to her dismay the woman turned and spotted her. "Hello there."

"Hi," Crystal replied.

"I'm Jenny, one of Laura's friends."

"Crystal. I'm her roommate."

"Yes, she mentioned you." The therapists face was warm and friendly and the stripper found herself leaving the sluggish comfort of her bed and stepping out onto the balcony.

"Sounds like everyone is having a good time," Crystal said as she leaned her hip against the rail.

"I needed a break from her mother," Jenny said. "So Laura said you were a

dancer, was it?"

Um

yeah." She reached in her shirt pocket and pulled out her cigarettes and lighter. "Are you a writer like she is?"

Jenny chuckled. "I'm afraid that kind of creativity is beyond me. Laura's the one with the vivid imagination. I'm a therapist."

"A shrink?"

"Well, not quite." She thought about what Laura had told her about Crystal's nightmare. "I work with survivors of rape and sexual abuse."

Crystal turned away, looking out at the ridge of trees separating the complex from the lake. "You mean you make them talk about what happened to them?"

"I don't make them do anything. I let them talk about what they need to talk about." With Crystal's head tilted, the blonde hair kept Jenny from seeing her face. "Sometimes people just need a place where they can go and know that's it's safe to tell the truth about what happened to them."

"Yeah? And what good does that do for them? It doesn't take away what happened."

"No, it doesn't take away what happened," Jenny said evenly. "But in many cases talking about what happened and learning to deal with the emotions surrounding it makes the difference between living and just existing."

Crystal threw her cigarette over the rail and reached for her door handle. "Sometimes it's better just to exist, Doc," she said before crossing the threshold into her room. She went to shut the door but found it stopped halfway by Jenny's hand.

"Existing is the easy way out," the therapist said. "It takes courage to move past what happened and regain control."

"Not everyone needs therapy to get over it," Crystal growled.

"Maybe not, but it helps." Jenny released her grip on the door and took a step back. "You know you're welcome to come downstairs and join us."

"I'm not into family things. Nice meeting you." Crystal shut the door and reached for the cord that controlled the blinds. Seconds later she heard Jenny pass through Laura's room and go down the stairs. What fucking good is therapy? It's not gonna change what happened. She flopped down on her bed and opened the nightstand drawer. She remembered Laura's request for her not to smoke pot while people were there. Sighing, she shut the drawer and punched her pillow. What a waste of a good Saturday afternoon. Locked in my own fucking room. Memories of childhood Saturdays spent that same way replayed themselves in her mind. Closing her eyes, Crystal thought back to a time when she and Patty would spend hours together, playing games or just chatting about nothing like sisters do. Inevitably, however, the happy scenes would always be shattered by their father's drunken rampages.

"Two hundred dollars, I own all four railroads," Patty said, holding out her hand.

"Can I pay you when I pass Go? Otherwise I have to mortgage Atlantic."

"I'll tell you what. I'll let you wait until you pass Go to pay me but if I hit Boardwalk, I get to wait until I pass Go too."

"Deal," Crystal happily agreed. "Maybe we can play something else afterwards?"

"I don't think there'll be time. He'll be home soon."

"Can we go for a bike ride?" the younger sister asked hopefully. Her body still bore bruises from her father's last rampage. Too late, they both realized when they heard the sputtering sound of his car pulling into the driveway.

"So much for our game," Patty said as she pulled the box onto the bed and started tossing in games pieces and cards. Games weren't just won and lost in their house. There was also a 'him' rule. When a game was interrupted due to 'him', it was declared a tie, no matter who the apparent winner was.

"When was the last time one of us won a game?" Crystal asked.

"I'm not sure but I know I'm the one who won," Patty grinned as she left Crystal's room and darted into her own. Seconds later their father entered the house, his loud voice easily carrying up to them.

"I've had it with you two!" he roared. Crystal jumped at the sound of a kitchen chair being thrown. "How many times do I have to tell you two to keep your fucking bikes out of the driveway?" Curling up into a ball, Crystal cowered in terror as she heard him coming up the stairs, his heavy footsteps coming closer and closer

Crystal sat up with a start, frantically looking around for the violent man she was certain was coming to beat her. Damn daydreams. She lit a cigarette and leaned back against the headboard. Can you make the nightmares go away, Doc?

Laura stood in the doorway until she saw the lights of her brother's car come on and the vehicle back out of its parking spot. "That went well," she said as she closed the door.

"Now I remember why I was studying all those nights you wanted to go visit your mother," Jenny said as she picked up an empty cup and headed for the kitchen. "There is a definite advantage to having her live two towns away."

"If only I was still going to school then," Laura joked back. "If I hear one more time how Captain So-and-so is having an affair with a twenty year old or how Mrs. Goldstein likes her tea with a shot of blackberry brandy, I'm going to seriously consider matricide."

Jenny laughed and opened the dishwasher. "Well, let's see if we can come up with a more suitable outlet for your aggravation than a capital crime. Hand me the plates, please."

"Sure. Oh, here's a cup and spoon." Laura handed over the dishes, then leaned against the counter.

"So how's the book coming along?" Jenny set the timer on the dishwasher and followed her ex-lover into the living room.

"I think I've written about four sentences since the last time you asked me," Laura sighed as she sat on the couch. "I don't know what's wrong. I've never had writer's block this bad."

Jenny put her hand on Laura's thigh. "Maybe you're trying too hard. Take a break, give it a few days, then go back and look at it."

"I tried that, Jen. It didn't work." She ran her fingers through her dark hair. "Sometimes I think I don't have an ounce of creative energy left in me."

"Do you want me to take a look at it?"

"No," Laura said. "Thanks though. I'll figure something out." She heard a sound and turned to see Crystal coming down the stairs. "Hello." A subtle nudge caused Jenny to pull her hand back.

"Hi." The blonde woman looked from Laura to Jenny and back again. "I thought everyone left. I didn't realize you still had company." She turned back toward the stairs.

"General Patton and Bobby left a few minutes ago," Jenny said, standing up and crossing over to where Crystal was standing. "We're just chatting. Why don't you join us?"

"Well, I

"

Laura gestured at the empty chair. "Have a seat. You have to be tired of being cooped up in that room all day."

Crystal hesitated, then nodded and moved over to the indicated seat. How bad could it be? I can be sociable for a few minutes. "So did your brother enjoy his party?"

"Yes, very much so."

"Do you have any brothers or sisters, Crystal?" Jenny asked after settling back down on the couch.

"I have an older sister."

"I'm an only child," the brown haired woman replied. "I always thought it would be great to have a sister."

"Me too," Laura agreed. "I love Bobby dearly but when I was sixteen, dragging my six year old brother with me to the mall was a real drag."

"Are you two close in age?"

"Three and a half years."

"Oh, that's nice," Jenny said. "So you two grew up together."

"Yeah," Crystal said quietly, her thoughts going to her beloved sister.

"So are you the big sister or is she?"

"Patty is older."

Jenny noticed the solemn expression on the blonde woman's face. "Does she live near here?"

Crystal shook her head. "No. She moved away a long time ago. We lost touch." She reached into her shirt pocket for her cigarettes, then remembered Laura's rule and settled for grabbing a carrot stick from the veggie platter within reach.

"I can't imagine losing touch with Bobby," Laura said. "Did you two have a fight or something?"

"She ran away when I was fourteen. I haven't seen or heard from her since." The emotions were building and Crystal felt the tightening in her throat. "Which way did you say the liquor store was?" she asked Laura.

"Go to the main road and take a right."

"Actually," Jenny said as she stood up, "I have to get going and I'm headed in that direction anyway. Do you need a ride?"

"I thought you were staying here tonight," Laura said with a question in her voice.

"I'm sorry, hon. I forgot I have to meet a client up in Manning first thing tomorrow morning. Her rapist is up for parole and she wants moral support when she speaks before the review board." She stood up and collected her purse. Laura rose as well.

"All right. I'll give you a call next week."

"Okay."

Once outside, Crystal lit a cigarette, the gray smoke forming a cloud near her face.

"Those are bad for you, you know."

"So I've heard," she replied, taking another long drag. "I suppose you don't allow smoking in your car either?"

"It's actually a loaner car while mine is in the shop but I've always found that the ashtray makes a great place to throw spare change."

"Figures," Crystal muttered, drawing as much smoke in as she could before tossing the butt away. "Are you a health nut like Laura?"

Jenny laughed and unlocked the doors to the car. "I'm not as bad as she is. I can enjoy a good burger and fries." They climbed in and with a turn of the key, the engine roared to life. She reversed the car out of its space, then guided it down the turning drive that lead to the main road. "So are you from around here?"

"Milton," Crystal replied. "About an hour up the turnpike."

"I know where it is. Big factory town."

"Big nothing town, you mean," the blonde woman said bitterly. "Milton is a nothing town filled nothing people."

"Your family still back there?"

"Wouldn't know, I haven't talked to them since I moved out."

Jenny nodded, her eyes never leaving the road. "How old were you when you ran away?"

Crystal's heart skipped a beat. "You a psychic or something, Doc?"

"I told you I'm a therapist." She slowed the car down as they approached a traffic light. "I'm perceptive. It's a necessary skill when dealing with people who aren't always forthcoming with their feelings."

"Yeah? So what else does your great perception tell you about me?" She crossed her arms defensively.

Jenny looked at her, then back at the road as the traffic started moving again. "Your answer tells me that I was right about you running away."

"Just as soon as I could," Crystal said. "A little more than a year after Patty did."

"At the house you said that she ran away when you were fourteen. You ran away when you were fifteen?"

"There's that perception of yours again." She looked out the window, dimly noting the liquor store sign approaching in the distance. "I tried to run away with her but I got caught. I tried three more times before I succeeded."

"It must have been pretty bad for you to try so hard to get away."

"Is this the point where you tell me all my problems are because of my fucked up childhood?" She pointed at the liquor store. "I don't need therapy to know that." Crystal opened the door before the car had come to a complete stop. "Thanks for the ride, Doc." She stepped out and shut the door, not giving Jenny a chance to respond.

The streets were deserted save for the occasional car, giving Crystal the freedom to drink from the bottle as she walked. By the time the complex came into view, her gait had a decidedly drunken sway to it and a third of the bottle's contents were gone. It was only as she approached the building that Crystal realized she had not taken her keys with her when she left. Fuck. Miss Tight-Ass will give me a lecture for sure. She brought the bottle to her lips and took a large swallow, wincing as the burning liquid made its way down her throat. She used her sleeve to wipe her mouth before reaching for the doorbell. Her head was pounding from the whiskey and all she wanted to do was lie down. "Dammit, open the fucking door, Laura." She hit the doorbell again, following it quickly by pounding her fist against the door. Sweat formed on her upper lip and Crystal leaned her forehead against the frame. She hadn't eaten anything more than a couple of carrot sticks all day and her body was quickly telling her that she had exceeded its limits. "Oh fuck," she whispered, feeling her stomach roil again. She pressed the doorbell repeatedly until she heard Laura unlocking the door. "Move!" Pushing the puzzled woman out of her way, Crystal staggered to the bathroom, barely lifting the toilet seat before her stomach made its final rebellion.

Laura closed the outside door and shook her head as she heard her roommate vomiting into the toilet. "Crystal? All you all right?" She received a retching sound in reply and groaned inwardly. I see you found the liquor store. "There are washcloths in the linen closet."

Gak

o-okay."

Laura went into the kitchen and filled a glass with water. She heard the toilet flush followed by the sound of the faucet being turned on. Minutes later a more composed Crystal exited the bathroom. "Thanks," she said, taking the offered glass.

"Feel better?"

Crystal nodded. "A bit."

"You should eat something. It'll settle your stomach."

The blonde woman thought about the three microwavable dinners sitting in the freezer and shook her head. "Naw, I'll be fine."

"Suit yourself." Laura opened the refrigerator and peered in. "I have a batch of leftovers from the party. Nothing much, batch of sandwiches and the rest of the veggie platter." She grabbed the plate of sandwiches and held it up for Crystal to see. "There's eg. salad, ham and cheese

" She looked quizzically at one of the neatly cut triangles. "Um

your guess is as good as mine." She handed the plate to Crystal. "Help yourself. Other than the eg. salad, I don't eat any of it." After getting a bowl of tossed salad for herself, Laura grabbed a bottle of dressing and used her hip to close the refrigerator door. She nodded in the direction of the living room. Reluctantly the blonde woman followed her out of the kitchen.

Laura settled on the couch while Crystal took the recliner. An awkward silence formed as neither was certain what to say to the other. Crystal took a bite of her sandwich.

"How is it?" Laura asked.

"Good." She took another bite, her stomach appreciating something healthy for a change. Realizing that she couldn't just eat her roommate's food and disappear back upstairs, Crystal resigned herself to being at least somewhat sociable. "So your mother and brother showed up, where's your father?"

"He died seven years ago." Sensing the opening allowed by the question, Laura tucked her right foot up under her left thigh and took a sip from her glass. "What about you? You said you have an older sister. What about your folks?"

Crystal took another bite of her sandwich and shrugged. "Last I knew they were both alive and living up in Curtisville."

"You don't talk to them?"

"No." She picked through the sandwich triangles on the plate before settling on what looked like chicken salad. "I haven't spoken to them since the day I left." She took a bite and grimaced. "Ugh, what is this?"

"Isn't that the one I said I had no clue?"

"Must be." The stripper looked around and spotted the paper bag sitting on the counter. The buzz was starting to wear off. Well if you want to chat, I'm gonna drink. She stood up and went out to the kitchen, returning moments later with a rock glass filled with *i.e.* a bottle of cola, and her whiskey. She was just sitting down when Laura decided to resume the earlier conversation.

"So why aren't you in contact with them?"

While not unexpected, the question did cause Crystal to hesitate and look over at her roommate. "It's a long story."

"I'm a good listener."

Silence reigned as Crystal waged an internal war. Don't tell. The words echoed over and over in her mind. No one will believe it anyway. "Let's just say it wasn't a happy time in my life." She reached down and picked up the glass and whiskey, pouring until the amber liquid filled more than half the glass. She added just enough soda to change the color of the drink, then settled back in the recliner.

"Is that what the nightmares are about?"

Crystal swallowed, wincing as the burning liquor made its way down her throat. "You want the Reader's Digest version?" Her voice was tinged with anger. "My father is an asshole and my mother is a spineless coward who cares more about what the neighbors think than about her kids." The glass made its way to her lips again.

"Is that why your sister ran away?"

"You think of a better reason?" Normally Crystal would have ended the conversation by now but the alcohol was doing a good job of keeping the defenses down. "I took off a year later."

Laura's brow furrowed as she did the mental math. "You said earlier you were fourteen when she left. You were only fifteen when you ran away?"

"Fifteen and a half, actually. Not the best age to be out on the streets but what the hell. It was better than being with them," she said bitterly, her gaze

focused on the coffee table.

"There wasn't anyone you could turn to? An aunt, a teacher?"

Crystal snorted and drained her drink. "Once Patty told a teacher what was happening. She called our mother." Her face turned hard and she reached for the whiskey bottle. "Guess who she told?"

"Your father?"

The stripper nodded. "He beat Patty senseless. You think I was ever stupid enough to tell someone else?" She shook her head and made another drink. Somewhere in Crystal's drunken mind it registered that she was doing exactly that. She was telling her roommate, a woman she barely knew, that her father used to beat her. This time she didn't bother with the cola, drinking the whiskey straight. "I bet the characters in your stories never have such sordid pasts, eh?"

"Um, no

not usually."

"Of course not." The liquid sloshed around in her glass as she gestured with her hands. "This is normal to you. A nice home, a reliable car, a family that loves you

I never had that." The urge for a cigarette was growing as was her desire for a strong hit of pot. She tugged lightly on her shirt. "I think I'm gonna go change and relax on the balcony."

"I guess it is kind of warm tonight. I'm sure you're due for a cigarette too." Laura stood up and reached for Crystal's glass. "I'll get us both fresh ice and meet you up there."

Meet me? Damn. There was no good excuse for refusing Laura's company and she did say she was going out on the balcony. "Uh, yeah sounds good." She picked up the whiskey bottle and headed for the stairs, determined to get a hit in before her roommate joined her outside.

Crystal was pulling on her shorts when she heard Laura coming up the stairs. Damn, you're quick, she thought as she zipped up and walked over to the nightstand. Opening the drawer, she pulled out a small flat wooden pipe and one of her many lighters. She took two quick puffs before putting it back and closing the drawer. Grabbing her bottle, cigarettes, and ashtray, she stepped out onto the balcony seconds before Laura.

"Oh good," Laura said when she saw the ashtray. "I wasn't sure you had one, especially when I saw all the butts on the grass."

"I usually don't think to bring it out here with me." Crystal flopped down on the white plastic chair and reached for the glass Laura had brought up for her. "Figured you'd have a fit if I tossed one over the rail."

"You figured correctly," the dark haired woman replied. "It took me a good fifteen minutes to pick all those up this morning."

"Fine, I won't toss them anymore." She lit a cigarette and reached for her bottle.

"Are you working tomorrow?"

"Yeah, I've taken more nights off lately than I can afford as it is." Crystal looked out at the shadowed outlines of the trees as dusk settled. "You ever hear the owl?"

"Oh, you mean George? Yeah, I hear him at night sometimes when I'm up late writing." Laura looked out as well, as if she could spot the elusive bird hiding between the leaves.

"There used to be an owl that lived in the trees near the trailer park," the blonde woman said, taking a drink between sentences. "At night sometimes I'd hear him. I used to lie awake wondering who he was looking for."

"The love of his life, I would imagine," Laura said. "Isn't that what we're all looking for?"

"I'd rather have money," Crystal said, her eyebrows raising when she heard her companion laugh. "What?"

"You don't have a romantic bone in your body, do you?"

"I don't believe in fairy tales." She brought the glass to her lips, finding comfort in the familiar smell of whiskey. "Life ain't the Brady Bunch."

"No, it's not," Laura agreed. "But it isn't Oliver Twist, either. Life is what you make of it."

"More like what it makes of you," the stripper replied sourly, drawing hard on her cigarette.

"The great thing about being an adult is the freedom to make choices," Laura said, glancing over to see Crystal drain her glass and reach for the dwindling supply of whiskey. "When I was in college my folks expected me to end up being a teacher. I was miserable studying all the time when all I wanted to do was write stories."

"So you have a degree?"

Laura nodded. "I've never used it. I doubt I could even get State certification at this point without going back for more credits."

"At least you have something to fall back on." She stubbed the cigarette out and took a sip of her drink.

"Well, you have a skill, Crystal. You're fit, you can dance." The brief image of her roommate at the Tom Cat Club, half-naked and slithering around the center pole, flashed through Laura's mind. "I think they're looking for an aerobics instructor over at Mary's House of Fitness." It was hard to make out the quiet woman's features in the fading daylight but the clenched jaw and white-knuckled grip on the glass were still evident. "Crystal? Is something wrong?"

"I'm not into aerobics."

"You don't have to be

" Laura stopped at the dismissive wave of Crystal's hand.

"I'm not exactly what they're looking for," she said angrily. "Forget it, Laura. You wouldn't understand." The glass was once again drained and a cigarette lit.

But

"

"I'm not a dancer!" Her feet, which had been resting on the rail, came down angrily on the wooden boards of the deck. The sudden movement caused some of the whiskey to splash out of the glass but Crystal paid no attention. She turned to face the writer. "I'm a stripper, Laura. I take my clothes off for money!" She leaned forward, her features hard. "I'm barely a step above a whore."

"I know," Laura said calmly. "I mean, I know you're a stripper." Crystal blinked in surprise, some of the anger diffusing. The dark haired woman continued. "One of the characters in my newest story has an affair with a stripper and I went to the Tom Cat Club once to do research." She shrugged at the questioning look. "I figured you'd tell me when you were ready." Do I tell her now? "Um

you aren't the only keeping secrets."

"No biggie. Your life is none of my business."

"Maybe not, but if you're going to continue living here, you should know at least this part." Laura took a deep breath. As many years as she'd been open about her life, there was still always that little quiver of fear that she would be rejected. "Jenny wasn't just my roommate when she lived here. We were lovers."

"You're a dyke?"

"I'm a lesbian," Laura bristled. "Jenny and I were lovers for almost two years."

"Oh," Crystal said quietly, unsure of what to say. "I wouldn't have guessed. I mean, neither of you look like

"

"Like a dyke?" the writer finished. "Here's a news flash, Miss Sheridan, not every gay person is obvious about it."

"I didn't mean," Crystal started, then stopped when she realized that was exactly what she meant. "I guess I never really thought about it." A bit subdued, she sat back in her seat and stared at the silhouetted tree line.

The seconds stretched into awkward minutes, neither sure what to say to the other. Finally Laura couldn't take the silence any longer. "Nice night." Crystal grunted in response, forcing the writer to try again. "Bet the stars will be pretty."

"Stars are boring."

"So you do remember how to talk. I thought I stunned you into silence," Laura teased, earning a sidelong glance.

"I've met a few lesbians before," Crystal said, turning her gaze back to the half-empty glass. "My friend has a cousin that's one." She paused, then shrugged. "Doesn't bother me."

"Good." Laura tucked a strand of dark hair behind her ear. "I'd hate to think something like that would get in the way of our living together." She chuckled to herself. "After all, there's enough other things."

"Such as?" Now Crystal's attention was more on the conversation than her drink. The glass which seemed permanently attached to her hand was set down on the table.

"Nothing."

"You wouldn't have said it if there wasn't something behind it." The blonde woman leaned towards her. "What? Is there something I do that annoys you? Other than the pot, that is?"

Laura hesitated before answering. "What possessed you to buy a clear shower curtain?"

"It's better than that blue flowery thing you had up," Crystal defended. "The clear one lets in more light."

Laura decided to take a chance and tease the younger woman. "You need to see what you're doing in the shower? Don't you know where everything is by now?"

"Screw you," the stripper said playfully, her smile growing. "You need a whole shelf just for your shampoo, conditioner, finishing rinse and God knows what else you have in those bottles." She reached absently for her glass. "How many hours do you spend in there?" She took a sip of her drink. "I get in there, do what I have to do and get out. No mess, no fuss." She reached for her cigarettes only to be stopped by the high pitched beeping of her pager. Holding it up in front of her, Crystal pressed the light button and looked at the number on the display. "Shit. I gotta use the phone."

"Help yourself. After all, you pay half the bill for it." Laura jerked her thumb at the door to her room. "There's a phone next to the bed."

"Thanks."

Laura leaned back and finished her *i.e.* tea, quietly listening to snippets of Crystal's phone conversation. She figured out that it was the Tom Cat Club looking for the blonde woman to come in and work. Crystal swore profusely and yelled at the person on the other end of the phone but in the

end told them she'd be there as soon as she could. She hung the phone up and returned to the balcony.

"I have to go to work. Charice twisted her ankle. Where do you keep the phone book?"

Laura rose to her feet. "I'll give you a ride if you'd like."

"Naw, you don't have to do that. I'll just call a cab."

"Really, it's not a problem. I need to get some milk in here for coffee tomorrow anyway. I'll just stop at the Money Slasher over on Fourteenth."

"You sure?"

"Yeah. Let me go put some long pants on and I'll be right with you."

After unlocking the passenger door, Laura crossed over to her side and stepped into her late model Jeep. She fastened her seat belt and looked pointedly at her passenger, who rolled her eyes and reached for her seat belt.

"Do you need a ride home when you're done?" she inquired while starting the engine.

"Naw, I'll get Rick or one of the girls to drive me home. No biggie."

"All right." She backed the vehicle up and pulled out onto the main road.

"Nice car," Crystal commented, looking at the brightly lit dials and buttons of the dashboard. "You have a CD player?"

"Yes." Without looking, Laura reached behind the passenger seat and retrieved a case full of discs. "I doubt there's anything in there that you like."

Crystal took the case and looked at the titles, the smirk on her face growing. "Paul McCartney's greatest hits? Little River Band? Captain and Tennille? What, are you stuck in the seventies?"

"Seventies and eighties, actually. I like that music."

Crystal closed the case and put it in the back. "You don't have to worry about me borrowing any of your CD's, that's for sure."

"Let me guess. You're into heavy metal."

"When the mood strikes me. Most of the time I listen to rock."

"I prefer songs that I can understand the lyrics to, not super loud drums and guitars." Laura guided the Jeep onto the highway and picked up speed.

"What time do you finish?"

"Last show is midnight. I usually get out of there around two or so but like I said, don't worry about it. I'll get a ride from someone." She pulled a cigarette out of her pack and rolled the window down.

"I don't allow smoking in my car."

"Even with the window down? It'll draw out all the smoke."

"It doesn't draw all of it out."

"Fine," Crystal huffed, jamming the cigarette back into the pack. "I suppose finding a decent station on the radio is also out of the question?"

Smiling in the dark, Laura turned on the directional signal and pulled into the passing lane. "As long as you can find one that doesn't threaten to blow my speakers."

The radio stayed off.

"I can't believe the crowd out there tonight. You'd think it was a Saturday or somethin'."

"Can't really complain, Monica. More customers means more tips." Crystal watched her reflection in the mirror as she adjusted the bust of her outfit.

"Damn, either I'm gaining weight or these costumes are getting smaller."

"There isn't that much material to start with," the other woman replied. "Why don't you wear the leopard outfit?"

"Ugh, I hate that outfit. You ever wear it?"

"Well it's better than that thing." The redheaded stripper pointed at a black leather outfit hanging on the rack.

"I'd rather wear that than the leopard outfit." Turning away from the mirror, Crystal picked up her elbow length gloves and began slipping them on. "I hope they're not letting Charlie do the music tonight."

"Oh, tell me about it, girlfriend. He did it last night and couldn't get two songs in a row right. Angel and I were ready to kill him."

"Why do they let a loser like that run the booth when Mike's not working?"

"Because he's cheap, Crys. And as long as Rick runs the place, we're going to continue getting jerks like that."

"Tell me about it," Crystal agreed. "He told me to take my car to that pervert buddy of his and the damn thing died on me." She lit a cigarette and leaned against the makeup table. "I swear if I didn't need this job

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"Well I'm not here for the fun of it either, Crys. Got an extra one of those?" Monica asked, pointing at the cigarette. "Thanks. I meant to stop on the way over here but I ended up running late."

"No prob."

"Anyway," the redhead paused long enough to exhale a lungful of smoke. "I'm looking around. I can't keep doing this night after night. Don't say anything to Rick, though. I don't want anyone to know until I'm sure I have this other job lined up."

"Another job doing what?"

"There's an entry level job at the office where my cousin works. It's not much, filing and answering the phone but it's better than this." Monica took another puff. "Let's face it, I'm not getting any younger and Mister Right hasn't come through that door yet."

"The only thing that comes through that door is horny old men and obnoxious punks thinking they're God's gift to women," Crystal replied before turning back to the mirror and picking up the brush to reign in an errant lock of hair. "If it wasn't for the money none of us would be here. This job sucks." A hard pounding at the door ended their conversation.

"Let's go ladies." Rick's authoritative voice boomed through the closed door. "Two minutes."

Running the brush through her hair one last time, Crystal made a final check in the mirror before turning to face Monica.

"You ready?"

"As ready as I'll ever be," she replied, surprised by the tired reflection staring back at her. How much longer can I keep doing this? she asked herself. As long as men are willing to pay to see it, the reflection silently answered. "Maybe not," she mumbled.

"What?" Monica asked.

"Nothing. Let's go give the boys their thrills." She opened the door to face a fuming Rick, who ushered them quickly to the stage.

Crystal was walking around her room, picking up her dirty clothes and stuffing them into the laundry bag. With most of her belongings destroyed in the fire, the need to do laundry came often. She went downstairs to find a basket of Laura's clothes sitting on top of the washer. Hmm, must have done it last night. Moving the basket to the top of the dryer, she opened the lid and began stuffing her wadded up clothes into the washer. A healthy splash of detergent and a twist of the dial and the washer hummed to life. After getting the newspaper from the front step she made herself a cup of coffee and went to the deck to wait for the laundry to be ready to be transferred to the dryer.

A few minutes later Laura came downstairs. "Crystal, didn't you see my clothes on top of the washer?"

"The clean ones?" She set the paper down. "Of course. I set them on top of the dryer."

"They aren't clean," the writer corrected. "I was going to take a shower before starting the laundry."

"What do you mean?" Confused, Crystal rose and walked over to the laundry area. "They're all folded."

"I always fold my clothes."

"You fold your dirty laundry?" She shook her head with disbelief. "I should have known. If anyone would fold their dirty laundry, you would. I'm surprised you don't iron it too."

"Only when I'm in the mood," Laura teased, reaching for a coffee cup. "If you see a basket of laundry on top of the washer, it's dirty. Just for future reference."

"Fine. Even if it looks clean, it's dirty." She turned and noticed Laura's outfit, a light blue baseball jersey and white pants with a matching blue stripe. Looking down, she saw the matching blue and white stirrup style socks. "What are you dressed like that for?"

"I'm on a softball team. Jenny's going to be stopping by in a few minutes to pick me up."

"You play softball? Somehow I can't picture you getting all dirty and sliding around the bases."

"I usually don't slide and yes, I play softball. Our team is called Ameilia's Airhearts. We're sponsored by Ameilia's Pub and she thought this was a good play on words. It's fun and it's a great way to get together with my friends." Laura poured herself a cup of coffee. "Do you play any sports?"

Crystal laughed. "I haven't played ball since I was a little kid and I knew then that I sucked."

"Ah, you just need practice. If you aren't doing anything today, you're welcome to come along."

"Thanks but no thanks. Getting hot and sweaty knocking a ball around isn't my *i.e.* of a good time."

Laura shrugged. "Suit yourself. Did you get the paper this morning?"

"Yeah, it's out on the deck."

"In how many pieces?"

"Hardy har har," Crystal said. "Go drink your coffee. I'm gonna go take a shower."

"If the wash finishes, I'll put it in the dryer for you."

Crystal came downstairs after taking her shower to find that Jenny had arrived, dressed in the same uniform as Laura. "Oh, hi Crystal," the therapist said with a smile. "How are you?"

"Fine."

"Hey Jen, we'd better get going," Laura said, picking up her cleats and glove.

"You want to come along?" Jenny offered to Crystal. "We're playing against the team from The Falcon."

"Naw."

"Come on, it'll be fun," she offered again. "You can watch Babe Ruth over here knock the ball over the fence a dozen times." She jerked her thumb in the direction of the now embarrassed Laura.

"No, really, I

"

"What are you doing today that's more fun than hanging out with a bunch of fun loving people and getting some fresh air?" Crystal fidgeted and looked in the direction of the washer. Jenny followed her gaze and shook her head. "Nope. Doing laundry isn't good enough." She reached over and tugged on the blonde woman's elbow. "Let's go."

Crystal stopped short when she saw Jenny's vehicle. "What the hell is that?"

"It's a Thing."

"What?" She walked closer to the pumpkin orange classic. "It looks like German army Jeep with the top down."

"It's a Thing. Well, that's what it ended up being called. Technically it's a Volkswagen One-Eighty-One." Jenny walked up proudly to her car and opened the back door. "This one is a seventy-four. The seventy-threes are the hardest to find but this one works with unleaded gas."

"Must be a bitch to get parts for," Crystal said, still giving dubious looks at the Thing. She shot a look at Laura when she saw the smirk directed at her.

"It's a perfectly safe car," Jenny said, walking over to the driver's side.

"Except when you get in one of your moods," Laura said, hopping into the passenger seat, directly in front of Crystal. She turned in her seat to look at her roommate. "She's been known to confuse the Thing with a racecar from time to time."

"Bite me," Jenny said tartly, sliding into the driver's seat and putting her key in the ignition. "I'm not the one with six points on her license." She placed a hard plastic hairband on to keep the wind from whipping her hair about and put the Thing in reverse. The clutch slipped twice before engaging, causing the car to lurch and buck. "Sorry about that."

"No problem," Crystal assured, looking around for the seat belt. She had to dig between the seat and back to find the two ends but when she did she put it on and quickly tightened it into position. Laura saw what she was doing and smirked.

"Yeah, no problem."

"You know you two can walk if you don't like the way I drive." She paused long enough to glance at the oncoming traffic before darting out and into the lane. "Ah, I knew Betsy would be fine once she had her oil changed."

"Betsy is what she calls the great pumpkin," Laura explained. "I always called it a piece of

"

"Don't say it," Jenny warned, turning on the AM radio and finding an oldies station. "You know how temperamental she is."

"Everything has a personality with her," Laura explained.

"Speaking of personalities," the therapist said, "don't be surprised if Donna and Wendy are all over each other. Kelly said she saw them at Amelia's Tuesday night and they were acting like they were back together."

"Wonderful. That means Toni is going to be bitchy."

"Maybe not. Kelly said Toni was trying to get back with Linda."

"Like Linda would take her back after what happened."

"Hey, you never know, Laura. She took Toni back once before."

From the back seat, Crystal listened to the gossip, the multitude of names and who was doing what to whom mixing in her mind until she had no clue what was going on. All she figured out from the conversation was that Laura was good with a bat and played right field while Jenny was the first baseman.

They pulled into a dirt parking lot, Jenny beeping the horn and waving at her teammates that were gathered around the bleachers. Minutes later Crystal was settled on the bleacher near first base, Jenny's cooler sitting next to her. To the stripper's disappointment, Jenny had only packed various kinds of sodas and juices to drink, no beer or wine coolers. Several women were also sitting on the bleachers, most talking amongst themselves about one or more of the players. Crystal saw the opposing team along the third base line, the Falcon's jerseys red in contrast to the Airheart's blue. The umpire blew her whistle and the blue team took the field while the red team began swinging bats to warm up. "Wish us luck," Laura said as she jogged past her.

"Oh, so you know Laura, hmm?" a husky voice asked, causing Crystal to turn to the side to see who was speaking to her. A woman with short red hair and wearing a blue jersey stood before her. "Lucky Laura."

"I'm her roommate. Crystal." She held her hand out and found it quickly incased in a firm grip.

"Peg." Crystal felt the woman's eyes checking out her body and shifted uncomfortably. "So you look kind of familiar. Have we met somewhere before?"

"Oh please," Jenny called from her vantage point ten feet away at first base. "Ignore her, Crystal. She's got more lines than the phone company. Rogers, when you are you gonna feel up to playing again?" she asked. "And I mean softball," she added before the redhead could get out a smart aleck reply.

"Um, no I don't think we have," Crystal said, pulling her hand back and looking toward home plate. The pitcher was done with her warmups and the batter was getting into position.

"When did you become captain of the team, Foster?" Peg said to Jenny before turning her attention back to the attractive blonde. "So you're Laura's new girlfriend, hmm?"

"I'm her roommate, not her girlfriend," the stripper replied quickly, not wanting anyone to get the wrong *i.e.* about her relationship with Laura. Looking around the field and audience, Crystal began to suspect that heterosexuals were in the minority here.

"Just friends?" Peg smirked and took a step closer. "Taylor must be dying with you around." She patted Crystal's bare knee just below the *e.g.* of her khaki shorts. "Honey, if you were my roommate I guarantee you wouldn't be going to bed alone at night."

"I'm straight," she said, shifting out of reach. The first pitch was a ball followed by a strike. Then the batter managed to connect wood with leather and the ball sailed out to deep right field. It hit the ground a second before Laura caught up with it. The batter rounded first and was halfway to second when wisdom dictated not testing the arm strength of Amelia's Pub's right fielder. She jogged quickly back to first.

"Hi Jen, how's it going?"

"Good Tracy, how are things with you?"

"Just fine. I think Lisa might go out with me tonight."

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah, at least she's talking to me again." Tracy turned her attention to home plate. All right, time to get your pretty asses kicked."

"Diane couldn't hit a beach ball," Jenny said, referring to the batter who just swung and missed the first pitch.

"Big talk, Foster. You'll be eating crow when she knocks that ball over the fence."

Despite Tracy's hopes, Diane hit a slow roller to second which was then thrown to first for the double play. The next batter struck out, ending the visitor's half of the inning. Laura and the rest of the outfield came running in, the Amelia's pub players settling on the bench between the bleachers and the first base line.

"Having fun?" Laura asked as she tossed her glove on the ground and opened the cooler in search of something cold to drink.

"Sure, see that one over there?" Crystal pointed at Peg, who was plying her charms on the third baseman.

"Peg? What about her?"

"She's jealous of you."

"Of me? Why?"

"Ah Laura," Jenny said as she joined the conversation. "You know Peg has a thing for spunky looking blondes. She offered to keep Crystal warm at night."

The writer nodded. "Ah, and I suppose she wasn't quite as subtle as that, was she?"

"I thought she was going to drool," Jenny said as she reached past Crystal and took a bottle of ice water out of the cooler. "Crystal told her she was straight and Peg took a walk. Don't worry, I'll keep an eye out and protect our friend's virtue."

"I'm sorry about that," Laura said to her roommate. "Usually they know how to behave like ladies," she shot a warning glance in Peg's direction but it was lost as the redhead's back was to them.

Jenny picked up her helmet and bat. "Guess I'd better get over there."

"Good luck," Laura said.

"Yeah, good luck," Crystal added as Jenny headed for the batter's box.

Swish

thwap! "Strike one!" the umpire called.

"Shake it off, Jen," Laura encouraged, clapping and urging her teammates to do the same. Half-hearted calls of support came from the bench.

Swish

thwap! "Strike two!"

"Come on, Jen, you can do it."

Swish

thwap! "Strike three, you're out!" the umpire said. Jenny walked back over to the side of the bleachers and picked up her drink.

"Hey Doc, I thought the *i.e.* was to hit the ball," Crystal said, earning a snort from Laura.

"You be quiet, my dear Laura," Jenny warned. "As for you," she turned her attention to the now grinning Crystal. "I see you're picking up her warped sense of humor." She took a long swallow of her fruit juice. "It's only the first out. Nothing to worry about."

"Duck!" Someone yelled as a foul ball cleared the bench. "Donna, do us a favor and try not to kill us before the inning's over, okay?" someone yelled to the embarrassed batter. The next swing put the ball in deep left field, allowing Donna to get to second base. Toni's base hit advanced the runner to third and a walk to Lisa filled the bases.

"All right, Laura," Jenny said. "Show 'em what ya got."

"Why is she standing on that side of the plate?" Crystal asked. "Everyone else stood on the other side."

"Laura's a lefty. They're supposed to stand on that side," the therapist explained.

The first contact sent the ball over the fence on the third base side.

"Foul ball, strike one!" the umpire called.

"Come on, Laura, show these little girls up," Kelly, the Ameilia's catcher, shouted.

Crystal sat quietly on the bleacher and watched as the pitcher wound up and fired the ball underhanded at the plate. This time Laura's hit was good, dropping into shallow center field. It was enough for the runners to advance, allowing Ameilia's Pub to score the first run of the game.

"Nice shot," Tracy said, taking her position covering first base. "Trying to impress your new girl?"

"She's my roommate, not my lover," Laura corrected. Tracy looked over at the blonde woman in question and shook her head.

"Too bad, Taylor. Looks like she's got a good set going there."

"Pervert."

The first baseman looked at Crystal again. "I don't know. Seems to me that it's perverted to let something that fine live under your roof and you not doing anything about it."

"She's straight, Tracy."

"So I've heard. Wouldn't be the first time one of them was shown how much better a woman can be."

"She's off limits. Pay attention to the game."

"I'd much rather pay attention to her," Tracy said with a sigh, reluctantly turning her focus back to the softball game.

Unaware that she was the subject of conversation between the two women at first base, Crystal continued to listen to Jenny identify everyone on the team. "Now the one up to bat is Kelly."

"The catcher," Crystal said, receiving a nod in reply.

"Yeah, now remember the one that hit on you earlier? That's one of her ex's."

"One?"

"Oh yeah, Kelly makes the rounds. We were together briefly."

"Why do I get the feeling I'm a minority here?"

Jenny laughed and reached for another bottle of juice from the cooler. "Because you are, m'dear." She popped the top off the bottle. "Take a look around. I think you're probably the only straight one here except for maybe some of the other fans." Jenny took a step closer to the end of the bleachers and lowered her voice, not wanting their conversation overheard by the players on the nearby bench. "Does it bother you to be around so many lesbians?"

"No, I don't think it does," Crystal said, sliding down one row of seats on the bleacher, bringing her face to face with the therapist. "I don't think I've ever been around so many."

"Well don't worry," Jenny said. "We don't bite."

"Unless asked," Carmen said as she walked by, catching only the tail end of the conversation. She stopped and held her hand out. "Carmen Cruz."

"Crystal Sheridan."

"Pleased to meet you, Miss Sheridan." Carmen's darker skin stood in contrast to the blonde woman's lighter tone as they shook hands. "I haven't seen you here before. Whose girlfriend are you?"

"None. I'm Laura's roommate," she said for what felt like the hundredth time.

"Well I'm glad you decided to grace us with your presence," the pitcher said, reluctantly releasing Crystal's hand. "Maybe you'll bring us good luck. Lord knows we could use some lately."

"We've lost our last four games," Jenny explained.

"Oh," Crystal said as she rose to her feet. "I don't know how you can play in this heat." She was wearing a tank top covered by a light blue short sleeved shirt. Without thought she peeled off the outer shirt and tossed it aside. At that very moment, Kelly hit a slow roller up the third base line. Distracted by the activity on the bleachers, the shortstop bobbled the ball, accidentally kicking it out to center field and allowing two more runs to score. Laura advanced from first to third and the home team bench exploded with catcalls and teasing comments when they realized what had happened.

"You're supposed to keep your eyes on the ball, not the girls," Toni called.

"Hey Duncan, I didn't think you were that hard up," someone else said. "What's the matter, not getting any?"

"I get it just fine," the shortstop said, aware that her most recent conquest was standing in the outfield. "I just

well

" She stammered to a stop, causing a new round of hoots and laughter.

"I knew you were a good luck charm," Carmen said to the now blushing Crystal. "You coming out with us after the game?"

"After?" Not knowing the answer, she turned to Jenny.

"We're not sure yet. Depends on how Laura is feeling," she said.

"Well then," Carmen said, picking up her glove. "If you do come out, you'll have to allow me the pleasure of buying you a drink," she directed her offer at Crystal. "After all, we're ahead because of you."

"I uh, sure," Crystal said. "If we go." A crack of the bat and Wendy grounded out, ending the inning.

"Well, I guess it's time for me to get out there." Carmen left just as Laura stopped by to pick up her glove.

"They're not bothering you too much, are they?" the writer asked with concern, aware that Crystal was the cause of the shortstop's distraction. There were days when the team from Ameilia's Pub became bawdy and no doubt this was going to be one of them.

"I think I've been hit on three times and the one that plays third base said she'd pay me to that again when she's up to bat." Crystal shrugged. "Other than that and everyone asking if we're sleeping together, I'm fine."

"They're really pretty harmless," the writer said. "If anyone gives you a hard time, you just tell me. I've got to get out there. Talk to you in three hopefully short outs."

Crystal watched her roommate head to right field before turning her attention to the activities at home plate. Alex, the Falcon shortstop who made the error in the previous inning, was at the plate. The catcher, Kelly, couldn't resist the opportunity.

"Hey Duncan, think you can pay attention to the ball this time?"

"Go to hell, Kelly," the batter said without malice. "I noticed you buzzing around her like a bee to honey."

"Batter up," the umpire interrupted. Alex took her position and waited for Carmen's pitch.

"I'd pay good money to dive into that hive," Kelly said just as Alex swung.

Swish

thwap! "Strike one!" The Falcon shortstop adjusted her helmet and resumed her stance.

"Bet she's sweeter than honey, too

mmm."

Thunk! "Foul, strike two!"

"Shut up, Kelly," Alex said, tightening the wrist straps of her batting gloves. She stepped in again, this time barely stopping herself from swinging at a low pitch.

Thwap! "Ball."

"Come on, Duncan, knock the shit out of it," one of the Falcon players yelled.

"Of course it's too bad she's straight."

Thwap! "Strike three, you're out!" Alex looked from the catcher to Crystal and back again, shaking her head and smiling when she realized that she'd just been distracted into making an out.

"It's gonna be a long game," she said as she walked away.

Carmen's strong arm and good fielding by Wendy and Donna ended the game, the Airhearts victorious over the Falcons. Small micro groups formed in the parking lot, women either agreeing to meet at Ameilia's or giving one of many reasons why they couldn't attend. Toni had Linda pressed up against the side of a van, their mouths doing something far more enjoyable than talking. Surprised by the public display, Crystal looked everywhere but at the passionate lovers. How can they act like that out here in front of everyone? She noted that the others seemed to not notice and those that did stop and look at the couple simply smiled and went back to their conversations. Crystal looked at the couple again, this time seeing more than just two women kissing. For the first time she saw tears running down Linda's cheeks. So engrossed in the drama unfolding before her, Crystal never heard the therapist come up behind her.

"Guess we won't be seeing them at Ameilia's," Jenny said, startling her. "Sorry, I thought you knew I was here."

"It's okay. So you're going to the bar?"

"Yeah, for a little while anyway. Laura likes to shoot pool and this is really the only time she gets to do it. It takes an act of Congress to get her out of the house any other time."

"She spends a lot of time on her computer," Crystal said, looking around for the woman in question. She spotted Laura talking to Kelly, the two woman laughing and gesturing animatedly.

"It does everyone good to get out and be sociable once in a while."

"Is that so, Doc?" Crystal lit a cigarette and leaned against the brightly colored Thing. "You think I need to get out more often?"

"I think you need to make some new friends and this motley crew is the perfect place to start." She leaned over and pressed the horn. "Come on, Laura."

"What if I don't want to go?"

"Well, the bus comes by about once an hour. Of course I'm sure someone here would be more than willing to give you a ride home."

"Oh, I'm sure there is," Crystal agreed, reaching for the door handle. "But I've seen those looks from enough men. Apparently wolves come in both sexes."

"There's good and bad in everyone, regardless of their gender or preferences." Jenny opened the door and got behind the steering wheel. "Some just come in prettier packages."

"Hey Crystal!" Carmen yelled, waving and running over to them. "You'd be safer riding in my car. I have a CD player and leather seats."

"And more moves than Michael Jordan," Jenny quipped, much to the pitcher's chagrin. "Crystal, Carmen is the original ladies woman."

"Yeah," Peg said as she approached and joined in on the conversation. "She just turns on that Cuban charm of hers and the woman fall at her feet."

"Jealous?" Carmen baited. "I can't help it if I know how to treat a lady and you don't." She turned back to Crystal. "And I would never let a lady ride around in this death trap."

"Oh man it's getting deep around here," Peg said. Jenny rolled her eyes and nodded her head in agreement. Laura finally finished talking to the catcher and joined them.

"Ready to go?" she asked, opening the door and getting in.

"We've been ready," Jenny said, turning the key and smiling as the Thing's engine roared to life. "Just for keeping us waiting, I think you should buy the first round for us."

"Yeah," Crystal enthusiastically agreed, causing the woman still standing around the car to laugh.

"I don't think you have to worry about someone buying your drinks, Sweetie," Carmen said. "They'll be lined up along the bar just waiting for the privilege."

"And you'll be right in that line, won't you?" Laura teased.

"Absolutely," Carmen said proudly. "I'll see you at Ameilia's," she said more to Crystal than anyone else. Jenny put the Thing in gear and moved it forward, hitting a pothole and causing the occupants to bounce around in their seats. Crystal quickly reached for the ends of the seat belt. "I told you that you should have ridden with me, Sweetie," Carmen called as they pulled away.

"She might have been right," Laura said, turning in her seat. "She would have only flirted mercilessly with you. Hell on wheels Foster here might kill you before we get there."

"Bite me," Jenny said, following Kelly's Range Rover out of the parking lot. "Now you buy the first two rounds."

Part 3

Ameilia's Pub was on the main thoroughfare with only a small parking lot to try and accommodate its customers. Jenny managed to get one of the last spaces in the lot, much to the dismay of Kelly, who was still circling in search of a place to put her Range Rover. Several other players also arrived at that time, adding to the lighthearted mood. "Hey Crystal," one of the Falcons called. "You gonna take your shirt off again?" Her comment was met with whoops and hollers from her friends.

"Sorry about the children," Laura apologized. "There's a few in every crowd. You stick near Jenny and I and you'll be fine."

"You know I'm not some innocent little virgin out on her first date," Crystal said, pulling out a cigarette. "Just because I've never been to a lesbian bar before."

Laura exchanged looks with Jenny. They knew their friends too well. "Just to be on the safe side, stay near us."

Crystal was not surprised to find Carmen holding the door open for them. While it still felt awkward, she was quickly coming to terms with the lustful gazes and attention directed her way. Yup, guess I won't be buying any of my drinks tonight. "Thank you."

"It was my pleasure, Sweetie," Carmen said with a flourishing wave of her hand. "Shall we go inside where you can quench your thirst?" Laura had to reach out quickly to catch the door as the Cuban woman followed Crystal inside.

"You know," Laura said while holding the door for Jenny. "Carmen is incorrigible."

"It's not her fault Crystal has the words 'fresh meat' tattooed across her forehead." She stepped up on her tiptoes to look for the woman in question. "Ah, there she is."

Crystal was at the far end of the bar, flanked by Carmen and Alex. "Should we go rescue her?" Laura asked.

"Didn't she tell you that she could handle herself?" Jenny said, guiding the writer toward the pool tables.

"But she's

" Laura's protest was stopped by her ex-lover's fingers on her lips.

"No doubt had lots of experience fending off horny men's advances. What makes you think she's incapable of handling the same situation with a woman?" She gestured at the small table in front of them. "Have a seat. I'll get us some drinks."

"It's filthy."

Sighing, Jenny smiled and patted Laura's shoulder. "I'll bring back some napkins. You want club soda or do you feel adventurous tonight?"

"Club soda is fine. Add a twist of lime to that please." Laura picked up a nearby napkin and began brushing the spilled ashes off the table.

"Don't forget to put our names on the board or you'll never get a table," Jenny said before making her way through the crowd.

At the other end of the bar, Crystal pulled out a cigarette only to have Alex hop up and pull out a lighter. "Allow me," she offered.

"Since you let this barbarian buy your first drink," Carmen said, earning a snort from the shortstop, "Will you dance with me, Sweetie?"

"Ah, no thanks." The scotch and soda was smooth and went down quickly. Crystal found a certain amount of comfort in the woman's bar, the guard she normally kept up to protect herself from men not needed here. She was certain a simple no would keep the would-be Romeos at bay.

"Yeah, I don't dance much either," Alex said, scooting her chair closer. "So what do you do for a living?"

"I'm a d-

" Crystal stopped herself, realizing her normal answer of dancer wasn't a good *i.e.* after turning the woman next to her down. "uh

" She looked at the bar full of rowdy lesbians. I don't think telling the truth is a good *i.e.* either. There had been enough comments and catcalls at the ball park without them knowing she was a stripper. Shit, think quickly. The bartender arrived at that moment with Carmen's drink. "A bartender," she blurted. "Downtown."

"Oh, that's interesting," Alex said, letting her hand rest on the bar only centimeters from Crystal's. "The Falcon is downtown. That's the bar I hang out at. I think Esther is looking for someone to help out on the weekends. You should go by there tonight and check it out."

"I'm working tonight," she said, thinking only of giving an excuse not to go to the lesbian bar.

"Oh yeah? Maybe I could stop by and say hi. Where?"

Un

" Fuck, fuck, fuck. Trapped in her own web of lies, Crystal panicked and took the first escape offered. "You know Carmen, I think I will take you up on your offer." I can do this, I can dance with a woman, she told herself as the now happy Carmen stood up and took her hand. "I'll be back in a few minutes," she said to Alex, feeling a twinge of guilt over the crestfallen expression on the shortstop's face. As she was led through the crowd to the dance floor, Crystal began to have second thoughts. Multi-colored lights bounced off the disco ball and the dance floor was divided into different colored panels that lit up in time with the music. The dance area was raised higher than the rest of the bar, allowing it to double as a stage from time to time. Ameilia's bar had been built in the late seventies and apparently the owner saw no reason to update it. At least the disc jockey knew what decade it was and kept the women entertained with the latest dance hits.

When Carmen led them to a spot near the front of the stage, Crystal lost her nerve and started to walk away. "No no no, Sweetie. Where are you going?" Carmen asked, reached out and stopping her with a tanned hand on her arm.

"I can't do this."

"Of course you can, Sweetie." The Cuban woman took Crystal's hands in hers and began swaying to the music, moving their arms to the same rhythm. It was a song the blonde woman was familiar with and she reluctantly admitted that Carmen was a good dancer. Of their own volition, Crystal's hips and legs joined in. "You see, my dear? I knew you could do this," the pitcher said, releasing her hands. They danced through two more songs before Crystal finally managed to beg off and leave the multi-colored floor.

The pool tables were between the dance floor and bar, making it easy for Crystal to solve the problem of Alex by sitting down at Laura's table. "Hi."

"Hi yourself," the writer said, setting a coaster down in front of Crystal. "You want a drink?"

"Yeah, scotch and soda, strong."

"Four bucks." Crystal reached into her pocket and pulled out her small wad of bills. She had enough to buy herself one more drink. Better nurse it, she thought to herself. She handed a five dollar bill over and watched Jenny approach, cue stick in hand.

"Oh, so you decided to come down from the dance floor after all? I thought you were going to dance with the girls all night long," the brown haired woman teased.

"I don't know why I did that. I've never danced with a woman before."

"Well, you looked like you were having a good time up there. I didn't see Carmen twisting your arm to keep you there." Jenny sat in the adjacent chair and picked up her beer. "Laura's driving," she offered before taking a pull from the longneck bottle. "So was she?"

"Was she what?"

"Twisting your arm to keep you up on the dance floor?"

"No. I just

"

"You dance good

for a straight girl."

"Thanks a lot, Doc," Crystal said sarcastically. "You know some of these women are as bad as guys? I get more attention here than in a real bar."

"This is a real bar," Jenny corrected.

"You know what I mean. It's weird, that's all." She looked toward the dance floor, spotting Carmen dancing with two other women.

"Did you have fun?"

"Well, it

" Crystal unbuttoned her shirt sleeved shirt. "Damn, it's hot in here."

"I'm glad you didn't do that on the dance floor," Jenny said. "You caused enough damage at the ball game. If Alex had been playing pool she probably would have knocked the ball through a window." They both laughed at the image. "So answer the question. Did you have fun dancing?"

"Yes. It was different."

"Different from what? Dancing with men?" At Crystal's nod, she continued. "How?"

"I don't know, it just was."

"That's a copout. Try looking at your feelings. What is it about dancing with a woman that's different from a man?"

"I don't know," Crystal began, fidgeting in her seat. "I didn't have to worry about anything but dancing with her." She shook her head, certain that her words didn't make any sense.

"You worry a lot, don't you?" Jenny prodded gently.

"Sometimes," the stripper admitted without looking up. She pulled out a cigarette and lit it, taking comfort in the familiar. "You wouldn't understand." She shook her head. "No one does."

"You'd be surprised at what I understand," Jenny said. "I understand what it's like to spend today worrying about yesterday and being afraid of tomorrow. I understand that a wounded child can't heal if she's never given love."

At Jenny's words Crystal's expression changed. The relaxed posture was gone, replaced by the gruff exterior that showed the day Jenny gave her a ride to the liquor store. "Too late for that, Doc." Laura arrived at that moment, giving Crystal what she so desperately needed at that moment. She drained half the glass before putting it down on the table. This conversation is over, she thought to herself, agitated at how easily Jenny seemed to read her. "Hey Laura, wanna play pool?"

"You have to put your name on the board but I can see if the next person wants to play partners." Without waiting for a reply, Laura looked around. "Hey Kelly, you want to play partners?"

"Hang on." The catcher turned and asked someone wearing a Falcon shirt, exchanging a few words before turning her attention back to Laura. "Sure, Carrie and me against you and who? Jenny?"

"No, Crystal."

"Sure. We'd be happy to kick your ass."

"Are you any good?" Laura asked quietly.

"I spend most of my life in bars and clubs. I can handle myself with a cue stick," Crystal replied. Feeling cocky, she called out to the grinning catcher. "Hey Kelly, you wanna put your money where your mouth is?"

"Where I'd like to put my mouth has nothing to do with money," the catcher replied. That garnered a few comments and hoots from the women around her. "How about a pitcher of beer?"

"Deal," Laura answered for the blushing Crystal. "You rack, we break."

The game progressed but not without several suggestive comments from Kelly and Carrie, especially when Crystal, her upper body covered only with a tank top, leaned over the table to make her shots. For the most part the stripper was able to fend off the innuendoes and occasionally found her roommate coming to her defense. It ended with Kelly sinking the eight ball out of turn, making Laura and Crystal the winners. The two women returned to their table to find fresh drinks waiting for them courtesy of Jenny. Moments later a pitcher of beer was delivered as per the bet made with Kelly. Crystal made quick work of her scotch and soda, her third of the evening, and reached for the pitcher. Laura just as quickly reached picked up a napkin to use as a makeshift coaster, lest any water sweat off the glass and onto the tabletop. The ever charming Carmen came along and talked Laura into joining her on the dance floor while Kelly pulled Jenny into a pool game. Now free to observe, Crystal watched several women slip out a side door. Ah hah. Making sure her lighter was in her pocket, the blonde woman crossed the room and exited through the door.

The side door led to the alley, still lit by the late day sun. Crystal saw the crowd standing on the far side of a dumpster. Most were wearing the red

jerseys of the Falcons but two were Airhearts. A red cooler was sitting on the ground next to them, the lid open to reveal several cans of beer chilling on *i.e.* Jackpot. Beer and weed. "Got room for one more?" she asked.

"Sure," one of the women in red replied. "I'm Diane and this is Liz, Dawn, and Tracy."

"We met at the game," Tracy said as she held out the burning joint. "Crystal, isn't it?"

"Yeah," she replied, taking the offered joint. "Laura's new roommate."

"Oh yeah," Diane said. "The straight one." She took the joint from Crystal and took a long drag. "Well, you seem pretty cool anyway."

Gee thanks, the stripper thought to herself. It's not like I have a disease or anything.

"Then again," Diane continued. "Anyone who can appreciate fine herb can't be all bad."

"Spoken like a true pothead," Dawn said. "Keep your eye on her, Crystal. Diane is notorious for plying women with wine and weed."

"Yeah, any more notches on her belt and it'll fall apart," Tracy chimed in.

"Fuck you both," Diane joked back. "There's nothing wrong with having a joint or two on auspicious occasions."

"Yeah, like sunset," Crystal said, causing the group to burst into laughter.

"Oh, Blondie has a wit about her, eh? Well fuck you too."

Crystal used the tips of her fingernails to take the remaining end of the joint from Dawn. "Naw, you'd enjoy it too much." The women howled again.

"She got you that time, Diane," Liz teased. "That's probably the first time I've seen you not have a comeback."

"You gonna hog it or pass it?" Diane growled good-naturedly. "And as for you," she turned to Crystal. "All I can say is once you've been with me, you'll never go back to a man."

"Amen to that," Dawn agreed. "But then again we can't all be perfect like you, Diane."

"Yup, that's her, all right," Liz said. "Practically perfect in every way. The lesbian Mary Poppins."

"Oh please," Diane said, rolling her eyes. "You see what I have to put up with?"

"Oh yeah, it's real torture," Tracy replied. "Stop griping and pass it around."

Crystal stayed in the alley with the women, smoking their pot and joining in on the jokes whenever she could. It was a sharp contrast to her druggie friends who preferred to spend their time indoors with rock music blasting. She leaned against the dumpster and let the heady feeling of the pot work its way through her body. She relaxed and let herself enjoy hanging out with a new group of people. By the time Jenny found her, Crystal's eyes were little slits and her gait resembled organized stumbling more than walking. Her new friends weren't any better, laughing at her and staggering about themselves.

"It's time to go," the therapist said, putting a hand on Crystal's shoulder.

"I'll give her a ride home," Liz offered.

"I think she wants to get home with all her clothes on," Tracy joked.

"I'll take her home," Jenny said firmly. "I think she's had enough fun for one day."

"Nice meeting you," Crystal said, waving her hand sluggishly. The combination of liquor, beer, and pot had the stripper totally under their control. She made no fuss when Jenny led her back into the bar and over to their table.

"Where'd you find her?" Laura asked, rising to her feet to help Jenny guide Crystal into a chair.

"Outside with Diane and her cronies."

"Yeah, she looks it. How'd she get hooked up with them?"

"I don't know. She must have figured out what they were doing and got herself invited, I guess."

"I've heard of gaydar but potdar?" The writer shook her head. "And you thought it'd be a good *i.e.* for her to come out with us. She could have stayed home and gotten trashed or stoned or whatever they call it."

"Trashed looks like an accurate term," Jenny agreed, looking at the semi-conscious woman sitting on the chair before her. "I still think it was a positive experience for her. Come on, let's get her out to the car."

"How do you figure that?" Laura asked while putting an arm around the smaller woman. "Crystal

Crystal, it's time to go. Think you can stand up?"

"S-sssure." Grabbing Laura's arm for support, the stripper pulled herself to her feet. She teetered for a moment before gripping her roommate's arm with both hands. "Damn, guess I drank more than I thought."

"More like smoked, I believe," Laura muttered. "Jenny, you got her on that side?"

"I've got her. Let's go."

"I can walk," Crystal protested, not wanting to be helped out of the bar.

"Walk right into a wall, you mean." Laura let her agitation show through in her voice. Her grip never lessened as she led the trio to the door. "I can see this was a really good experience for her, Jen." She used her hip to push open the door. "Now she has a new place to go get her drugs."

"Now you know Diane wouldn't sell anyone pot."

"Sell? Did you see the way everyone acted around her today? If Crystal said she wanted some I'm sure at least a half dozen women would offer to give her some. Oh, there's something positive. Crystal learned she can seduce women into buying her drinks." Laura paused her ranting long enough to open the back door of the Thing. "I thought poor Alex Duncan was going to have an orgasm right there on the infield when Crystal took her shirt off."

"That was pretty funny, wasn't it? I'm just glad she didn't do that again on the dance floor."

"Don't try to change the subject, Jen." Together they helped the lethargic Crystal into the back seat. "How on earth is this a positive experience for her?"

"Think about what you've told me about her nightmares and the way she feels about men," Jenny said, leaning against the side of the orange car. "Do you think she's ever been able to relax this much around a group of people?"

"So in order to relax she has to get drunk?"

"Put the drinking and pot aside for a minute. Last week she wouldn't even come out of her room when you had company at the house. Today she came out to the ballfield with minimal fuss and even went to a lesbian bar. She relaxed and had fun, even before she started drinking." She looked at Crystal, who was struggling to sit up on her own. "I think I'm going to ride in the back with her."

"Good, that way you can warn me if she decides it's time to redecorate the upholstery." Laura opened the driver's door. "You are spending the night at my place, aren't you?"

"Yeah, I've had a few beers. I don't want to take the chance. Scoot over, Crystal. I'm going to ride back here with you." Laura started the Thing and exited the parking lot.

"Is Laura pissed at me again?" Crystal mumbled.

"Why would you say that?"

Shrugging her shoulders, Crystal pulled out a bent cigarette from her rumpled pack. "I dunno."

"Yes you do. Why do you think Laura would be angry with you?"

"She usually is, espec-cally when I'm drinking."

"Why did you drink so much tonight?" Jenny glanced up to see Laura taking the onramp for the highway.

"Felt like it." The little slits widened slightly. "Oooh."

"What?"

"Look at that." Crystal pointed at the lights of a Ferris Wheel off in the distance.

"Hmm, looks like the carnival is back in town. Do you always drink when you feel uncomfortable?"

"What? You think I'm an alky, Doc?"

"Do you think you're an alcoholic?"

Crystal's brow furrowed. "N-no, I don't think so. I never really thought about it. I just drink."

"Does it help?"

"Sometimes." She looked off to her right again, her eyes focusing on the carnival lights. "I haven't been to the fair since I was a little kid." She watched in silence until the lights could no longer be seen. "You trying to play shrink with me, Doc?" She turned to look at Jenny. "If I told you, you wouldn't believe me."

"If you told me something was the truth, Crystal, make no mistake about it, I would believe you."

"Yeah, shame you weren't around when I was a kid," she said bitterly. "It doesn't matter now."

"If it causes even a moment's discomfort for you, it matters now." Jenny turned in her seat to face Crystal. "One of these days all the beer and pot in the world isn't going to keep those demons at bay. What are you going to do then?"

Laura pulled the Thing into the parking space. "Think we should put the top up?"

"No, it'll be fine," Jenny said. "So do we wake her?"

"Unless you want to carry her."

"Not a chance." Jenny nudged the sleeping woman's shoulder. "Crystal, we're home."

"Hmm? Oh." She yawned and rubbed her eyes. "What time is it?"

"A little after nine."

Laura groaned as she got out the car and stretched. "I feel like I've been run over by a truck."

"You were," Jenny said. "Remember, you, Dawn, home plate?"

"I don't know about you two but I'm going in, peeing, and going to bed," Crystal said, leaning against the car. She looked at the front door blearily, mentally calculating her chances of successfully navigating the walk. Taking a step forward, she felt the ground beneath her shift and all sense of balance disappear.

"Grab her!" Laura yelled, catching Crystal's arm to keep her from falling. Jenny quickly took position on the other side and together they walked the drunken woman into the house.

Despite being too drunk to walk on her own, Crystal was in a good mood and quite agreeable to the therapist's suggestion of going to sleep. When Jenny came downstairs, she found Laura in the kitchen pouring steaming hot water into two mugs.

"I thought you might like some chamomile."

"Oh, that sounds good." Jenny kicked off her sneakers and settled herself at one end of the couch, her feet resting on the middle cushion. "I haven't had that in months."

"Probably not since the last time you spent the night." Taking up a similar position at the other end of the couch, Laura took a sip of her tea. "Where did you want to sleep tonight?"

"You mean you're asking instead of hinting?"

"Keep it up and you can sleep out in the Thing."

Jenny smirked at the empty threat. "We're too old to be playing around in the back seat anymore. Since when has there been a question about where I sleep when I'm over here?" Knowing her ex-lover all too well, she immediately guessed the problem. "Because of Crystal? Laura, I don't think she'll drop dead of shock if she found out we slept in the same bed. After all, roommates have to respect each other. Speaking of which

"

"I still don't think this is going to work out, Jen. She's just too different."

"Why?"

"Aside from being a druggie?" Laura set her cup down and flexed her fingers. "Let's see

she's moody as hell."

"And you never have moods? Might I remind a certain someone of fifty pages of story that disappeared forever when you let your writer's block get to you?"

"That's different," Laura defended. "I was under a lot of stress then."

"Do you think it's stressful waking up from nightmares every night?" She watched Laura fidget. "Or not knowing where your only sister is?" Jenny received a heavy sigh in reply, her point made. "So what else?"

"That damn shower curtain. Did you see it? Why on earth would anyone want a clear shower curtain? I get a great view of the toilet while I'm showering."

"Well, at least you get to admire your fuzzy seat cover."

"Ha! It doesn't occur to her to put the seat down when she's done. I'm surprised she remembers to flush." She smiled at Jenny's attempt not to laugh. "I just can't figure out why she'd want a clear one."

"I don't know," Jenny said thoughtfully. "What else can you see besides the toilet?"

"Nothing. Just the sink and door." She shook her head. "Why would she want to see that?"

"Why indeed?" She leaned forward, going into what Laura affectionately referred to as her therapist mode. "Alone, naked, vulnerable. I can't imagine why she's want to be able to see the door at all times."

"So she needs to see a locked door?"

"She needs to feel safe, whatever safe means to her." Reaching out, she put her hand on Laura's knee. "Just like you feel safe when things are neat and orderly."

"I don't like the drugs, Jen. Her last apartment caught fire. She said she was sleeping. What if she set the fire during a hallucination?"

"From what I've seen, she doesn't do hallucinogens. She wants to feel numb, not space out and stare at things that aren't there."

"Oh yeah, that's much better," the writer scoffed. "She still has a problem with drugs."

"You have to look past the symptoms to see the real problem." Jenny said, leaning back and picking up her teacup. "People who have been severely abused will do anything they can to protect themselves, no matter how irrational it might seem to others." Seeing that Laura wasn't convinced, she tried a different approach. "Think about it this way. She grew up with an abusive father and her only comfort apparently was her sister. Think about being fourteen and having the one thing you depended on most in your life ripped away from you. Then imagine living on your own, with no support, at the age of fifteen."

"It's so hard to believe a man could be so cruel to his own daughter."

"Daughters," Jenny corrected. "And what do you think he was like after Crystal's sister ran away?" Setting the now empty cup on the stand, she twisted around until her head was lying on Laura's lap. "Is it any wonder that she never learned how to properly deal with her emotions and problems?"

"I don't think she has many friends." Laura said. "I mean, how many people would put up with her?"

"Not many," Jenny agreed. "Most would probably just write her off as a lost cause." She gave her ex-lover a meaningful look. "Just turn their backs and walk away."

"You don't play fair, you know that?" She leaned down and, brushing the light brown bangs out of her way, planted a soft kiss on Jenny's forehead.

"All's fair in love, war, and trying to get you to see my side of things," Jenny said with a grin. "Now, you have any of that lavender bubble bath left?"

"Yeah, there's some upstairs in the linen closet. Why, you thinking of taking a bath?"

"Right after you do."

Laura raised her left arm and sniffed. "I guess I could use one."

"Guess? After running around right field all day and then being in that smoke-filled bar a bath is a requirement unless you want to sleep on the couch tonight." She sat up and stretched, groaning as stiff muscles protested the movement. "Besides, I could use a good long soak about now."

"You go first then. I'll catch up on my email and get some writing in. Do you want the blue or red pajamas?"

"Blue. It's too hot for flannel."

"You could go with au natural, you know." Laura wiggled her eyebrows lecherously. "I wouldn't mind."

"Oh, that's subtle," Jenny said sarcastically. She put her hands on Laura's shoulders and pointed her in the direction of the stairs. "Maybe you should take a cold shower instead of a bath."

"Brrr, you're no fun."

"You just go up there and get your mind on writing instead of in the gutter."

"Yes Mother."

"Keep it up," Jenny warned playfully. "My threat to make you sleep on the couch still stands." She picked up the empty cups. "And don't think I won't."

Crystal thrashed about her bed, the blanket becoming tangled around her legs. In her dream, her father was coming closer, screaming obscenities the whole way. Feeling trapped, she struggled harder, the frantic movements finally bringing her to wakefulness. She looked about the room, momentarily disoriented. "Damn

" Taking a deep breath, she rubbed her face with her hands and tugged her legs free of the blanket. Sleepy eyes barely open, she slowly got up

from bed and trudged her way into the bathroom.

When she was finished, the half-awake women shut the light off and turned left, opening the door and stepping inside. Only then did she realize her mistake. Get lucky tonight, Doc? The two women were facing away from her, Jenny's arm wrapped protectively around Laura's waist. Crystal started to leave but found herself unable to tear her eyes away from the sight. I thought that only happened in the movies. She had seen a man and woman sleeping in the same bed but never had she seen two people cuddled up so close. It wasn't a case of having nowhere else to sleep, it was obvious the women wanted to be with each other. Upset by the nightmare and envious of the love Jenny and Laura shared, Crystal finally turned away and headed back to her own room.

Well this sucks. Now awake with nothing to do, Crystal looked around her room. Where is it? She kicked the blankets out of her way, turning up a boot and a sock but not the missing remote. There's probably nothing on this late anyway. She opened the vertical blinds and looked out at the night sky. The moon gave little light, barely enough to see the outline of the trees separating the complex from the lake. She retrieved her cigarettes and lighter before opening the sliding glass door and stepping out onto the balcony. Misjudging where the chair was, Crystal ran into it, the metal legs scraping against the wooden deck.

"Huh? Whazzat?" Laura mumbled, picking her head off the pillow. Jenny's hand came up and gently pressed the dark head back down.

"Shh. I think Crystal is on the deck." Jenny's voice was clearer, having been awakened a few minutes before by the sound of the toilet flushing and the bedroom door opening. "You go back to sleep, Honey."

"Hmm? Wha time is it?"

"Time for you to relax. I'll go see if she's all right."

Laura mumbled something unintelligible and promptly fell back to sleep. Jenny waited for a minute then slowly slid out from between the covers.

Crystal turned her head at the sound of the door sliding open. "I didn't mean to wake you up."

"I'm a light sleeper," Jenny said as she stepped onto the deck and pulled out the empty chair. "So what gets you up at this hour?"

"I had to pee." She frowned as the therapist sat down and put her arms on the table between them.

"That's always a good reason." Hoo, hoo, hoo. "Sounds like we're not the only ones awake," Jenny observed. "Good evening, George." As if recognizing his name, the owl hooted a reply. "Whenever I was in a melancholy mood, I'd come out here and listen to him."

"You?" Crystal snorted with disbelief. "Come on, Doc. I can't see you being like that."

"Everyone has a rough day

or night," she added.

"I didn't say I had a rough night."

"You didn't have to," Jenny said. "I'm a therapist, remember?"

Crystal ran her fingers through her hair, straightening out the wild blonde locks. "I told you I'm not into deep chats."

"No, you like to keep everything bottled inside," Jenny challenged. "You know what the definition of insanity is? It's doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results."

Crystal bristled at the words. "And you think talking about is the answer. Patty told and she got the crap beat out of her. All of your therapy isn't going to change what happened." She roughly ripped a cigarette out of her pack and lit it, throwing the lighter down on the table.

"So you're just going to keep existing instead of living?" Jenny shook her head. "You're stronger than that."

"What would you know about it?" The orange glow of the cigarette grew, then dimmed behind gray ash. "You don't know what I went through, what Patty went through." Growling with frustration, she threw the cigarette over the rail. "Can you make the nightmares go away?"

"No," Jenny began.

"I knew it." She threw her hands in the air and stood up.

"Only you can make the nightmares go away, Crystal."

Her hand paused on the door handle. How? She leaned forward, pressing her forehead against the cool glass. "I've tried," she whispered, the words sounding strange to her own ears. "Sometimes

" Sometimes it hurts so much. "They won't go away."

Jenny rose and stepped behind her. "They will if you face them." The therapist's hand touched her shoulder and Crystal flinched involuntarily. "Don't let the past keep controlling your present."

"The hand on her shoulder squeezed encouragingly. Crystal tried but couldn't remember the last time someone had been so gentle with her. Her heart pounded in her chest. "I don't know if I can."

"You may not know but I do," Jenny said softly. "It's scary to take that first step but believe me, it's the most important." Her hand, which had stilled, now began moving in small circles on Crystal's back.

"How can I talk about this with a stranger?" Crystal's body stiffened when Jenny's hand began moving, relaxing only slightly when the hand stopped and rested against her shoulder again.

"Start with baby steps. You don't have to take a giant leap. I can recommend several good therapists who specialize in childhood abuse issues." Crystal stiffened again and this time Jenny removed her hand.

Crystal turned around. "I thought that's what you did."

"I do but I don't think it would be appropriate for me to counsel you. You're Laura's roommate and she's my ex-lover."

"So?"

"There's a confidentiality that could be compromised in that situation and I won't take that chance. I don't want to have to worry about what Laura and I talk about and if you and I have both a social and a professional relationship, I don't want that line to accidentally blur."

"Oh." You tell me I need help and then you refuse to help me? Bullshit. You just don't want to deal with my fucked up life. Crystal grabbed the door handle. "Whatever. Don't worry about it."

"We can still be friends and if you ever need to talk

"

"That's what the therapist is for, right Doc?" She jerked the door open and stepped inside. "Night." She closed the door and blinds, leaving Jenny standing on the deck. A few seconds later Crystal heard the other sliding door open and close, followed by muffled voices, then silence. That's right, Doc. Go curl up with your girlfriend. You don't have to worry about me. She flopped on the bed, only then remembering that her cigarettes and lighter were sitting on the table outside. Fuck. Shutting the light off and rolling over, Crystal punched her pillow twice before settling down. Jenny's words played themselves over in her mind.

"If you ever need to talk

"

"I need to talk," she whispered into the darkness.

Crystal pulled the cord, alerting the bus driver that she wanted to get off at the next stop. Looking at the paper torn from the phone book, she double-checked the address and stepped off the bus. The multi-story office building loomed just before her, the large stone numbers on the front confirming it was the right place. It was then that fear rose its ugly head. I can't do this. I can't tell her what happened. Realizing that she looked odd standing in front of the doors, Crystal turned and began walking up the street.

This is stupid, she thought as she moved further away from the building. What good would talking about what happened do anyway? She turned left at the corner, oblivious to her surroundings. Jenny can't make everything all better. She can't take away the pain. So what does she do for her patients? They wouldn't keep seeing her if she didn't do something to help them. Maybe talking does help. She replayed the late night conversation with Jenny over in her head, aimlessly turning corners and realizing with a start that she had simply walked around the block, ending up in front of the building she was so afraid to enter. Lighting a cigarette, Crystal paced nervously outside for several minutes before finally entering and going to the second floor.

The sign on the frosted glass quiet and discreet, J. Foster, CSW, CAC, Licensed Acupuncturist. I don't know. With great trepidation, Crystal pushed down on the handle and stepped inside.

"May I help you?" the receptionist asked kindly.

"Um, I have an appointment with Miss Foster at three o'clock." She looked nervously at the clock on the wall. Five minutes before three.

"You must be Miss Peaks," the receptionist said. "Have a seat. Miss Foster is running a bit late today." The redheaded woman picked up a clipboard with papers attached. "You can fill these out while you're waiting. We need your insurance information and some other vital data."

"I don't have insurance. I'm paying cash."

"Oh, that's fine. We have a sliding scale fee schedule. Make sure to fill out section three."

Crystal sat down in a chair and began filling out the form. She had used her stage name to secure the appointment but put Sheridan down on the form, knowing Jenny would recognize her instantly. She left the emergency contact information blank, painfully aware she had no one to list. No one cares if something happens to me, she thought sadly. She handed the clipboard to the receptionist and returned to her seat.

It was obvious from the reading material in the waiting room that Jenny's clients were all female. A small display on the table held brochures educating women how to do monthly breast exams. The magazines were all oriented toward women and several self-affirmation posters adorned the pink walls. Crystal picked up a copy of Lady Sports and was reading an article about a female basketball player when Jenny stepped into the room.

"Crystal?"

She tossed the magazine on the table and stood up, now more nervous than ever. "I

"

"Let's go into my office." Jenny opened the door and stood aside, her face revealing nothing of her mood..

Crystal entered the office to find it not at all what she expected. The desk was tucked neatly into a corner, facing the wall. An overstuffed leather couch facing a matching chair were the only other real pieces of furniture. Several brightly colored beanbags were scattered along with nearly a dozen throw pillows. On the wall were several diplomas, the name Jennifer T. Foster clearly visible.

"Have a seat wherever you'd like," Jenny said in a gentle tone. Crystal chose the recliner, pushing the beanbags away sitting up stiffly. The brown haired woman noticed and sat down on the couch. "Do you want some water or juice?"

"No." What am I doing here? She must think I'm a flake. I shouldn't have come. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have come here." She started to rise from the chair only to stop when she saw Jenny's raised hand.

"Wait. You might as well sit down. You still have forty-five minutes."

Well

"

"Crystal, I told you I could recommend several good therapists but I

"

"I know what you said," she interrupted. "But

"She looked away, focusing on the bright green beanbag. "I can't do this with a stranger. I don't know if I can do it with you," she added in a voice just barely above a whisper. Her heart was beating faster and the urge to run was growing. "Maybe I should leave."

"You can't run forever, Crystal. There comes a point when it's harder to keep running than it is to stand up and face your demons." The therapist leaned forward, resting her forearms on her knees. "I can't take you on as a client. It wouldn't be fair to you."

Fair? The fear was overshadowed by her rapidly growing temper. "Fair? You want to talk about fair?" She forcefully sat back in the chair and hugged her knees to her chest. "I haven't had a fair day in my life since I was fucking born! Everyone I've known has fucked me over so why not you too? Do you think it's fair that he got away with all the shit he did? Do you think it's fair that he drove Patty away? Do you think it's fair that I get punished just because you and Laura like to play between the sheets?" She angrily kicked her legs out, blinking back stinging tears. "It's not fair." A lone tear slipped through and she turned away, this time staring at the red beanbag. "Dammit."

"You're right," Jenny said after a long silence. "What happened to you was not fair and it wasn't your fault." She treaded gently, aware of the stripper's vulnerable state. "I'm not trying to hurt or punish you in any way." She paused. "Trust is an important issue with my clients. Even the appearance of impropriety has to be avoided."

"If I wasn't living there, would you help me?"

"Of course. It's not that I don't want to help you, Crystal, I do."

"So I'm just fucked again," the stripper said dejectedly, slumping further into the chair as the fight drained out of her. "It's all right, Doc. No biggie."

"Let me get you the names of some very qualified

"

"Don't bother," Crystal said dismissively. "I knew I was stupid to think about doing this." She wiped her eyes with her shirt sleeve and stood up to leave.

"No, not stupid," Jenny said, motioning for her to sit down. "Courageous." She set the clipboard aside. "It takes courage to heal." She paused, waiting for Crystal to look at her. "If I agreed to see you, there are certain rules that have to be made clear right from the start."

The stripper swallowed hard and nodded, her emotions too raw for her to trust speaking. She didn't want to do or say anything that would dash the tiny glimmer of hope.

"The most important thing is knowing that whatever is said in this room stays in this room," the therapist continued. "It's a safe place for you. Nothing you tell me will ever be repeated unless you threaten to harm yourself or others. You can cry, scream, yell all you want. The walls are insulated so no one in the waiting area can hear you."

"Okay, Doc." Like I'm going to cry or scream, she thought dubiously, frowning when she remembered that only minutes ago she was on the verge of breaking down.

"I have certain expectations as well."

Crystal inhaled deeply and readied herself to protest. Jenny stood up and walked over to the desk, opening a drawer and removing a small, thick book. At first Crystal thought it was a bible until she saw the flowers and birds on the cover.

"This is a daily meditation book. I expect you to read the appropriate passage each morning and again at night." Crystal took the offered book and opened it. Each page was labeled with the month and date, but no day.

"You want me to meditate?"

"I'm not talking chants and yoga," Jenny said. "Take ten to fifteen minutes in the morning to read and think about the day's topic."

Topic? Curious, Crystal looked closer. Each day focused on a different feeling or problem. Discouragement, self-worth, shame, guilt, and anger were the topics for the next five days. "Looks like real fun reading," she said sarcastically.

"It's not meant to be fun, it's meant to be thought-provoking. This isn't going to be easy, Crystal. If you want to change then you have to make some changes." The stripper continued to flip pages while Jenny continued. "Remember, insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results."

"You like that phrase, don't you Doc?"

I like many phrases. That happens to be one of my favorites." She leaned back on the couch and tucked her feet up beneath her.

"So how does this work? Do you ask me questions and I answer them or what? I've never done this before."

"You're not in the principal's office here, Crystal. We'll do it whatever way is comfortable for you, to a point."

"To a point?"

"Change is uncomfortable and scary. I'm not going to let that fear keep you from growing. I may push you from time to time but it's done only out of compassion and concern, not any desire to cause you pain." A slight smile curled her lips. "I get the feeling, Miss Sheridan, that you can be stubborn as hell when you want to be."

"And I get the feeling that you can be a pain in the ass when you want to be," Crystal countered with an equal smile. "Sometimes Patty would push me to do homework or something and I'd call her every name in the book. Wish I'd listened to her then."

"Your sister encouraged you to do your homework? Where was your mother?"

That question earned a derisive snort from the blonde. "My mother? Oh, you mean the lush that stayed in the bedroom all the time with her cable and doggie dew."

"Doggie dew?"

"Mad Dog twenty twenty and Mountain Dew. Nasty shit."

"It sounds it," Jenny agreed. "Did your father drink too?"

"Case after case of whatever was cheapest that week." Crystal heard the e.g. in her own voice and took a deep breath. "After Patty left, he started with the whiskey." And me, she added silently.

"Let's go back for a minute," Jenny said. "Help me make sure I have my facts straight. Your sister ran away when she was

?"

"Seventeen."

She nodded. "And you ran away when you were

"

"Fifteen and a half."

"What grade were you in?"

"Halfway through ninth grade. I should have been in tenth but I got held back a year."

"Did you ever go back?"

Crystal looked at the diplomas on the wall and shook her head. "I was too busy trying to live from day to day to worry about school." She studied the stitching on the chair, too ashamed to look at Jenny. "I didn't do good when I was there so why bother? I can read and write. I get by just fine."

"Is getting by all you want to do? Just make enough money to get from week to week with no future?"

"It's all I've got!" Crystal snapped. Don't you fucking get it? I'm nothing. "I take my clothes off for money because that's all I'm good for. I can't make better money somewhere else."

"Then you need to do whatever it takes to make that possible. You're what, twenty-four?"

"Twenty-five."

"Twenty-five. How many more years do you think you can keep stripping? How long before stripping won't be enough to pay the bills? What are you going to do then?"

Crystal gripped the arms of the recliner, her defenses kicking in to the challenge in Jenny's voice.

"Come on, Crystal. What things have you done for yourself that keep you from ending up just another statistic?" Jenny waited a few seconds for an answer, then continued. "All right, what changes are you going to make so you don't end up a statistic?"

"I don't know."

"Another rule, Miss Sheridan. I don't allow cop outs and I will call you on them. Let's try again. What changes are you going to make so you don't end up dead somewhere with a needle in your arm?"

"I'm too old to go back to school."

"Wrong. You can study at home for the equivalency test. Pass that and it holds the same weight as a high school diploma. You can even download research materials off the internet."

"I don't have a computer."

"They have them at the library," Jenny countered. "I don't allow excuses either."

"I didn't come here to be lectured into going back to school," Crystal said. "What does that have to do with the fucking nightmares?"

"So why did you come here?"

"What?" "You know why I came here. Why are you pushing me like this?"

Jenny repeated her question. "Why did you come here? What are you hoping to accomplish?"

"You know."

"Tell me."

"You know," Crystal repeated angrily.

"Say it."

"I want it to stop," she snapped, glaring at the therapist. "I want the nightmares to stop. I want the flashbacks to stop. I want the fucking pain to stop!"

"So what are you going to do to change that?" Jenny asked, nonplused by the outburst. "What changes are you going to make to make the pain stop?"

Crystal turned away, clenching her jaw and refusing to answer.

"I told you this wouldn't be easy," Jenny said. "No one else can do all the work. It's up to you to make the tough choices and change the way things are for yourself. You're not that lost fifteen year old anymore."

"Now I'm a lost twenty-five year old," Crystal muttered, still refusing to look at the therapist. "Is that what you're trying to tell me?"

"No, I think that's what you're trying to tell me," Jenny said gently. "I think this is a good stopping point for today."

But

"She looked at her watch. "I still have five minutes."

"Enough time for us to talk about some more of the rules."

"Oh yippee." Here it comes.

"I knew you'd like this part."

Crystal rolled her eyes and raised her eyebrow at the brown haired woman.

"First, no drinking or drugging before you meet with me. This is serious work and I won't waste my time with someone who can't be serious as well."

"Fine." I'll just make sure I schedule the appointments in the morning.

"Second, there's a proper and an improper way to deal with anger. I told you this room is a safe place and you can yell all you want, but

"The therapist raised her finger. "The only things you can throw or hit are the pillows." Crystal nodded in agreement. "And I don't just mean here," Jenny added. "At home too. Get yourself a beanbag or an overstuffed pillow."

"Fine, anything else?"

"Get a spiral notebook, a thick one. I want you to write in it each day."

"You want me to keep a diary?" Are you nuts? Write it down so someone can see it? She shook her head. "No way."

"Way. You write in it whenever you want but at least once a day."

"What about?"

"Whatever you want. How you're feeling, what's going on in your life, anything you feel like writing about." Jenny stood up and took the book from Crystal's hands. Finding the correct page, she handed it back. "You still have a few minutes left. Today's topic is self-worth. Read it now and again at bedtime. Read tomorrow's when you wake up and again in the middle of the day. Find yourself ten to fifteen minutes three times a day to read the meditations and think about them."

"And this is going to help, Doc?"

"Remember what I said about taking baby steps. Read the meditations three times a day for the next week and we'll talk about them." They walked to the door and Jenny rested her hand on the curved handle. "Usually my clients get hugs when they leave."

No way. Crystal backed up a step. "I'm not the hugging type."

Jenny put her hands up. "Okay. Just know that hugs are always allowed." She put her hand on the handle again. "One last thing. What I said out our personal and professional relationships, I meant it. We can talk about things in here but if you come to the softball games or I'm hanging around with Laura, we're just Jenny and Crystal, got it?"

"That mean you won't rag on me if I grab a few drinks after the game?"

"As long as you behave responsibly and don't drive or put yourself in dangerous situations." She opened the door. "I'll see you here next week."

Next week. She did it. Jenny had agreed to help her. She paused at the doorway. "Hey Doc?"

"Hmm?"

"Thanks." Crystal forced a smile to her face. Inside she was both thrilled and scared. "I

I don't know if I can do this but I'll try. Just don't get too disappointed in me if I can't, okay?"

Crystal

"Jenny's hand reached for her shoulder. "I told you this wouldn't be easy. I don't expect perfection and neither should you. What's important is that you learn from your mistakes and try again." She guided Crystal to the receptionist's desk. "Catherine, would you please schedule regular appointments for Miss Sheridan?"

In a hail of gunfire

" Laura furrowed her brow. "In a hail of gunfire

" Shaking her head, she pressed the backspace key repeatedly. "Sounds like something out of a forties gangster movie." Her back was beginning to ache from sitting in the same position so long but the deadline was too close for comfort. "Bullets fell like rain upon

no no no no." Sighing heavily, she deleted the sentence and stared at the screen. I hate writing action. Give me a good dialogue scene any day. "The police opened fire, drowning the terrorists with a hail of bullets." Yeah, that works. "Then what?" The cursor tauntingly blinked at her as the seconds passed. "Fine." She began typing. "The police opened fire

" Why would they open fire without knowing where the hostages were? She rubbed her face vigorously and blinked with disbelief when she saw the time on the screen. "Grrr." I can't believe it's so late. The pronounced yawn confirmed what her eyes told her. It was closer to morning than midnight and if the page count at the bottom of the screen was telling the truth, she had very little to show for her prolonged effort.

The seconds turned into minutes but no more words appeared on the computer screen. The writer's block that had plagued her for the last several weeks was rearing its head once again. Frustrated, Laura pushed away from the keyboard and leaned her head back, seeing only the ceiling. "All right, let's think about this," she said aloud, as if hearing the words would help bring things into focus. "The hostages are in the subbasement but the police don't know that. So where do the police think they are when the gunmen come out shooting?" Do they even need to be at the warehouse? If they're not there, where do I put them? Do I even need hostages? Why are they robbing the bank in the first place?

"Oooh, I hate this!" Sitting up in her seat, Laura moved herself in front of the keyboard again. The pressure to get the scene done and finish the required chapter on time was doing nothing to help her creativity. All right, just let me think for a minute. To her surprise, the front door closed, announcing Crystal was home from work. She listened as the refrigerator door was opened, then shut again, reminding Laura she meant to speak to her roommate about using the last of the milk and not marking it on the grocery pad. Heavy footed steps ascended the stairs, pausing at the landing.

"I'm awake," she called, wondering what caused Crystal to stop instead of heading straight to her room.

"You're up late." the voice on the other side of the door answered.

"Deadlines will do that to me." She rubbed her eyes and leaned back. "How was work?"

"It was work. Night."

"Night." What's wrong? The defeated tone in Crystal's voice concerned her. Laura opened the blinds and slid the door open, leaving the screen in place. Just in case she wants to talk, the writer told herself.

Several minutes passed and Laura had all but given up when she heard the glass door slide open and Crystal step out. I knew something was wrong. Shutting off the computer, she walked out onto the balcony. The orange glow of the cigarette was the only light in the near pitch darkness on Crystal's side. Goosebumps sprang up Laura's arm as a cool gust of wind blew by. "Brrr, I didn't realize it was so cool out here tonight."

"Uh huh."

"You up for company?"

"I'm not much company tonight," Crystal said dejectedly.

"That's all right, I'm not much either." She pulled out a chair and sat down, groaning as she did so. "I just can't take looking at that screen anymore."

"Screen?" The stripper looked at the sliding door. "What's wrong with the screen?"

You think I mean

She forced herself not to smirk at Crystal's confusion. "Not that screen. The computer screen. I'm battling writer's block."

"Oh."

Laura watched as the head of the cigarette flared, then dimmed as her roommate took a drag. You weren't kidding about not being in the mood to talk. While debating about trying to strike up conversation again, she was surprised when Crystal spoke.

"Can you go on the internet with that thing?"

"At fifty-six K when everyone in town isn't online," she said proudly.

"Uh huh."

You don't have a clue what I'm talking about, do you? "So yes, you can go on the internet with it. Why, are you in the mood to go surfing?"

"Surfing?"

"Searching around, looking at the different sites." Laura mentally chastised herself for not thinking. "Looking for something specific?"

"Um, no

do you have to pay to use it?"

"I pay a monthly fee and have unlimited access." Well now. It was the first time Crystal had shown an interest in anything she liked. Laura sat up and rested her arms on the table, her eyes adjusting enough to the darkness to see the outline of Crystal's face. Think I'll pick up some table candles next time I go shopping. "You can use it if you want, just don't download anything."

"Naw, I was just curious. I don't know how to use one anyway."

"Well, you have to learn sometime. Why not now?"

"I don't know," Crystal said hesitantly. "It's late and you're probably tired."

"If I go to bed now, I'll grind my teeth all night. Really, I'm wide awake."

"Maybe you could just show me and I could go to the library and use theirs." Crystal stubbed her cigarette out in the ashtray and stood up. "I won't be interfering with your writing or anything, will I?"

"Hardly," Laura snorted. "I'm lucky if I got two paragraphs done tonight." She rose and opened the screen door. "Come on, it'll be fun."

Once inside, Laura tugged her foot locker over to the computer desk and sat on it. "Help yourself," she said, gesturing at the chair.

"I don't know anything about this," Crystal said as she looked over large monitor, tower and printer. "This is the mouse, right?"

"Yeah, it's set for lefties, though. You press the right button to click on something."

"Is it supposed to be on the other side for right handed people?" She gingerly moved the mouse over the smooth surface of the mousepad. Her hazel eyes widened as she watched the pointer on the screen mimic her movements. "I dunno. Seems just as easy to use it on this side."

"It is. It's just how you're taught, I guess. My mom is left handed too and she always made sure to accommodate me in that regard. Let's get online and I'll show you how to search the net." Lifting up slightly, Laura reached between her legs and grabbed the handle of the footlocker and tugged it closer to Crystal's chair. "See that yellow globe near the top of the screen? Click on that."

"So I move the pointer thing up there

and click this button?"

"Yes, you have to double-click it." Watching the cursor move drunkenly about the screen, Laura tried hard not to smirk. It took Crystal three clicks to open the program.

"What did I do?" the stripper asked nervously when windows and programs began opening by themselves. This time Laura couldn't contain her mirth.

"Nothing. I have it set to open all the necessary programs when I log in."

"You could have warned me," Crystal said with a non-threatening glare.

"I could have," she admitted. "But it was more fun to watch you jump out of your seat." She reached over and took control of the mouse. "See this button here?" One click and the screen changed. "Okay, type whatever you're looking for in the box." Laura sat back and waited for her roommate to type in the information.

Crystal poked at the keys with her index fingers. "Damn. How do you erase on this thing?"

"Use the backspace key, top right side just below the F12 key."

"Where? I don't see anything marked backspace."

"Oh, the lettering wore off." She leaned over to point out the key. "I use backspace and delete often."

"Make a lot of mistakes?"

"I prefer not to think of it as making mistakes so much as refining," Laura said, feeling more relaxed with her roommate. "Actually I tend to rewrite a scene several times before being satisfied with it."

"Sounds like a lot of work," Crystal said, her eyes darting over the keyboard in search of the proper letter.

"It is," she said, pointing out the location of the N key. "But it's also a great deal of fun."

"What kind of stories do you write?"

"Mostly mysteries and thrillers, but I've been known to do the occasional short story for magazines when money gets tight." Which is most of the time, she silently added.

"Okay, now what?"

Laura looked at the search words. "New York State Board of Education? What exactly are you looking for?"

"Just looking," Crystal said, tucking a strand of blonde hair behind her ear. "Someone said I might be able to get some information about something."

Oh yeah, that's real clear. "Well perhaps if you told me what you were looking for, specifically, I might be able to narrow your search down."

"Someone told me I could find out how to get a GED without having to go back to school." Suddenly Crystal found an intense interest in her cuticles. "They said there was a way to study for the test on the computer."

"Hmm, I'm sure there is." Duh, makes sense. How old was she when she ran away? "There might even be study guides that you can print out. I have plenty of ink and paper," she offered. "Um

can I ask you something?"

Crystal shrugged. "I guess."

"When you ran away, how did you manage to survive? You would have needed working papers in order to get a job anywhere and then of course there's always the worry about the truant officer."

The younger woman hesitated before answering and when she did, it was while deliberately looking anywhere but at Laura. "You really want to know the answer to that?"

What would Jenny say? "Um, if you feel like telling me." Good

nice safe answer, Laura told herself.

"Let's just say some jobs don't require working papers or ID."

"Oh." The writer shifted uncomfortably and now it was she that was unable to maintain any eye contact. She did say stripping was a step up. "I see, well

um

"Shaking her head, Laura quietly admitted, "I don't know what to say."

"Nothing to say anyway," Crystal shrugged. "I did what I had to do." She wiggled the mouse. "So what next?"

It took Laura a second to shift mental gears and turn her attention to the information on the screen. "Put the pointer over Search and click it." She looked at the top matches and shook her head. "You'll have to scroll down."

"In English?"

She smiled at the error, pleased to see a like one on Crystal's face. "Sorry. I keep forgetting. It's just part of my vocabulary. I'm not used to people not knowing what I'm talking about." She explained how to navigate around the screen, finding to her surprise that Crystal was a quick study and she rarely needed to explain things more than once. Within minutes they found a site offering a self-paced study program. "This is perfect," she said. "Look at this." Excited by the discovery, Laura thought nothing of leaning in and taking control of the mouse. "You can work on each topic until you're ready and then take a self-test at the end. That'll make it easy. Here." She clicked on a link. "Look at all the modules available."

Crystal's eyes widened. "I'll never be able to learn all that."

"Of course you can. It's not as hard as it looks."

"Easy for you to say. You have a college degree. I didn't make it through the ninth grade."

"Hey, I wasn't born with that degree, you know. I had to learn everything too." She clicked the mouse again. "You don't have to learn everything all at once. Try doing one of the modules. What subjects were you good at?"

"I dunno. I didn't really ever pay that much attention to school." Crystal shrugged in the now familiar gesture. "I'm surprised I only failed one grade." She pushed the chair back, propping her left ankle on her right knee. "I'm not stupid or anything, it's just that studying and homework weren't that important to me then." She interlaced her fingers and rested them on her lap. "I bet you were the honor student. Got straight A's and all that."

"Well, mostly A's," Laura admitted.

"Uh huh." Crystal said knowingly. "Where'd you go, Harvard or Yale?"

"Neither," she replied. "I was supposed to go to West Point but ended up going to Colgate."

"West Point? Oh, that's right. You're an Army brat. So why didn't you go there?"

"It's a long story." Seeing the expectant look on Crystal's face, Laura jerked her chin in the direction of the balcony. "Let's go out there. It'll be more comfortable."

Part 4

"So what happened?" Crystal asked once they were settled on the balcony.

"All right. Now you have to understand that the military isn't the same as civilian life. Things aren't handled quite the same way." Laura was grateful for the shroud of darkness, making it easier for her to tell her story. "Appearance is everything and rumors move through the ranks quicker than you can imagine. I was a senior in high school and my father had just been stationed at West Point about four months before. In the fall they have a formal dance during Homecoming Weekend. My father arranged for me to go with a fourth year cadet named Eugene Watkins."

"Eugene?" Crystal snorted and reached for her cigarettes. "Why would anyone saddle a kid with a name like that?"

"Probably because he was Eugene Watkins the third, grandson of General Eugene Watkins and son of the late Captain Eugene Watkins."

"Still a rotten reason to name your kid Eugene."

"Anyway, Cadet Watkins' eg. was only overshadowed by his hormones, especially after having sneaked several sips of whatever liquor he was hiding in his jacket. After spending most of the evening talking about himself, Mister Personality thought he was entitled to more than a few formal dances."

You mean he tried

?"

"Oh yes, he most certainly tried," Laura said. "We took a walk on the grounds and he did his best to cop a feel. I pushed away from him and began walking back, willing to chalk it up to a bad date with a creep but he refused to give up that easily. He pushed me up against a tree and tried to get his hand under my dress. That's when I screamed and kned him."

"Good, the bastard deserved it," Crystal said, taking a long drag on her cigarette. "You should have kicked him in the balls."

"I wish I had thought of it at the time," Laura admitted. "Kneeing him wasn't enough to get him off of me. He pushed me down on the ground and began pawing at me. Another cadet heard my screams and ran over. If he hadn't been walking around, well

we were pretty far away from the rest of the party."

"I suppose because he was the General's grandson he got away with it, right?"

Laura sighed and rested her foot on her opposite knee. "It's not that simple. The Academy is very strict on enforcing the Honor Code."

"So what happened?"

"I was pretty upset by the time the cadet brought me inside. We came in the front door and standing right there was my father, General Watkins, and a few other senior officers. Imagine how it looked. There I was, my dress torn in the front with mud and grass stains on the back. My father took me into a private room and I told him what happened. He left and came back a few minutes later to take me home." Looking up at the twinkling stars, Laura let the emotional evening relive itself in her mind. "My father never lied to me, I'll give him that. He told me up front that it was my word against Eugene's and of course you know what his story was."

"That you wanted it," the stripper guessed.

"He said I allowed him to feel me up and when he refused my demands for more that I began screaming."

"Of course," Crystal snorted.

"Dad also told me that General Watkins reminded him that Eugene's father died a hero in Lebanon when Eugene was still in high school." She shook her head, absently identifying the various constellations floating above. "All it would have taken was one call from the General and Dad would have found himself shipped off to Anchorage or even worse."

"So your father made you drop the charges?"

Laura nodded. "There wasn't really much choice. If I pressed a complaint, it would have brought the media down on the academy, General Watkins, and him. Look at what they do to the Kennedys. Imagine if the grandson of a general and son of a war hero was charged with attempted rape?" Resting her elbows on the arms of the chair, she interlaced her fingers. "Dad and the General worked something out behind closed doors. He never told me what happened, only that it was over and I should forget about it. I heard from one of the other cadets that Eugene lost his rank as Battalion Commander and was confined to the grounds but was still allowed to graduate."

"Oh big punishment," Crystal scoffed.

"Actually losing your commission at the academy is a huge black mark. He'll never be on the fast track up the chain of command now. Plus I don't think he'll ever think about touching a girl like that again."

"Why not? He got away with it once, what's to stop him?"

"The other cadets. About a week after the incident, a group of cadets caught Eugene in the shower and I guess they beat him up pretty good. He spent a couple of days in the infirmary but never revealed who was involved."

"Serves him right. I hope they made it so he couldn't use it again."

"Well I don't think they went that far," Laura said, picking up on the anger in the smoke-roughened voice. "I think my father knew who did it but he never told me."

"Were you mad at him for not defending you?"

Was I mad at him? She stared up at the stars again. "At the time I was furious with him because I thought he wasn't on my side. I blamed the Army for him caving in to the General. That's why I accepted a scholarship to Colgate. It wasn't until I was an adult that I realized why he did things the way he did."

"I don't get it," Crystal said.

"Jenny told me once that sometimes the only way to win is to compromise. That's what Dad had to do with General Watkins. He may not have gotten Eugene thrown out of the academy but he made sure that his career was all but ruined. Every time he's up for a promotion, he'll be questioned about that incident. With all the fear about sexual harassment and officers taking advantage of female recruits, I don't think he'll ever see a command position."

"And you consider that a win?"

"Yes I do. You don't have to chop a man's hands off just because he steals a loaf of bread. Eugene will still be able to have a career in the Army, it just won't be a cushy one."

"I still think he got off easy," Crystal groused. "They always do. Just 'cause a guy has money or power he can get away with anything." A cigarette was lit. "Ah, who's kidding. Even the drunken slobs think they can get away with copping a feel whenever they want it."

Laura again wished for a table candle so she could see the expression that went with the hard tone. "Something happen at work tonight?"

"Nothing that hasn't happened before," the stripper said with a resigned sigh. "Just a job hazard. Some asshole decided to wait outside the side exit for me to come out. I would have been fine if Rick was where he was supposed to be and not still in the hallway shooting the shit with one of the bouncers."

Alarmed, Laura sat up straight. "Did he hurt you? Why didn't you say anything before?"

"I'm fine. I've worked long enough to know how to handle myself with a stupid drunk," she said dismissively.

"But it still bothers you." Laura tried to stifle a yawn but failed. "I'm getting too old for these late nights. The sun will be up in a couple of hours." She waited for a reply and got none. "Well, I suppose it's time to

"

"Can you use your computer to find people?" Crystal asked.

Um

yes, there's places online where you can search for people." I should be used to the way you suddenly change topics, Laura thought to herself. "You thinking of looking for your sister?"

"I dunno, maybe."

"Well, you're welcome to use the computer to try and find her if you want." Forget the candle, I'm buying one of those battery operated lanterns. The seconds ticked by before she received a noncommittal grunt from the blonde. "You know there are companies that will look for people for a fee."

"I know. Three years ago I spent over five hundred dollars looking for her. I didn't know her social security number so there wasn't much they could do." Laura heard the scraping of the chair legs against the wood as Crystal stood up. "I'd just be wasting my money again." Crystal lightly knocked on the table. "I'm tired. Night."

Laura sat there for few minutes after the door shut, listening to the sounds of night. Thinking of her own childhood, she tried to remember what her life was like at fifteen. Images of bicycles, long bull sessions on the telephone, music videos and hanging out at the mall filled her mind. How could she have survived? At fifteen I never would have been able to make it on my own. She shuddered to think what Crystal went through and found herself thinking about her roommate with a new respect. With a yawn, she stood up and went inside.

The computer beckoned her but the bed beckoned more. After removing her clothes, she folded them neatly and put them in the hamper. Avocado silk pajamas were donned and the corner of the blanket neatly turned down before she turned out the light and slipped into bed.

Laura smiled and clicked on the save button. Awake only two hours, already she had managed to get four full pages done. So focused on her writing, she missed the first two rings of the phone. "Not now," she sighed, pushing her wheeled chair over to the *e.g.* of the bed and picked the phone up off the nightstand. "Hello?"

"Are you speaking to me?"

"Peter?" She used her feet to push her way back to the computer. "Where have you been?"

"Now Laura, just hear me out okay? I know you might be a bit miffed at me

"

"Miffed?" She put her foot on the *e.g.* of her desk and crossed the other one over it. "I think miffed is a rather mild word for it, don't you? Did you know she was the stripper from the Tom Cat Club?"

Well err um

"

"Peter, your ears are turning red. Don't lie to me, I know you too well."

"Laura, when she came into my office it just seemed like divine intervention. You know it's been a while."

"I do not need you to arrange sexual liaisons for me."

"I'll make it up to you, I swear," he said, his high-pitched voice going even higher. "I found her another place. A one bedroom at the other end of the complex. I'll even make the rent the same as what she's paying now."

You found her

" Laura hesitated. Wasn't this what she had wanted? She couldn't live with a booze swilling, pot smoking, foul mouthed stripper, could she? This was the out she had been looking for, wasn't it?

"Laura?"

"Yeah, I'm still here, Peter. So you found another apartment?"

"It's over near the dumpsters and there's only one bathroom but it should be more than enough for her. I took one seventy-five off the rent. I can use the older appliances and the fact that it hasn't been rented in four months as an excuse to the head office. It'll be perfect, Laura. I promise she'll like it and move out," he said encouragingly. "The carpets have all been cleaned and she could move in as early as this weekend."

Um

" Oh damn, what am I thinking? "Peter? Do me a favor and don't mention this to Crystal, okay?"

Stunned silence filled the phone line. "Did I hear you correctly? You don't want her to move out?"

"Well

look, you said that apartment hasn't been rented in four months, right?"

"Right. People want new rugs and appliances and that unit isn't due for replacements until next year."

"So if things change and the apartment is still open, she could have it at the same price, right?"

"I suppose but I can't hold it. If I can get a tenant in there, I will."

"I understand," she said, feeling more confident that she had made the right decision. "I think things might just work out here after all."

"Oh really?" he said, drawing out the last word. "Is your bed actually seeing something other than solo action?"

"Peter Knight, you stop that," she chastised. "Crystal is straight and I'm not interested in straight women. It's just that well, we're getting along, that's all."

"Getting along really well, I'm sure."

"Peter!"

"All right, all right. Are you really sure about this?"

Am I? She took a deep breath and released it slowly. "I'm sure."

"And you're not mad at me anymore?"

"I'm not mad at you anymore. So how are things with you and Michael?"

"The usual. He's being a screaming bitch about one thing or another. It's really rather annoying." Laura heard a tsking sound through the phone. "He really just doesn't know when to let something go."

"What did you do this time? Or should I say who?"

"I didn't do anything this time. He just thinks I did."

"Not like he's ever been given any reason to doubt your word, Peter."

"Of course not. Well, not lately."

"Exactly," she said. "So now that I'm not mad at you anymore, when are you and Michael coming over for dinner?"

"How about tonight? He's complaining he doesn't get out enough."

"Is it your night to cook too?"

Well

"

Laughing, Laura shook her head and smiled. "Fine. I don't think Crystal has to leave for work until seven or so. Let's make dinner around five thirty."

"Wonderful. Michael will have someone new to complain to about me."

"Are you dieting again?"

"Oh heavens, please. With these thighs? No fettuccine alfredo for me."

"All right. How about lemon chicken?"

"Do you want us to bring anything? Michael just learned how to make this killer spinach soufflé."

"Sounds delicious."

"Splendid. He says I don't appreciate his cooking enough. Casual or semi-formal?"

"Casual please. It's dinner, Peter, not a dinner party."

"Casual it is then. We'll see you and Miss Big Tits around five then."

"Peter, don't you even think of commenting on them around her," she said, knowing all too well that her friend had a habit of pointing out people's prominent features in sometimes less than flattering ways. "She's a bit sensitive."

"Can I help it if she looks like a young Dolly Parton?"

"Peter!"

"All right, all right. No talking about her built in life preservers."

Laura shook her head. "Goodbye Peter."

"Bye."

She hung up the phone and turned her attention back to her writing. It was only a few minutes later that she heard Crystal exit her own room and enter the bathroom. The door shut followed by the telltale click of the lock. Shower time, she guessed, confirmed a minute later by the sound of water running. Deciding she could afford to take a short break, Laura donned her robe and headed downstairs.

The high pitched whine of the hair dryer drowned out all other sound in the modest bathroom. Crystal watched her reflection in the mirror while using the dryer and brush to get her blonde hair to do something other than lay limply against her head and neck. I need a haircut, she thought as one long lock refused to go where it belonged. A pleasant smell wafted beneath the door. Mmm, wonder what she's cooking? Smells good. She gave her hair a few final strokes with the brush before turning the dryer off and unplugging it. The middle drawer of the vanity had been reserved for her belongings and she quickly learned that it included her dryer and curling iron. She dressed in comfortable shorts and a sleeveless shirt, expecting to spend the remainder of the day relaxing before going to work at the club that evening. Slipping her feet into her sandals, she tossed her towel over the shower rod and left the bathroom.

She found Laura in the kitchen removing a tray of crescent rolls from the oven. "Morning."

"Good morning," the writer replied, carefully setting the hot tray on top of the cooling rack. "Actually it's about ten minutes after noontime so good afternoon." She moved the rolls onto a plate. "Inside or out?"

Crystal looked out the sliding glass doors to see an overcast sky. "Inside is good."

"I picked up a pint of fresh blueberries yesterday if you want to have some with your cereal," Laura said as she carried the plate of rolls to the table. "Unless you'd like to share a grapefruit with me?"

Grapefruit? Ugh. "Thanks but I'll stick to my high sugar cereal." She crossed the room and opened the refrigerator, retrieving both the milk and blueberries. "Can you give me a ride over to Dunphy's later so I can pick up my car? It's supposed to be ready."

"Sure. I have to go to the market anyway to pick up some things for dinner. Peter and Michael are coming over tonight."

"The guy that rented me the place?"

"And his current boyfriend," Laura said while slicing her grapefruit in half.

Crystal filled a bowl with cereal and headed for the table. "What time are they coming over?"

"Around five. I figured we'd have dinner around five thirty so you'd have time to get ready for work afterwards."

Surprised by the thoughtfulness, Crystal could only stammer out a reply. "Th-that sounds fine. Is Jenny coming?"

"No. On Fridays she has group sessions until nine. She'll be at the game tomorrow."

"Oh, so it's just the four of us?"

"Yes. I thought it would be nice for you to get a chance to meet the boys. Peter is a sweetheart." She spooned a wedge of grapefruit into her mouth. "And Michael will remind you a big teddy bear. He's as gentle as they come but I swear he could bench press a refrigerator."

"Sounds like an odd couple."

"They are," Laura laughed. "Well, you've seen Peter. I think he's about five six or so and maybe one fifty on a good day." Crystal nodded in agreement. "Michael is at least six feet and close to three hundred pounds." Another piece of grapefruit disappeared into the writer's mouth. "He's a handyman. He put the shelves in the linen cabinet and in the closet in your room."

"Does he have a brother who's a mechanic?" She pushed the flakes around in the milk. "I can't believe it came to over three hundred dollars to fix it this time. I just put two fifty in less than three months ago."

"I think his brother is a priest."

"Even better. He could give it last rights." She smiled when Laura laughed but inside she was worried. The repairs were becoming more frequent and more expensive. She knew it wouldn't be long before it would be time to look for another car but money only stretched so far and moving took everything she had and then some. Her final bills had arrived for the utilities at the old apartment and there simply was just no money left to put down on another car. She slowly chewed a mouthful of cereal. What am I going to do? It wouldn't be long before Laura would be asking for her half of the current bills. It was going to be a race as it was to make sure the rent money was in on time. Figures payday is two days later.

"So when do you want to go pick up your car?"

"Oh." Laura's question pulled her from her thoughts. "I guess anytime after we eat. Whenever you're ready."

"We can go in about an hour or so. I have to take a shower and get dressed first. I don't think they'd appreciate me walking through the bread isle in my pajamas."

"Someone would like it, I'm sure," she said, using her spoon to chase a berry around in the milk. Catching it, she triumphantly brought it to her mouth. "These are good. You should have some."

"I was thinking of making some homemade muffins for dessert tonight."

"Ooh." Crystal smiled and nodded enthusiastically, her mouth watering at the mere thought. "I love blueberry muffins."

"Then blueberry muffins for dessert it is."

"Great." Pushing her empty bowl away, she reached for her coffee. "So what's for dinner?"

"Lemon chicken with rice pilaf and spinach soufflé."

"Sounds

interesting." She looked up to see Laura's hazel eyes smiling back at her.

"Healthy food won't kill you."

"That's what you think. My stomach wouldn't recognize it." She leaned back in her chair, no longer feeling the urge to rush away from the table once the meal was finished. Laura gave her every indication that she was welcome to sit and visit. "Can I ask you something without you thinking I'm stupid?"

"Crystal, you can ask me anything and I don't think you're stupid."

"What's spinach soufflé?"

"Have you ever had spinach?"

"Once in a while at a diner but I never cared for it. It was usually cold by the time I go to it."

Well

when it's soufflé is baked in a way that makes it light and airy. It's really very good." Laura paused. "Michael is bringing it."

The one that can bench press a fridge. "Oh. I guess it won't kill me to try it."

"I'll try to put a small amount on your plate."

"Do you want help with dinner?"

"No, I'll handle it. You can keep the boys entertained."

Crystal watched the smirk form on Laura's face and immediately became wary. "Why? What aren't you telling me?"

"Nothing. You'll love the boys." The smirk grew wider.

"Laura." She tapped her nails repeatedly on the table for emphasis, secretly enjoying the friendly banter. It reminded her of early mornings with her sister. "Tell me or I'll hide the vacuum cleaner."

"Hide it? You have to find it first. Do you even know where I keep it?"

Whoops, big mistake. Realizing she'd been caught, she gave her roommate a sheepish grin. "I was going to get to it but you keep the place so clean that I didn't see any point."

"Uh huh."

"You don't believe me, do you?"

"Not a bit," Laura replied with a smile.

"All right. I'm not Susie Homemaker. I just don't think of things like vacuuming or sweeping or stuff like that." No one taught me it and it never seemed to matter. Not like that asshole noticed if the place was clean or not. With memories of her past flooding in, Crystal felt the familiar weight settle upon her shoulders. She looked down at the table. Lost in her own thoughts, she didn't hear Laura's voice the first time. "What?"

"I said you're getting better."

"Bullshit. You're right. I have no *i.e.* where you keep the vacuum or broom or mop or whatever else you need to clean up." Almost two weeks and I haven't even thought about helping her clean the place. "I need a cigarette." Standing up, she quickly crossed the room and opened the door to step onto the deck. Fuck.

The balcony above provided shade from the midday sun as she leaned the back of her head against the wooden clapboards. I can't believe I didn't know where they were. She thought back to her parent's trailer. She knew damn well where the broom was kept in that place. It had been used on her enough times when her mother was in a drunken rage. A firm hand gripped her shoulder and Crystal jumped.

"Sorry," Laura said as she stepped fully onto the deck. "I didn't mean to startle you."

"It's all right. I just um

"Do I dare tell her more? "It's nothing. Never mind." She tried to turn away but found herself unable to resist the gentle pressure of her new friend's hands.

"Crystal, let's sit down and talk for a minute."

Is this going to be good or bad? she wondered, reluctantly taking her seat. I know I'll need a cigarette for this. She lit one and waited for Laura to start.

"I mean what I said in there. You are doing better about helping keep the place clean."

She looked up at Laura. "How?"

"For one, I don't walk into the bathroom to find the towel on the floor and water all around the sink. You aren't leaving your dishes lying around. I find them either in the sink or in the dishwasher. I'd call that an improvement."

"So where do you keep the vacuum and broom?"

"The broom and ironing board are in the little cabinet near the washing machine. The vacuum is in the closet near the stairs."

"Oh."

"Let's make a deal, okay? I have a certain way of doing things. That includes cleaning. Let's be honest here, Crystal. You won't clean the way I do and I'd only end up doing it over." Laura leaned back in her chair. "Just pick up after yourself and I'll take care of the general cleaning."

Great, now she thinks I'm a hopeless slob. "Look, if you showed me how you wanted it done

she began.

"Really, don't worry about it. I'm a bit neurotic about keeping the place clean, I know that. My father was big on everything being neat and orderly."

"What happened if it wasn't?" Crystal asked.

Laura leaned forward, resting her forearms against the table. "One time I was in a rush to go to the mall with my friends and did a sloppy job with making my bed before I left."

"What happened?"

"He did just what a drill sergeant would do. He flipped my mattress. Unfortunately, when he did that he found something I never wanted him to find." Her face took on a look that Crystal couldn't remember seeing there before

shame. Laura took a deep breath and continued. "He found some magazines."

"You had porno mags under your bed?"

"Three. Nothing hardcore. Just the ones you can get at the grocery store." The dark haired woman's face blushed slightly at the admission. "I was curious."

"So that's why you're a neat freak? Because your father found your girlie mags?"

"I would have preferred a better way of coming out to him than having him find those."

"Did he flip?" she asked, knowing her father would have beaten her senseless for something like that.

"Flip is a mild word," Laura said. "He sent Bobby to a friend's house and was waiting with Mom when I got home."

"Oh boy."

"He wasn't pleased. I hadn't even done anything yet. Like I said, I was just curious." Laura's face took on a faraway look. "I had to sit there for almost two hours having a talk about sex with my parents."

"Oh man, that had to be awful."

"Yeah, Mom talking about standing and image while Dad paced around the room asking me over and over if it had anything to do with that incident at West Point." She shook her head. "Apparently he was of the school that all lesbians are that way because they've had bad experiences with men. They convinced themselves that it was just a phase I was going through until I moved in with Lisa."

"Was she your first, um

"

"Lover?" Laura offered. "Yes. We lived together for about two months after graduation. After that the romance disappeared and she found me impossible to live with. Of course by then there was no denying it to my parents anymore. I think by then they'd accepted it." She leaned back in her chair. "So maybe that's part of why I'm so careful about everything being neat and orderly. Every once in a while Jenny will pull her therapist act on me and she says that's part of it." She turned her head to look at Crystal's watch. "What time is it?"

"Heading for one thirty."

"We'd better get going if we're going to get to the garage and the store and back before the boys get here."

"Oh. Yeah." Secretly Crystal breathed a sigh of relief that the conversation was over. Laura's recounting triggered memories that she'd rather not have had return. Stubbing the cigarette out in the ashtray, she followed Laura inside. To her surprise, the table had been cleared. When did you have time

She then remembered that Laura had not followed her outside immediately. Can't let it go for even a minute, can you? she silently asked as she watched Laura head up the stairs. She walked over to the phone and called the garage to make sure her car was ready before going up to her own room to get her wallet and sneakers. Maybe we can stop at the ice cream place on Wilson.

Crystal leaned her elbow against the counter, resting her chin against her hand. "I would never have the patience for that."

Laura glanced up from her task, sprinkling seasoning over the chicken breasts. "It's easy enough to follow the recipe."

"Too many steps," she said, shifting so both forearms rested on the counter. "I prefer the open 'em up, toss 'em in the nuker and go kinda dinners."

"So I've seen." Laura placed the pan in the oven. "My freezer never saw a TV dinner before you moved in. Your stomach must be made of cast iron."

"I'm used to it. I grew up with TV dinners and frozen pizza."

Laura paused in her wiping of the counter. "You ate that a lot, huh?"

How did we get back to talking about me again? She shrugged. "I guess. Whenever we weren't having macaroni and cheese from a box, that is." Her eyes fell on the open recipe book. Reaching out, she pulled the book closer. "You know, I've seen these on television and at friend's houses but I don't think my mother ever had one." She flipped the page.

"You never cooked something nice for yourself?"

"It was cheaper to buy the pre-made stuff than to buy all the ingredients and make it from scratch." She was saved from further conversation by the doorbell.

"That'll be the boys," Laura said, folding the dishrag and draping it neatly over the faucet.

"I'll get it." Crystal went to the door and looked out the peephole, seeing only the distorted image of the man who rented her the apartment.

"Miss Sheridan!" the balding redhead exclaimed as the door was opened. Before she could react Crystal found herself caught in an enthusiastic hug. Peter stepped back, his hands gently squeezing her upper arms. "It's so good to see you again."

"Um, hi." Surprised by the greeting, it took all of her willpower not to jerk back out of his grasp. She forced a polite smile to her face and subtly stepped out of reach. She turned toward the open doorway and received another shock when she saw the hulking behemoth of a man standing before her. His bulky chest and bulging biceps strained the neatly pressed white shirt. Short blond hair refused to be tamed, cowlicks spiking up on both the back and sides. His rounded face and cheeks made him appear squinty but even so Crystal could easily see the bright blue of his eyes.

"Miss Sheridan, this is Michael.," Peter said sweetly. He took the covered dish out of his lover's hands and walked off to the kitchen.

Crystal found her hand clasped between two larger ones as Peter walked away, leaving her alone with the man easily twice her size. She couldn't decide if he looked more like a wrestler or a bodybuilder. The sheer size of the stranger was enough to get her heart pounding with an old fear and the urge to flee was almost too much. Then the giant opened his mouth.

"I'm pleased to meet you," his said, his voice almost as high as hers. "I'm Michael Swenson, Peter's lover."

"Hi." She tried to reconcile the boyish voice with the grown man standing before her. "Crystal."

"Well it's very nice to meet you, Crystal," he said, every word calming her innate fear. "You'll have to excuse Peter. Manners never were his thing."

"Don't start," a voice called from the kitchen. "It's not my fault you don't pay attention."

The blond man tsked and rolled his eyes. "He thinks he tells me things," he whispered conspiratorially. Crystal couldn't help but smirk at his expression. "Four hours ago he tells me we're supposed to bring a soufflé." He sighed and shook his head. "But you don't need to hear about our problems."

On

well, um

it smells wonderful." That voice just doesn't fit that body, she thought to herself.

"Wait until you taste it."

"Hi Michael," Laura said as she walked into the room, offering her cheek for a perfunctory kiss. "It's good to see you again."

"Always a pleasure. It's nice to get out of the house once in a while," he replied, earning a snort from his lover standing near the entrance to the kitchen. Crystal looked over to see Peter shake his head and stalk off into the kitchen. Michael sat down on the couch, leaning back and crossing his leg over his knee. "I wanted to go to the fair this weekend but he promised his mother I'd fix her porch."

"You'd rather my mother broke her hip falling off those rickety steps?" the red-haired man said as he walked into the room, a cocktail tray with drinks in hand. He looked at Laura and huffed. "I swear he's just so thoughtless sometimes. Here sweetie, club soda with lime." He handed the glass to the writer, then turned his attention to Crystal. "I didn't know what you liked but I figured you for a gin and tonic girl."

Gin? She looked in surprise at Laura, then at her drink. She has booze somewhere? Oh what an idiot I am. Having not seen her roommate drink or seen any bottles lying around, Crystal assumed there was no liquor in the house. So that day I sat here and suffered, you had something here all along? She made a mental note to check out what was really in the cabinets in the kitchen the next time Laura went out. "Thank you." I could use this about now.

Peter took his drink and set the tray with its remaining glass on the coffee table. Laura frowned slightly and handed Michael the drink.

"Michael, how difficult would it be to install a light on the upstairs deck?"

The big blonde man shrugged. "It shouldn't be too hard. It's just a clapboard wall on the outside and sheet rock inside, right?"

"Right."

"Shouldn't take more than a couple of hours if there's a good place to connect into the wiring. I could probably get it done in an afternoon."

Peter leaned over until his face was next to Laura's. "I wouldn't hold my breath if I were you," he said. "I've been waiting five weeks for Mister Fix-It to put up my new bird feeder."

I hung it up

twice," the handyman defended. "Both times you bitched."

"Well how am I supposed to see it from the bedroom window if you hide it under all those leaves?" The redhead straightened and took a small sip of his drink. "Honestly I just don't know what you're thinking sometimes."

"I'm thinking how nice it would be to go somewhere for once and not have you throw a hissy fit."

Peter held his drink close to his chest and tapped his foot on the short carpeting. "Laura, would you join me in the kitchen, please? There's something I want to show you."

"I don't think that line will work on her," Michael said, his youthful voice again drawing Crystal's attention to him. "That only works on guys hanging out at in the park," he continued.

Ooh. Crystal winced. Jeez, he's really pissed.

"He thinks I believe him when he tells me he's going to the gym," the blond man said to her. "Mister Vanity doesn't realize I canceled our membership two months ago."

She leaned forward, lowering her voice so they wouldn't be overheard. "So why haven't you told him?"

"I'm waiting."

"For what?"

His round face puffed up with a smile. "He's just having a fit because I yelled at him for not giving me more notice with the soufflé. He'll get over it in a little while if I stop picking on him." He leaned forward. "I'm saving my trump card until he discovers I scratched the paint on his car backing into a parking space."

Crystal brought the glass to her lips, tasting very little tonic. Few more of these and I won't have to sneak upstairs for a hit, she mused, taking another healthy sip. She realized Michael was still speaking to her. "What?"

"I asked if you wanted to show me the balcony so I can give Laura a better *i.e.* of how much it would cost to put a light in."

Um

"Upstairs? Alone? Rational thought told her that the hulking blond man meant her no harm but she couldn't stop the tensing of her body. Downing the rest of her drink, Crystal struggled to think of an excuse not to go upstairs with him. Fortunately Laura unwittingly came to her rescue.

"Would anyone like some fruit salad?" she asked as she entered the living room.

Perfect. "Sounds great." Crystal stood up quickly. "I'll get it while you show him where you want that light."

"Oh, okay. It's in the green bowl in the fridge."

"Okay." Crystal escaped into the kitchen, finding Peter leaning against the railing on the deck. She found the bowl and was setting it on the counter when he spoke.

"I suppose he told you what a bad guy I am, hmm?" He wagged his finger. "I asked him to make a soufflé. You'd think I asked him to pave the driveway in the middle of August. Oh no, my dear." He reached over and took the spoon from her. "A good rule of thumb Miss Sheridan is to give your guest just a few bites. Appetizer plates should always be small. Don't want to take a chance of ruining anyone's appetite, do we?"

Well excuse me, Martha Stewart, she thought as she watched him resize the portions. The thought of going upstairs for a few hits of pot were dashed when she saw Michael and Laura ascending the stairs. Fuck it, I'll settle for a cigarette and a drink. Looking around, she spotted the bottle of gin on the counter. "Would you like another drink, Mister Knight?"

"Oh please call me Peter, and no thank you." He picked up his half full glass and jiggled it. "The home handyman won't let me have more than a couple of drinks while we're out."

"He's upstairs now," she pointed out, holding the bottle in her hand.

The redhead looked over at the empty living room, then at the stairs before thrusting his glass at her. "Well I suppose there's nothing wrong with topping it off."

"No, nothing at all," she said as she filled his glass.

"Thank you," he said, bringing the drink to his lips. "Ooh, now that has some kick to it, doesn't it?" He took another sip. "You do like to make them strong, Miss Sheridan."

"Crystal and yeah, the stronger the better." She took a healthy swallow of her own drink and headed for the sliding glass door. "I need a smoke."

"By all means, Miss, I mean Crystal." He followed her outside. "I see Laura is enforcing her no smoking rule."

"Mm, One of her many rules," the stripper mumbled as she lit her cigarette. "You should be a used car salesman."

Peter laughed nervously. "Well now, I guess I wasn't completely forthcoming about Laura's little quirks."

"No, not exactly," she agreed.

"But you two are getting along splendidly from what I see now," he offered in defense. "Laura likes you."

"Peter you'd better stop talking about me," the writer's voice carried from the upper deck. The balding man's face turned redder than his hair.

"Oh my, what an embarrassing faux pas." In a louder voice he called "I was just commenting on how well you and Miss Sheridan were getting along."

"Uh huh, I know exactly what you were doing," Laura said, leaning over the upper rail. "I can't leave you alone for a minute, can I?"

"Um, the fruit salad is ready," Crystal said before taking a long drag of her cigarette. "And I'm getting hungry."

"All right, we'll be down in a minute."

Crystal's fork carefully avoided all but the grapes and peaches while she listened to Michael ramble on about how to wire a fixture on the upper deck. Peter and Laura were in deep conversation, about what the stripper wasn't sure. Deciding that it had to be more interesting than the benefits of adjustable lighting, Crystal turned her attention to them. Peter was shaking his head in disagreement with something Laura said.

"Well what are they going to do? Decide not to publish your book?"

"They could. Most likely they push it back on the production schedule."

"That means pushing back your checks," Peter said. "Any chance you'll meet the deadline?"

"Even if I sat in front of that computer day and night I wouldn't make it. I can't figure out where to go from here with the characters and the whole trial scene seems awkward at this point." Laura took another bite of her fruit salad and pushed the bowl away, dabbing the corners of her lips with her napkin. "I hate writer's block." The ding of the oven timer ended the conversation. "If you will excuse me," she said as she rose to her feet. "I have to check on dinner."

"I'll help," Crystal offered, not wanting to be stuck alone with the quarreling lovers. She followed Laura into the kitchen.

"Sorry about that," the writer said as she pulled the pan out of the oven. "Sometimes the boys get into a fight and they don't know enough to leave it at home."

"It's all right. At least they're not throwing punches."

"No, they won't get to that point." Laura began transferring the chicken to the serving tray. "At the very worst they'll just not speak to each other. Would you bring the soufflé to the table?"

"Sure." Using the potholders, she picked up the ceramic dish and headed for the deck. The aroma wafted under her nose, making Crystal's mouth water in anticipation. Despite her earlier misgivings, she was now looking forward to her first sampling of the spinach soufflé. She found Peter and Michael staring in different directions when she stepped out onto the deck.

"Oh here, let me help," Michael said, moving a trivet to the center of the table.

"You have to leave room for the entree," Peter huffed, moving the hot plate to the side to make room for the chicken plate. Once she was certain the wrought iron trivet was staying put, Crystal set the dish down. She turned to go help Laura but found the dark haired woman coming through the doorway with the entree in her hands.

"The rice and sauce are still in there," Laura said, jerking her chin in the direction of the kitchen.

"I'll get them." Crystal stepped around her roommate and returned to the kitchen. Scooping the rice from the pot into the bowl, she couldn't resist taking a taste or two. Fortunately Laura had made more than enough.

They sat at the round table on the deck with the women across from each other, Michael on Crystal's left and Peter on her right.

"Smells delectable," Peter said enthusiastically as he took the dish from Laura. "I haven't had lemon chicken in ages."

"Well I've never had it but you're right, it does smell good," Crystal said as she reached for the dish.

"Oh no, my dear, allow me," Peter said, setting the plate down on the trivet. He put two pieces on her plate and poured a generous amount of sauce over them. "Trust me, you'll love it."

Love it or hate it, Crystal was determined to put a good face on for her roommate. She waited until everyone had filled their plates before picking up her fork. Deciding the rice pilaf looked safest, she aimed her fork for it.

"You haven't tried the soufflé yet?" Michael asked before her utensil made contact with any food.

"Don't be silly, Michael," Peter admonished. "Of course she's going to try Laura's chicken first. Go ahead my dear, try it."

Actually

" she started, looking hesitantly at the green vegetable.

"No, it's okay," Laura said. "You can try the soufflé first if you want to. I don't mind."

"See?" the blond man said impatiently at his lover. "Go on, Crystal. It'll melt in your mouth, I swear."

Six eyes watched as Crystal took a forkful of the puffy dish and brought it to her lips. "Mmm." As Michael had predicted, it did indeed melt in her mouth. "It's good," she mumbled, putting another piece in her mouth.

"I knew you'd love it," the large handyman said, his round face beaming with pride.

"Of course it's delicious," Laura said, shooting Peter a look to forestall any comment.

Crystal lowered her head to hide her smirk at the silent exchange. Encouraged by the soufflé, she picked up her knife and began cutting up the chicken.

"So Laura," Peter said, an almost sinister look coming to his face. "Are you going to the dance next Friday at the community center? I heard from a reliable source that Tina would be there."

"She's too butch for you, Laura," Michael said without looking up from his plate.

"Oh please." Peter leaned back in his chair, the late afternoon sun reflecting off the bald spot on the top of his head. "So she likes body piercings, so what?"

"So I prefer my women not look like pin cushions," Laura replied.

Crystal chewed her chicken slowly, more interested in the conversation than the tangy meat.

"You're too picky," the redhead said. "I've told you that before. Face it, my dear, you're not getting any younger."

"It's my life, I can afford to be picky," Laura protested. "Besides, I'm not going to the dance. I have to stay home and get some writing done."

"Are you going to the game tomorrow?" Crystal asked.

"I have to go to the game but I'm not hanging around afterwards." A smile formed on the writer's lips as she looked at the blonde woman's plate.

"Looks like you're enjoying the chicken. Either that or you're hungrier than you thought."

"I am enjoying it." Crystal put another forkful in her mouth. "This is really good."

"Yes well our little Miss Taylor is absolutely splendid when it comes to culinary matters." Peter smiled and used his knife to daintily cut his meat. "She'll make a fine wife one of these days."

"Stop it," Laura said, a blush creeping up her neck.

Crystal smiled at her roommate's discomfort, knowing it would be short-lived. The conversation had a way of changing its focus from one person to another.

"You're so cute when you blush," Peter said. "Don't you think so, Crystal?"

"Well, um

" She looked down at her plate, dimly noting that only the pilaf remained. Maybe she'll make this again some night. "I don't really

"

"Oh, that's right." The redhead laid his hand on Crystal's and squeezed. "I'm sorry, my dear. I keep forgetting that you are on the other side of the fence."

Other side of the

oh. "Yeah, well

"

"It doesn't matter," Laura said firmly. "Peter, you'd better behave or

" She leaned over and whispered in his ear. Crystal watched as he swallowed nervously and nodded. Whatever it is, I bet it's something juicy. Michael simply laughed and helped himself to another helping of chicken.

"Ahem, so

" Peter picked up his fork and held it over his plate. "Did you hear that Michael landed a remodeling contract for that building at the corner of Exchange and State?"

"Where the credit union used to be before the fire?"

"Exactly. They're planning for twenty-five office suites as well as a lounge and lobby." He chewed on a bite of chicken before continuing. "Isn't that right, Michael?"

"Plus all the bathrooms," the blond man replied. "I'll be hiring the subcontractors next week."

"How exciting," Laura said. "How long do you think the job will take?"

"Depends. We're doing the demolition work right now and that will take at least two weeks or more. Once it's gutted I figure no more than three or four months."

"If he makes it three months, we'll make enough to take that trip to Amsterdam that we've been dreaming about."

Crystal's brows raised. After all the bickering and snide comments passed between the men all evening, here Peter was talking about going on a vacation together. How can you be so mad at him earlier and now act like you're the best of couples?

"We can still go if I get the job done in four months, we just can't make that side trip to Munster to see the Blarney Stone."

Peter turned toward Crystal. "Laura's heard this story before but I did a genealogy search on my family a few years ago and I learned that my ancestors actually worked as servants for Lord MacCarthy."

"Oh no, not the Knight family history again," Laura groaned playfully. "At least wait until after dessert. Speaking of which

" She wiped her lips with her napkin and stood up. "If you would excuse me I have to go inside now and get the muffins in the oven."

Crystal watched as the compulsive woman began clearing the table, stacking dishes and scraping plates. Now why do it right this instant? she wondered. It's not like we need to use the table for something else right this minute. Still a brief pang of guilt was enough to get her in motion, standing up and helping the writer take things into the kitchen.

"The table or the living room?" Peter queried.

"Living room," Laura said before pulling a mixing bowl down from an upper shelf. "We'll be out in a minute." She took the blueberries, eggs, and butter out of the refrigerator. "Do you want to get the muffin pan ready?"

"Oh, sure." Crystal looked at the lower cabinets, trying to guess which one held the cake pans.

"Second one on the left next to the stove."

"Thanks." Kneeling down, she opened the door and peered inside the darkened space. Of course. The square pans were neatly nestled within each other next to an similar stack of rectangular ones. The muffin pans were on the bottom shelf. "Which one?"

"The square nine cup next to the stack of six cuppers."

Finding the correct one, Crystal stood up and set it on the counter. Laura's back was to her, allowing the stripper to watch unobserved as she mixed the milk, eggs, and other ingredients into the bowl. A drop of batter splashed out of the bowl and onto the counter only to find its life short lived as Laura used the dish rag to wipe it up. It happened again as the electric mixer churned its way through the yellow batter and once again Laura immediately wiped away any trace of a mess.

"It would be easier to let it wait until you were done and then clean it all up at once," she observed, knowing it was just a wasted effort.

"Haven't you figured out by now that I can't let something like that go, even for a minute?" She carried the bowl over and leaned against the counter next to Crystal. "It's just one of my little quirks like the way you roll your eyes when something irritates you."

"Wha-? I do not."

"You most certainly do," Laura said. "Look, you're doing it right now."

"No one has ever told me I roll my eyes."

Laura moved closer and leaned over so her mouth was near Crystal's ear. "And just how many people have you let get close enough to you to notice something like that?" Without waiting for an answer, she reached over and retrieve the bowl of berries. "Here, you can mix the berries in. Use a wooden spoon and be gentle. You don't want to crush up the berries."

Crystal pushed the eject button and slipped another tape into the player while keeping one eye on the traffic. She was running late and the speed limits were ignored in favor of making up time. The conversation over dessert continued to be a whirlwind of topics and she found herself hard pressed to leave. As it was, she had to go at least twenty miles over the limit most of the way in order to make it to the club in time for opening curtain.

As she pulled her car into the parking lot, a frown crossed her lips. The lot was packed with cars and she knew without looking that the few spaces on the street were filled as well. A glance at the marquee explained why. In black letters against the backlit white plastic was the proud proclamation that the Tom Cat Club was having mud wrestling night. Oh shit. Just what I need. The usual crowd would be replaced by a group of beer guzzling, profanity spewing men who generally couldn't keep themselves from breaking into fights at least three times during the night. Extra bouncers were required on wrestling night after one woman was nearly attacked in the mud pit by a drunk and horny patron several months back. Crystal hated working on such nights. The tips were lower and the sexual harassment was greater. Finding a small spot behind the dumpster, she parked her car and ran to the back door. She had to knock several times before the crash bar was pressed and the door opened.

"Where have you been?" Rick demanded. "You go on in five minutes."

"Traffic," she growled back, pushing past him and walking quickly down the hallway toward the dressing rooms. She almost reached the door when a strong grip on her arm caused her to stop short.

"I need to see you after your first set."

"What about?"

"See me after the set. We don't have time to talk about it now," he said, releasing his hold.

Great, what the fuck did I do now? she thought to herself while entering the dressing room. She stopped short when she saw Monica standing in front of the mirror. "Why are you dressed like that?"

"Oh thank God you're here. Rick changed the opening number again. We're doing the roller derby queen number first, then the biker chicks one."

"That's ridiculous," she grumbled, stripping down to her G-string and reaching for the spandex outfit. "It takes twice as long to get into the leather outfits than these. We'll need a longer intermission." She tugged the clingy material up her thighs. Damn this is getting tight. Better lay off the muffins.

"I think he's going to have the first wrestling match between our sets."

"Oh no, you're kidding." Crystal paused in the middle of pulling her arm through the sleeve. "Is he nuts?"

"He says he can get two extra matches in this way," Monica shrugged. An angry pounding on the door announced Rick's growing impatience.

"We'll be right there," Crystal yelled, jerking her arm the rest of the way through. She hadn't even stepped on stage and already was dreading the upcoming night.

Crystal had every reason to be uneasy about the night. The announcement of women's mud wrestling had done more than draw the rowdy drinkers. Several tables were filled with members of a local college's fraternity. Peeking out through the curtain on the e.g. of the stage, she saw a sea of red sweatshirts with Greek letters on them, the tables overflowing with beer bottles. Damn. Another look around showed to her dismay that there was only one, not two bouncers standing near the stage. Terrific, just terrific. Why don't we just put up a sign saying "attack the dancers, we don't care." She reached down and tugged on the spandex riding up her crotch. Monica came up behind her. "It doesn't look good, does it?"

"College night," Crystal replied. "I only see Tony working the stage."

"Don't go too close to the e.g. of the stage," the older stripper said. "Those frat boys are a dangerous lot. You'll be three rows back on someone's lap before you know it."

"Rick better keep an eye on things, that's all I can say," Crystal sighed, knowing her work was cut out for her that evening. The manager in question appeared at just that moment.

"Let's go girls. There's paying customers out that that was a good show from you two. Crystal, use the right pole. You're more what those guys on that side want."

Meaning the frat boys asked you to put me on their side of the stage, she thought to herself, walking past Monica to stand near the right pole. Rick stepped between the curtains and the crowd quieted down. "The management of the Tom Cat Club would like to welcome you all here this evening for a very special show. Not only do we have six separate matches scheduled throughout the evening

"He had to pause as the din turned into shouts of approval. Crystal felt her mood darken as the seconds ticked away. I'm so damn tired of this. Rick's microphone amplified voice broke into her thoughts."

but we also have the very sexy Crystal Peaks here to entertain you along with the ever popular Monica." At the mention of their names, the strippers reached for the poles, readying themselves for the start of the music and the rising of the curtain. "And so without further ado, let me introduce Crystal Peaks and Monica." The speakers on either side of the stage began blaring a rhythmic beat.

The first thing she noticed when the curtain went up was all the students huddled on the her side of the stage. This isn't going to be good. Picking up her cue from Monica, she made a quick turn around the pole, stopping in front of it to do a shoulder shimmy.

"Aw, stop screwing around and show us those tits!" one of the frat boys shouted. Several of his cohorts yelled in agreement, banging their beer bottles down on the table for emphasis. The result was a massive scramble as foam ran down the bottles and all over the tables. Crystal kept her eye on the flurry of movement, missing a cue and falling out of step to the music.

Dammit. She did some quick double-stepping to get herself back in time with the music. Concentrating on her routine, she danced back and forth half-heartedly trying to entice the men with her body. The bouncer was positioned on Monica's side of the stage, providing no protection for her from the horny fraternity.

"Let's go ladies," another frat boy shouted. "We want tits and we want them now!" His buddies around him took up the chant, pounding their fists on the tables.

"We want tits! We want tits!"

Rick ran across the stage and down the steps to reach the frat boys. Things quieted down quickly after that and Crystal was able to resume her routine. Looking over to Monica, she nodded and listened for the right spot in the music. In synch both women lowered the zippers on their spandex tops, revealing bare skin beneath. Normally Crystal would draw this part out, teasing the audience with what was to come. Tonight however, drawing out the set was not something she had any interest in doing. The jackets were whipped off and tossed behind them on the stage, followed quickly by the spandex pants. Monica moved to the e.g. of the stage, kneeling down before a table of middle-aged men. Dollar bills quickly found themselves wedged under the thin strap of her G-string. The frat boys were hooting and waving bills as well but Crystal didn't want to go anywhere near them, choosing instead to go to the front of the stage and do her shimmy there. The boys howled their disappointment and began pounding the tables again. She looked over to Monica, hoping the older woman would take pity on her and entertain the frat boys but even the extra tip money wasn't enough to get the redheaded stripper to move to Crystal's side of the stage.

Fuck. She knew Rick was somewhere amongst the sea of red-shirted boys and hoped he would be enough to keep them under control. Plastering a fake smile to her lips, Crystal hesitantly went over to them. A beefy guy with his hair buzzed almost completely off leaned over the rail and held a five dollar bill out. Kneeling down in front of him, she shimmied and wiggled, making her breasts wave and bounce. She offered him a hip side of her G-string to slip the bill into but he had other ideas. He hooked his fingers around the string and tugged hard, jerking her off the stage. Crystal fell onto the table, beer bottles wedged against her back. It took a second for the pain of the cigarette against her back to override the painful squeeze of her nipple by the jock's fingers. She kicked and jerked wildly, causing him to pinch the tender flesh. "Son of a bitch!" he screamed when her heeled foot made contact with his ribs.

Focusing more on stopping the burning pain in her back than where her foot landed, Crystal never saw the backhand coming. Hard knuckles and an oversized class ring connected with a resounding slap. "You fucking bitch!"

Strong hands pulled her off the table and away from the drunken man. The lights went up, drowning the room in brightness and the music stopped. Crystal noticed none of it, her eyes closed tight against the reality of what was happening. Voices were shouting, mixing together into a deafening din. Hands were squeezing her shoulders, touching her face. Her left nipple throbbed from the painful pinching, helping blend the past and present together until Crystal found herself unable to distinguish between the two. Visions of her father's face floated behind closed lids until, dizzy from the sensory overload, Crystal let the welcoming darkness take her.

She woke up to find herself laying on the couch in the dressing room. Monica was sitting on a chair at the table, reading a romance novel. Oh God, what happened? she thought to herself, bringing her hand up to rub her eyes. "Ow." She winced at the pain on her face.

"Crys? You awake? God girlfriend, you had us worried. Rick said if you didn't wake up by the end of the next set we'd have to call an ambulance."

"That was big of him," she mumbled, carefully touching the tender area on the right side of her mouth. "What happened?"

"I'm not sure. I heard the commotion but by the time I got over there you were passed out or unconscious or whatever. Rick had them bring you in here. He had to put the wrestlers on early and told them they have to do extra matches." It was then that Crystal noticed Monica was dressed in her street clothes. "You'd think the least the cheap bastard could do is pay me half of the tips I'm going to lose for the rest of the night but no, you know what that son of a bitch does? He tells me if I want to work the rest of the night I have to be one of the wrestlers."

She sat up, inhaling sharply as she did so, the burn stinging. "Yeah I guess I probably do look like a fright now." Even without a mirror she knew her lip was swollen and bloody. "Can you hand me a washcloth or something?"

"Sure girlfriend," Monica replied, grabbing a cloth and heading behind a rack of clothes to get to the small sink. "I guess Mister know-it-all doesn't think I can go on solo." She reappeared from behind the clothes and handed Crystal the wet cloth. "Fuck him. I'll take advantage of having a Friday night off and go home and relax. You gonna be all right?"

"Ow, yeah I'm sure." She pressed the cloth gingerly around her lip, gently wiping the excess blood away. "I'm not spending the next year paying off an emergency room bill for a bloodied lip." Standing up slowly, Crystal walked over to the dressing table and slumped into the chair. "Shit. Looks like someone used me for a punching bag."

"Oh man, Crys, what happened to your back?"

"I landed on a cigarette, I think." She turned in her seat, craning her neck to see the blackened, ash-covered burn. She hissed at the sight of it. "Ooh that looks nasty."

"I think you need to have someone take a look at that," Monica said.

"No. I'll just soak in the tub when I get home. It'll clean it right up." She looked in the mirror to see the redhead's expression. "Don't worry. I've been through worse than this, I promise." I've never had a flashback in the middle of performance before, though, she admitted to herself. "Listen, Mon. Could you do me a favor? Wait until I'm done getting dressed and walk me to my car, will ya?" She cast a glance at the mirror, noting the purpling bruise forming around her left aureole. Other mirrors, other bruises flashed before her mind's eye, making her feel even more unsettled. "Please? I'll only be few minutes."

"Boy, you're really shook up, aren't ya?" Monica asked, setting her purse down on the table. "Of course I'll stay and walk you to your car. Where are you parked?"

"Over by the dumpster. You know they haven't fixed that light yet."

"Of course not. While it's not working they're not paying as much in electricity." She reached into the cubicle reserved and pulled out Crystal's clothes. "Here you go, girlfriend."

"Thanks." She took the shirt and, careful of her injured lip, pulled it down over her head. Next came getting it past her tender breast without rubbing against the cigarette burn on her back. Monica gratefully noticed her predicament and helped her get the shirt on. Crystal pulled her pants and sneakers on, stuffing her socks in her pockets. The noise from the patrons filtered through the wall, reminding her that she was only a few feet from where she'd just been assaulted. "Did Rick throw that guy out?" The pause was enough to give her the answer. "Of course."

"Crys, remember that guy is there with all his buddies. If Rick throws him out the others will leave too."

"Yeah yeah, I've heard it before." She angrily pulled a cigarette out of her pack, bringing it to her lips only to stop and move it to the opposite side. "I'm ready."

They walked out the side entrance and over to where Crystal's car was parked.

"Thanks again, Monica. You sure you don't want a ride to your car?"

"No, I'm right over here." She pointed at the minivan parked several spots down the row. "How long you think it'll be before you can come back?"

"It'll be a few days before the swelling goes down but with makeup, who knows. I'll give you a call." Looking at the brick building, a haze of smoke coming out the screened windows, Crystal felt her stomach churn at the thought of entering it again. Without thought, her right hand came up to cover her injured left breast. She closed her eyes and leaned against her car, hoping the night air would clear her mind.

"You really sure you're okay?" Monica asked.

"Yeah, sorry. Just tired I guess." She opened the car door. "Beep me Monday. I'll let you know what's going on." She stepped into the car and waited until she heard Monica's car door shut before starting her own engine and pulling out of the parking lot.

Crystal drove up the busy main avenue of the city, more than once looking around to make sure her car doors were locked. She didn't turn on the radio, preferring instead the solitude allowed by the silence. Her lip throbbed as did her back and breast, refusing to let her forget what happened that evening. She pulled into the brightly lit parking lot of the liquor store, noting that there were still time before they closed. The need to reach oblivion became stronger with each passing minute. A shortage of cash allowed her only one pint of whiskey but that didn't stop her from opening it the second she returned to the car.

"Dammit." She took another swallow, feeling the booze burning its way down her throat. "Why the fuck does this have to keep happening?" She pounded her heel on the steering wheel. "I'm so tired of this, so fucking tired." The sting of tears burned her eyes but she refused to give in, instead starting the car and squealing tires as she sped out of the parking lot.

Part 5

Laura heard the door unlock and stopped typing. A quick glance at the clock in the lower right hand corner of her computer screen confirmed it was far too early for Crystal to be home. "Crystal?" she called, rising to her feet and opening her bedroom door.

"Yeah, it's just me." As she stepped onto the landing, Laura could easily see the puffed lips and broken skin. "There was an incident at the club tonight."

"Let's get you cleaned up." She guided Crystal into the bathroom, pretending not to notice the paper bag in the stripper's hand or the way it was covertly set down on the floor next to the toilet.

I can

"

"No argument," Laura said, cutting off the protest. "Whether you want to tell me what happened or not is up to you but I'm not going to let you let this go untreated." She opened the medicine cabinet and took out the peroxide, cotton balls, and antibiotic cream. "Here, sit on the toilet and tip your head back."

"Is it really that bad?"

"You don't want to get a scar, do you?" Holding a cotton ball over the sink, Laura soaked it with peroxide. "I have to clean it first to see how bad it really is. Hold still, this might sting."

"Yeouch!"

"I told you. Now hold still." Cotton ball after cotton ball was used to gently cleanse the area. "That looks pretty nasty."

"I think he was wearing a ring."

That explains the jagged looking cut, she thought to herself. "So you want to tell me what happened?"

"Mud wrestling, a drunken asshole and an even worse asshole for a club manager," Crystal sighed. "Easy."

"Sorry. I really think you could use a stitch here just to be on the safe side."

"No. I really don't want to have anyone look at it."

"Okay. I think I have some butterflies in the first aid kit. But you have to keep it covered with the ointment to keep it from scarring." She stopped wiping and gently cupped Crystal's chin with her fingers. You have such a pretty face

The thought entered her mind and almost passed her lips. "Let me get the butterfly."

After the bandage was in place and the bruised area treated, Laura stepped back to give it one last check. "There. I think that will take care of it. You'll have to keep putting the ointment on but I think it'll heal up fine." She began straightening things up.

"Laura?"

"Yes?" She turned to see Crystal looking at her nervously.

Um

there's another place," she began, standing up and turning her back to the writer. "I figured I'd soak in the tub and that would take care of it but

"

"Let me see." To her surprise, Crystal began lifting her shirt. "Where is it?"

"On my back. I think I fell on an ashtray and got burned."

Laura knelt down until her face was level with the small of Crystal's back. She reached up and took over the task of lifting the shirt. There on the right shoulder blade was the burn. "Ooh."

"It is a burn, right?"

"Oh yeah, looks like you landed right on a cigarette. I'll get the burn cream and a gauze pad." She turned away quickly, opening the linen closet and staring past the cream. Why do you always end up getting hurt? "This happened at the club?"

"Right in the middle of the first set."

Laura rested her fingers on the tube of burn cream. "And things like this happen often?"

"Not often but once in a while. Usually they don't get to do more than cop a feel before the bouncers get hold of them."

And copping a feel is okay? You've gotta get out of this line of work, she thought to herself before picking up the tube. "I have to clean it first before I can put the cream on it. Think you can hold your shirt up out of the way?"

"Yeah."

Crystal stood facing away from the mirror while Laura wiped the injured area with the soaked cotton balls. "So how are you going to work with that lip?"

"I'm not. People don't pay to see busted lips. I'll wait until the swelling goes down and see how good the makeup covers it. That and my back."

"I don't know if you're interested or not but Michael was talking after you left about that new project his has downtown."

"The office remodeling he was talking about at dinner?"

"That's the one. He said he was in the demolition phase. You know, cleaning out the old sheetrock and carpeting and such." Tread carefully, Taylor. "He's looking for some extra help to haul things out of the building. It's hard labor but he pays well. I was even thinking of working a day or two after my writing deadline to earn a little extra cash."

"He'll hire people for just a day or two? What if they don't have experience in construction?"

Well

"Laura crouched down to get a better look at the burn. "How much experience do you need to pick up a piece of sheetrock and throw it in the dumpster?" She tossed the cotton ball in the wastebasket. "Ten bucks an hour."

"Ten? Just to clean out an old building?"

"Hold still," she admonished. "You were burned pretty good, Crystal. It blistered up and broke the skin. You'll have to be extra careful. It looks like it's in a tricky location."

Crystal reached behind her back, straining with her fingertips to reach the spot covered by tape and gauze. "It is. I can barely touch it."

"I'll take care of it then. Just yell to me after your shower and I'll put a fresh bandage on it for you. And yeah, ten bucks an hour. It's hard work and the turnover rate is high enough at that price."

"You mean he can't keep people for that much money?"

Laura fastened the last piece of tape and straightened up. "Some people just don't want to work that hard, no matter how much the pay is. Since Michael can't afford to make it a long term job, most only stick around for just a few days while looking for other work."

"But if they did a good job, would he keep them on?" Crystal asked while lowering her shirt.

"I don't know. I imagine he always has a job or two that need to be done even with subcontractors. I've helped him out a few times for a day or two when he was shorthanded. It's hard work but he's always appreciative." Come on, Crystal. All the sweat is still ten times better than taking your clothes off for these people. Look what happened to you tonight. As much as she wanted to voice the words, Laura held back. She had dropped the hint. It was up to Crystal to take the next step and pushing her wouldn't make it happen.

The blonde woman turned around to face her. "Thanks for helping me with this."

"You're welcome. Are you sure you don't want to talk about what happened?" She put her hand on Crystal's shoulder but pulled it back when she felt the stiffness at her touch. "I really am a good listener. We can even go out on the deck if you want."

"No. It's late and you need to work on your book. I think I'm just going to go to bed."

"Are you coming to the game tomorrow?"

"Um, sure if you want."

"Good. Remind me to give you one of my hats to help keep the sun off your face. It gets pretty hot out there." The cream, cotton balls, gauze and peroxide were returned to the cabinet. Soon they were just standing there, in the bathroom with nothing to say. "Um, so uh."

"Um, yeah. I guess I'll catch you tomorrow. Thanks again for helping me with this," Crystal said, pointing at the puffed lip, the ointment causing the light to reflect brightly off it.

"Of course. See you tomorrow. Pleasant dreams." She heard the low snort and the rustle of the paper bag as she reached for the door handle. She stepped into her own room and looked up at the ceiling. She's had a rough enough day. Please let her sleep easy tonight. Sighing with resignation that she had done all she could do, Laura sat down at the computer and looked at the screen, reacquainting herself with the last few paragraphs she had written. Cracking her knuckles to limber them up, she began typing, tuning out the world around her and focusing on her characters instead of the deadline.

One sentence, then two appeared on the screen. It's hot in here. Pushing with her feet, she wheeled her chair over to the sliding glass door and opened it, letting the night air in through the screen. Immediately the now familiar scent of pot mixed with incense filled the air. Hmm

She sniffed the air again. It's not cherry or vanilla. Lilac? Listening carefully, she heard glass clinking together followed moments later by the sound of Crystal's lighter. The smell of pot grew stronger.

Standing and pushing her chair under the desk, Laura opened the door and walked across the landing to stand in front of Crystal's bedroom. She knocked lightly. "You busy?"

Uh

" Laura heard a drawer open followed by the sound of what she assumed to be Crystal's pot pipe being thrown in. "Come in."

"I um," Okay, so now what? "I was just wondering what scent this incense stick was." She walked over to the dresser and looked at the small cone burning in the metal dish.

"It's called Rain." Crystal was sitting on her bed, her legs tucked up beneath her. The lamp next to the bed was on, a mirror on the wall causing the light to reflect onto the white ceiling, giving the whole room a soft glow. The stripper had changed into gray shorts and a white undershirt, her breasts pressing hard against the thin white material.

"I don't think you've burned this one before." She picked up the box full of incense cones and read the label, deliberately keeping her eyes away from her roommate's obvious attributes. "Hard to tell though, you seem to use so many different varieties."

"It depends on my mood. Open that top drawer." Laura did as instructed and found several boxes of cones as well as long packs full of sticks and a curved piece of wood used to hold them.

This one seems

" She took another sniff and shrugged. "Reflective."

"I guess that's one way to put it."

"You burn them a lot. Is it just to hide the pot smell? I can't imagine even you smoke that much all the time."

"No, I don't smoke it every minute of the day," Crystal said, her smirk taking away any e.g. to her words. "I like the smells. When I was growing up, everything smelled like my father. His cigarettes, his cheap cologne

" The pause caused Laura to turn and see Crystal shudder. "Just everything," the young woman said bitterly, reaching for her cigarettes.

Well

"Now what do I say? If I had a father like yours, I'd do everything in my power to not be reminded of him too." "I like it. It makes the upstairs smell very nice. If you're just burning it," and nothing else, her eyes silently added, "you're welcome to leave your door open."

"Laura, can I ask you something?"

"Sure, anything." She tried to look at Crystal's eyes but they were hidden behind little slits. Must have really been hitting that pipe before I came in, she thought to herself. "Mind if I sit down?"

Crystal motioned at the foot of the bed. "Go ahead." She took a long drag on her cigarette, then watched the bluish-gray smoke swirl upward. "Did your father ever hit you?"

"When I was little I earned a spanking or two but not like you mean. He never did anything more than that." Laura pulled her feet up to sit cross-legged on the bed. "Sometimes he acted like a drill sergeant but even then he knew the difference between his recruits and his kids."

"Must be nice." The head of the cigarette flared a bright orange as she once again inhaled the thick smoke. "Mine used to think that his fists solved everything. He

"Crystal's voice trailed off and she looked away. "He used to

h-hurt me."

Laura's heart lurched when she heard the hitch in her roommate's voice. Up until that point Crystal had only alluded to the abuse, not actually come out and said it. "Um, you know he can't hurt you now," she offered. Crystal responded by picking her half-empty glass and draining it.

"Even after all this time I still have nightmares that he finds me and drags me back home with him." Eyelids made heavy by marijuana left her eyes as little more than slits but she still managed to focus on Laura. "Tonight

"She looked longingly at the nightstand drawer, obviously wanting the escape offered within it.

No, don't leave me now, she thought. Come on, Crystal, you're doing great. She sat up on her knees. "What happened tonight?"

it

"Crystal started and stopped several times before throwing her hands up in frustration. The movement caused gray ash to fall off the end of her cigarette and onto the sheet.

Laura immediately shot up to brush it away lest a hot ash burn through. In the end she found herself stretched diagonally across the bed, her shoulders level with Crystal's hip. She rolled on her side and propped herself up on one elbow. "Shh," she cooed. "Just take a deep breath and try again."

"No, it's okay, I

"

"Crystal," she interrupted, moving up onto her knees again. "You can't sit here and tell me that whatever happened tonight didn't bother you. You had your lip practically split open, a cigarette burned into your back and God knows what else happened that you haven't told me." Taking a chance, she moved closer, her knees only inches from Crystal, who remained cross-legged at the head of the bed. "And I think whatever happened triggered something that made you think of your father."

"So what else is new?" she snorted, stubbing the cigarette out in the ashtray. "That bastard fucked up everything. Anything he touched, anything he said

"She reached for the paper bag and pulled the pint of whiskey out. "I hate him."

That's putting it mildly, Laura thought to herself. "Can I tell you something?" She waited until Crystal nodded. "I know we haven't known each other long and we're not exactly best friends."

"Not exactly," the blonde agreed.

But

" Laura smiled at interjection. "Just the same I've come to know you a little bit and I consider you a friend. I don't know if I should say anything or not but when I think of what he's done

how he hurt you, well

I hate him too."

Crystal's eyes widened. She opened her mouth as if to say something then apparently thought the better of it, instead filling the glass with whiskey. Settling back with the glass in her hands, she looked down at the dark amber liquid. "Patty hated him too. I think Mom hated him but she was just too damn lazy to leave. She certainly didn't stay behind to protect us," she snarled, venom dripping from her words. "She left us alone to face him." The glass was raised and a good third of its contents drained. "Didn't expect such a fucked-up roommate, huh?" The single bulb of the lamp gave off enough light for Laura to see the shine of unshed tears in her eyes. Crystal set the glass down on the nightstand. "I used to wonder what I did that was so wrong that I got such a rotten family," she said, looking down at her lap.

Laura reacted the only way she could, lunging forward and wrapping her arms around the startled blonde. "We can't pick our families," she began, mindful of the stiffness of the body she was holding. "But when we become adults we can make new ones."

"With my luck it'd be just like choosing up sides for kickball in school," Crystal said quietly.

"Oh no," Laura whispered, adjusting her hold so the younger woman's head was nestled just under her chin. "I'd pick you for my team anytime." Can't you believe that someone could want you? That you're worth caring for? She ended the hug with a quick squeeze and moved back, giving what she sensed to be much needed space to Crystal after the awkward embrace. "I love my brother dearly but I always did wish for a little sister." Crystal shot her a look. "Okay, maybe not one as

complex as you, but just the same

" Laura tried, relieved when she saw the barest of smiles touch her roommate's face.

"I think I'm being handed a load of shit here." To the writer's surprise, Crystal reached out and slapped her thigh. "But thanks." She rubbed her hands together. "I think it's time for me to get to bed now."

Recognizing the brush off, Laura moved off the bed and stood up. "I'll see you in the morning then. Good night." It's all right if you want to stop now, she thought to herself. She felt a real sense of progress between them and was satisfied with that.

Laura pulled the Jeep into the parking lot, looking carefully for a safe, out of the way spot to park. "There's a spot over there next to Jenny's car," Crystal pointed out.

"Nope, too close to the fence. Have you seen the way they smack foul balls out here?"

"Oh, I thought you were afraid to get dust on it."

"Well, that too," Laura admitted, pulling into a shady spot near some trees. "Come on, you can watch us get our butts kicked by the Bees."

"Good team, huh?"

"Best in the league and they know it." They stepped out of the Jeep and walked around to the back. Laura reached over the tailgate and retrieved her gear bag. "It's like Tinker to Evers to Chance only here it's Winters to Winters to Smith."

"Huh?"

"I guess you'd have to know baseball to understand that one. The Winters twins play short and second and it's almost a guarantee that any ball hit their way becomes an out if not a double play."

"Oh." Crystal shrugged her shoulders. "So we're really just here to get hot and dusty and lose?"

"Pretty much." She hefted the gear bag over her shoulder. "You get to carry the cooler."

"Gee thanks."

"Don't mention it." Laura used her shoulder to playfully nudge her roommate. "Now come on, it's time to watch the Airhearts give the Winters fielding practice."

Jenny smiled and waved when she saw the pair approach. She gave Laura and hug. "Glad you could make it," she said to Crystal, who stood just out of reach.

"Well I hear those two are something to watch out for." She pointed at the twins.

"Definitely. I have a feeling it'll be a quick game. What happened to your face?"

Oh, um

bad night at work. Laura, I'm going to get the cooler over there and claim my seat."

"Okay."

Jenny waited until the blonde woman was out of earshot before turning to Laura. "So what happened?"

Watching the retreating form heading for the bleachers, Laura leaned her forearms against the top rail of the chain link fence. "I hate that she works there. Some poor excuse for a man hit her last night."

"Oh my god, what happened?"

"She didn't give me all the details. Her face looks better today than it did last night. She was burned by a cigarette on her back too."

"Was she?"

"No. This happened during one of her shows." Laura looked out at the field, dimly noting the yellow and black uniforms on the team throwing the balls around. "Jen, you should have seen her last night."

Jenny squeezed her shoulder. "How are you doing?"

"Me? I wasn't the one who got beat up." Taking off her cap, she sighed and began toying with the brim. "Sometimes she's a real pain but last night

" Laura paused, licking her lips to give her time to collect her thoughts. "When I saw her face I couldn't believe it. How could someone do something like that to her?"

"Bad things happen to good people, Laur. That's a fact of life."

"I can't see how she can go back to work there after something like that happens."

"It's her job."

"She could find another job. I told her Michael was hiring. Maybe if she does that for a few days while she heals up she won't want to go back to working there."

"You can't plan on that." Jenny said. "You may not like what she's doing but you have to accept that it's her life to live. The best you can do is be there for her." The activity on the field changed as the excess balls were thrown in and the catcher settled into position. "Guess I'd better get out there and hope for a merciful pop out."

"I'd better get over there and check in with the coach," Laura said. "If you get thirsty Crystal's guarding the cooler."

"Oh good. I didn't even think of packing one today. Did you get ice water for me?"

"There's water, soda, juice and beer. I know, I know, letting her guard the cooler with beer in it is like letting the fox guard the hen house but there's a six pack in there. I doubt she can go through that in the course of a whole game."

Jenny sorted. "Uh huh, and dreams come true if you wish on the first star of the night."

Yeah well

" Laura reached over and tugged on the brim of Jenny's cap. "Thanks for listening."

"Anytime, hon. Wish me luck."

"With luck you'll strike out instead of hitting one right to them," Laura said, putting her cap on her head. "I on the other hand will hit every shot right into her glove."

"Which one?"

"I can never keep them straight which is Carol and which is Coral. The shortstop."

"That's Carol."

"Yeah, her. I swear she has a magnet in her glove and there's a steel slug in the middle of the ball." The women laughed and walked toward the dugout bench.

Jenny was up first and as expected, she hit a slow dribbler toward the shortstop. She jogged back to the dugout and hooked the knob of her bat through the one of the holes in the chain link fencing. "Well that was eventful," she said. Crystal walked over, beer in hand.

"I thought the *i.e.* was to hit the ball past them, not to them."

"Funny. Grab a bat and give it a shot, Smarty."

"Hey, Blondie, who got you?" Carmen said, sidling up alongside the stripper. She reached out and cupped Crystal's chin with her hand. "Damn girl, that's a beauty. Hey Taylor, don't you know how to treat a fine specimen like this?"

"I didn't do it," Laura answered, sliding a weight ring onto her bat. Curiosity caused several Airhearts to leave the bench and walk over to see Crystal's injury. Donna struck out with barely a notice and Toni's walk earned little more than a few half-hearted claps from her teammates. Drawing on her previous lie of working as a bartender, Crystal quickly made up a story about jumping into a fight between two drunks. Lisa's ground out ended the first half of the inning, forcing the Airhearts to stop their ogling of Crystal and pick up their gloves to defend against the Bee's bats.

"So what did Laura say to you about it?" Crystal asked, her voice carrying the short distance from the fence to first base.

"She said you were going to be out of work for a few days," Jenny replied.

"Yup."

"How do you feel about what happened last night?"

Crystal shrugged. "I dunno. It's just something that happened. No biggie."

"Uh huh," Jenny said dubiously. "I always get smacked around at work." She interrupted the conversation to position herself to receive a relay throw from second. After the umpire called the Bee out, the first basemen threw the ball to the pitcher. "Are you going to give working for Michael a shot?"

"I don't know. I don't think I can do that kind of work."

"I guess it's easier to give up without even trying than to take a chance, hmm?" Again their talk was disrupted by the ongoing game as the Bee's shortstop smacked a line drive past the third baseman. Within seconds Carol Winters rounded first and easily jogged into second. The other half of the Freeze Zone stepped up to the plate, taking a stance identical to the one her sister had just moments before.

"It won't look good if they trounce you right in the first inning, Doc."

"Hey Crystal? Bite me."

"Ooh, now there's an offer," one of the Airhearts sitting on the bench hooted.

Thunk. The softball and bat connected, this time sending the ball into left field. Laura reacted quickly, her cleats giving her much needed traction on the dry grass. With a lunge she was able to catch the ball but the resulting belly slide left her in no position to stop the lead runner from advancing to third. Aggravated, she brushed uselessly at the grass stains on her pants as she walked back to her position.

"What's she upset about?" Crystal asked. "She got the out."

"She didn't want Winters to advance. Now anything out of the infield is a run."

"Don't worry, Honey," Carmen said, leaning elbow to shoulder with Crystal against the top of the fence. "I'm sure she'll let you console her after the game."

Is that all they think about? Crystal thought to herself, shifting slightly to the right to break the skin to skin contact with Carmen. The dark-skinned pitcher took the hint well, suddenly developing an irresistible need to make sure she didn't forget her keys in her car. "She's something else," Crystal said when the Cuban woman was out of earshot.

"She certainly is," Jenny replied, watching as the batter struck out. "You're going to have to get used to it around here. By the way, why didn't you

wear that tank top like you did last week? We could use all the help we can get." A fly ball to center caught by Toni ended the inning. "Why don't you get Laura a drink? She's bound to be hot after all that running around out there."

Duh, of course. "Sure, what do you think she wants?"

"Iced tea, probably."

"Got it." Crystal jogged over to the cooler and flipped open the lid. Several cans stood out through the crushed ice and she located the *i.e.* tea quickly. She returned to the fence just as the right fielder reached the bench.

"Oh, thanks," Laura said as she took the can. "I can't believe how hot it is out here."

"It's great for working on a tan." The blonde woman held out her arm to prove her point.

"And for getting heatstroke," the writer said, taking off her cap and wiping the sweat from her brow. She took another long swallow from the can before handing it back to Crystal. "I'm up first, see you in a few."

"Good luck. Knock it out of the park."

"I'll try."

Jenny walked up and leaned back against the fence. "Wagner is pitching. Laura always has problems with the lefties."

"She strikes out?"

"No. Usually she hits it

" Thunk. "

right at the shortstop," she finished.

The area protected by the Winters twins was jokingly referred to as the Ice Block due to the difficulty in getting a hit past them. The block proved to be impenetrable as the game went on and every attempt by the Airhearts bats to even up the score was met by an umpire's raised fist and an 'out' call. By the top of the seventh inning, the Bees were enjoying a four to zero score and taking advantage of the lead to add insult to injury. Jenny was struck by a pitch, the bruised wrist worth getting on first base. Donna managed a bloop single over the first baseman's head to put runners at first and second with no outs.

Watching from the fence, Crystal nudged Laura with her elbow. "Hey, looks like we got a chance."

"Yeah, a snowball's chance in hell maybe. Toni is one of our best hitters but she always drives the ball into left field. She doesn't stand a chance against the twins."

"Maybe I should have worn that tank top," the blonde mused. "Oh look!"

Toni hit a routine grounder up the middle but it took a bad hop just as the pitcher reached for it. The resulting bounce off the *e.g.* of the pitcher's glove sent the ball going in an unexpected direction. By the time the Winter twins were able to get to the ball, all three runners were safe. The Airheart's dugout went berserk, enjoying for the first time the sight of bases loaded with blue and white instead of yellow and black.

"Bases loaded and our cleanup batter coming to the plate." Laura adjusted her cap and cupped her mouth with her hands. "Come on, Lisa! You can do it!"

Crystal clapped and joined in. "Yeah Lisa!"

"I'd better get to the on deck circle. I'm next if she doesn't hit into a double play."

Swish

thwap! "Strike one!"

Laura clapped again, encouraging the other teammates to do the same. "That's all right, Lisa. It's only strike one." She turned to face Crystal. "Wish me luck."

Swish

thwap! "Strike two!"

"Good luck."

Laura picked up her bat and walked to the on deck circle. She barely got a practice swing in before she hear the swish

thwap followed by the predictable call from the umpire. Oh great, now it's on me. Holding the bat with both hands, she lifted it over her head and stretched, acutely aware of the dampness under her arms. Walking to the plate, she looked over to see Jenny waiting on third base, smiling and giving her the thumbs up sign.

"Okay Julie, one more out," the catcher called as Laura stepped up to the plate. Looking out at the infield, twins made it clear they had no intention of letting a hit get past them. I just have to concentrate and hit the ball. Of course it was more than just hitting the ball. She had to make sure it was high enough to get over the Ice Block but not so high that an outfielder could get under it. Flexing her fingers around the handle, she leaned on her back foot and awaited the pitch.

Swish

thwap! "Strike one!"

"Come on, knock it out of the park!" With her back to Crystal, Laura couldn't see her but she easily heard the words of encouragement. The sound of a fist hitting a glove drew her eyes to the curly-haired shortstop. An almost sinister grin met her gaze and she swallowed reflexively. Maybe I can pull the ball. She looked hopefully at the gap between first and second base. Laura kept that thought on her mind as the pitcher lobbed the ball at the plate.

This time her bat made contact but her swing was far too early, weakly sending the softball into foul territory. Holding the bat between her knees, Laura wiped her upper lip and focused her gaze on home plate. One more strike and the tradition of the Bees trouncing the Airhearts would continue. She barely heard the rumble of her teammates as she nervously assumed her stance. Her jersey felt as though it was made of thick wool against her sweat soaked skin and her sports bra was decidedly damp.

She almost swung at the next pitch but managed to hold back at the last instant, smiling when she heard the umpire call ball one. Laura let out a deep breath. "Oh thank God."

"Weren't sure about that one, were you?" the catcher teased. "You know Carol's just waiting for you to hit it to her." As if on cue, the shortstop pounded her glove and glared at the batter.

Please don't let me hit it to her, please don't let me hit it to her. Gripping the bat tighter, she waited for fate to determine if she would be a hero or a goat.

It was a perfect throw: a slow arcing toss just to the left of center. Committing herself, Laura swung as hard as she could, the impact of ball against aluminum making her hands shake. It was just over the first baseman's reach and dropped to the ground well ahead of the right fielder. She was so happy that it wasn't scooped by the Winters twins that it took her a second to remember to run to first base. She thought hard about going to second but stopped short when she saw Toni double back, leaving her no room to advance. Both Jenny and Donna scored, cutting the Bee's lead in half. Laura smiled and, with one foot on first base, leaned heavily toward second. Kelly had a strong bat and was a good clutch hitter, giving the team hope that with two runners on base that they had a chance against the Bees. Their hopes were not to be, however, as Kelly hit a hard shot right at the Ice Block. Carol scooped the grounder up and flipped it to her sister, waiting patiently on second base to force Laura out. With a casual flip of the wrist, Coral tossed the ball at the umpire. "Good hit," she said before trotting over to exchange high fives with her teammates. Laura stood at second base for a moment longer, staring at the retreating forms with disbelief.

"Hey, it was a good game," Jenny said as she came up behind her.

"We still lost," Laura pointed out.

"But we didn't lose by as much because of you." They began walking over to the Airheart's bench. "Look on the bright side, you finally got hit against the Ice Block. That's cause for celebration, don't you think?"

Laura stopped and gave Jenny a look. "Any excuse to go to Ameilia's, hmm?"

"Actually I can't go. I told you I have to go see Mom tonight."

"Well then, I'll probably just go home and get back to writing. No fun to go out alone." As they approached the others, Laura broke off to talk to Crystal.

"You did great," the blonde woman said as her roommate approached. "I thought you guys had it."

"So did I," Laura admitted. "It was a good game, even if the Bees clobbered us again." She picked up her glove and bat. "Can you handle the cooler?"

"Sure, it's a lot emptier now than when we got here. The water's already dumped out."

They walked out to the parking lot, pausing for Laura to exchange words with her teammates. Crystal leaned against the Jeep waiting for her roommate while several Airhearts stood in a circle talking about the game. After trying the door handle twice, the blonde gave up and looked around. A brightly colored flyer caught her eye. She looked over at Laura, finding her still trapped in a sea of blue and white uniforms. Curious, she walked over to read the advertisement.

"No, really. I have to get home and get some writing done," Laura apologized. "Any other time I'd love to come out." Walking toward her car, she noticed the cooler sitting on the ground without her roommate standing nearby. She spotted Crystal standing near the utility shed. Quietly walking up behind her, Laura read the flyer taped to the wall announcing the county fair. "You ready to go?" she asked, causing Crystal to jump with surprise.

"Oh, yeah I guess so."

"Do you like the fairs?"

"Yeah, I went to them a couple of times when I was a kid." Crystal turned around and they headed toward the Jeep.

"You should go," Laura said. "They have those pay one price, get all the rides free passes."

"Naw, it's no fun going alone." Crystal waited for her to unlock the door, then put the cooler in the back seat. "Besides, I don't think my crappy car will make it over to Blue Hill."

Nodding noncommittally, Laura entered the driver's side and put the key in the ignition. A quick side glance showed some dirt on the side of Crystal's face, no doubt caused by the dust kicked up during the game. "In the glove box is some of those pre-moistened towellettes, You should clean your lip. No sense encouraging infection." She watched as Crystal opened the packed and gently wiped over and around the bruised and cut area. No. I have to go home and finish that scene, she thought to herself as the Jeep roared to life. I don't have time to go play all those games and ride the pirate ship and

"You know what? That was a pretty good hit I had out there today."

"Oh yeah," Crystal agreed. "I was hoping you'd get a hit. Nothing worse than striking out with the bases loaded."

"You're right. I think this calls for a celebration. You feel up to going to the fair? Just for a little while?"

"You mean with you?"

"Of course. I haven't been to the fair in years. I bet it would be fun." Making the decision, Laura turned left instead of right at the parking lot exit and pointed the Jeep toward Blue Hill. I'll just stay up late tonight and catch up, she told herself.

"Look at all the traffic," Crystal said as they turned off the highway and onto the road that lead to the fairgrounds.

"It's probably the last Saturday that it's here before they tear down and continue on their circuit or route or whatever they call it." Laura pressed the button on the end of the directional signal, sending streams of blue liquid onto her windshield. "I can't believe how dusty this road is. I'm going to have to wash the car on the way home."

"A little dirt never hurt a car. I let the rain wash mine."

"That's why mine has a nice shiny finish and yours is all faded," Laura replied, pressing hard on the brakes when the van in front of her came to a sudden stop. "I haven't been to the fair in years. I forgot what a pain it is to park."

"Do you want to just forget it and go home?" Crystal offered, much to Laura's surprise.

"Is that what you want?"

"I dunno," she shrugged. "I didn't realize you'd have to wait so long just to get the car parked. It's probably packed." She looked longingly at the Ferris wheel off in the distance.

"Oh." Laura turned her head toward the driver's side window, smiling to herself. She knew her roommate was giving her a way out. "Naw. We're not that far away now. Once we get parked and inside it'll be fine, I'm sure." The traffic inched up slightly. "See, we're moving again."

It took another fifteen minutes before they finally reached the parking areas. Laura's eyes widened at the sign announcing four dollars for parking but it was Crystal who spoke up.

"I can't believe it. That's ridiculous. It's just a big empty field. How can they charge for parking?"

"Because they know we're going to pay it instead of driving all the way up to the truck stop and walking down," the writer said, reaching into her pocket and pulling out several bills.

"Here, let me get it," Crystal said, holding out a five dollar bill.

"How about we split it?" She countered, holding up three singles. Minutes later the Jeep was parked near a shady tree. Crystal hopped out quickly, her first desire to have a cigarette after the long ride. After locking the Jeep and putting the keys in her fanny pack, Laura walked over to her side.

"Look, there's a big tent. Maybe they have a circus too."

"That would account for the smell." The blonde wrinkled her nose. "A least a petting zoo."

"We'll have to make sure we stay upwind of them." They walked over to the gate, grumbling to each other about the admission price. Without meaning to, Laura noticed that Crystal had only a five and three ones left after paying the exorbitant amount. They walked past the bandstand where a barber shop quartet warmed up for later performances and a booth offering to make them millionaires buying distressed properties.

"Hey, come here," Crystal called, already heading toward the keg-shaped beer cart. "What kind do you like?"

"Oh, no thanks," she replied. "I'm driving, remember?"

"We just got here. One beer won't kill you." The blonde turned to the clerk. "Two Millers."

"Really, it's all right, I

" Laura gave up her protest when she saw the amber liquid filling the clear plastic cup. The sun pounding down on her dark hair didn't help either. "Well, I suppose one won't hurt."

"Oh please." Crystal rolled her eyes playfully and took a healthy swallow of her drink while handing over Laura's. They stood at the end of the Midway, sipping their beers and looking around at the various game booths before them.

The closest game booth caught Laura's eye. "Hey, you want to give this one a try?"

"I've never played it before," Crystal said as she threw her empty cup in a nearby trash can. "How does it work?"

"You see that water gun? You aim at the clown's mouth and that makes the car go up the pole. First one to the top wins." While she was talking, Laura was also guiding Crystal toward the booth. She unzipped her fanny pack and pulled out several bills. "I'll even treat for the first game."

"You don't have to do that, I have money," the stripper protested, reaching into her pocket.

"You got the beer. Let me get this game, okay?"

Crystal hesitated for a moment before nodding and sitting on the nearest stool. Laura smiled and after brushing the seat off with her hand, sat down on the stool next to her, holding the money out for the attendant. The teenaged girl took the money and pressed something behind the stand with her foot.

"Shoot only at the targets. No leaning. First one to the top gets choice of the bottom row. Upgrades allowed only with prizes won at this game." The girl said the words over and over as she moved down the row collecting money. "When the bell sounds, aim for the center of the clown's mouth. Good luck."

Brrringgg. Laura managed to get an early jump as Crystal took precious seconds getting her aim corrected. The cars moved up the poles, the blue one ahead of the red. Higher and higher they went until the bell sounded again. The numbered globe above Laura's car flashed rapidly, announcing her as the winner.

"Congrats," Crystal said as she put her water gun back in its holster. The teen walked down and stood in front of Laura.

"Anything on the bottom shelf."

The bottom shelf consisted of small plastic trolls with a rainbow of hair colors. "The green one," she decided. Taking her prize and stuffing it into her fanny pack, Laura walked away from the game, Crystal right beside her. "Now what would you like you do?" she asked, stopping to finish the beer that was getting decidedly warmer as time passed.

"Have you ever been on the Pirate Ship ride?" she asked, pointing at the longboat shaped ride swinging like a pendulum.

"No."

"You want to try it?"

"I dunno." Crystal gave a familiar shrug and looked at the ticket booth. "What does it cost to go on a ride?"

Laura reached over and hooked her finger under the green plastic wristband on the younger woman's arm. "Nothing. All the rides are free with the bracelets."

"Oh." Crystal stared at the large ride for a moment. "Have you been on it before?"

"Years ago. Jenny and I used to sit as close to the end of the boat as we could. It's more fun that way. Look, the line isn't that long."

"I haven't been on any of these kind of things since I was in the fifth grade and went on a school field trip." She continued to look at the ride, listening to the happy screams of the participants as the longboat rocked back and forth, going almost vertical before going one hundred eighty degrees in the other direction.

"It's really very safe. And fun," Laura added. "I'll tell you what. Go on the Pirate Ship with me and I promise to go on any ride you want."

"Can we sit towards the middle? It doesn't go up as high."

"If that's what it takes to get you to go on it with me." The ship ride continued to swing, although it was slower now and not going as high, signaling the end of the ride. Looking at the line, the writer realized if they hurried they might even make it with the next load of riders. She reached out and grabbed Crystal's wrist. "Come on, it'll be fun." "I'll get you to sit at one of the ends next time, she thought to herself as they stood at the end of the line.

They were too far back to get on the ride this time but being close to the front of the line still had its advantages. At this closeness, the sound of the motors and the screams of the riders were all encompassing, making conversation almost impossible. Deciding the rail was much too filthy to lean against, Laura stood and divided her time between watching the ride and watching Crystal watch the ride. She found it hard to reconcile the pot smoking, beer guzzling, tough-as-nails person with the woman staring a bit fearfully at the thrill ride. Then it hit her. She hasn't been to a place like this since she was in fifth grade. That'd make her what, about ten or so? She probably couldn't even go on something like this back then. No wonder she's scared. Maybe we should start out on something easier, like the tilt-a-whirl. She gently nudged Crystal's shoulder. "If you want to go do something else and come back to this later, it's okay."

"No, we're going to be on the next ride. As long as you don't make me sit on the ends, I think I'll be okay." Despite her bravado, Crystal's words still came out sounding nervous. Without thought Laura reached over and lightly patted her roommate's back.

"I'll be right there next to you. I promise it'll be fun."

The ride came to a stop and the people exited. After a quick cursory inspection of the seats and restraint bars, the greasy haired attendant threw his cigarette on the ground and opened the entrance gate. "Secure any loose items. Keep your hands and legs inside the ride at all times." The line moved forward and up the steps to the loading level. Laura followed Crystal to the seat closest to the center of the ship, jostled by teenagers trying to get to the coveted back seats. Crystal slid in first, moving across the padded bench seat to make room for Laura.

"There's no seat belts," the nervous blonde pointed out.

"No need." She pointed at the metal bar currently in the raised position. "Before the ride starts they'll lower the bar. That'll be enough to keep us in our seats."

Crystal reached out and touched the thick black pad surrounding the safety bar. "I don't know about this."

Laura scooted closer, their hips almost touching. "Trust me, this will be fun."

"I'm not a wimp," she said, fastening the button on her shirt pocket to keep her cigarettes in place. "When I was little I went on the scrambler and the kiddy roller coasters. They were fun."

"Well now just think how much fun it will be on the bigger rides," the writer countered. A resounding series of clicks were heard as the safety bars were lowered into place. "Ah, here we go. It's almost time."

"Hey, I can still move around behind this bar," Crystal said. "It doesn't hold me tight."

"It's not supposed to." Laura reached over and patted the hand gripped tightly around the padded bar. "Please Crystal. Trust me on this, okay?"

"I do trust you. I just don't trust this ride."

But it was too late for protests as the ship started moving. "Here we go," Laura said, casually resting her wrists on the safety bar. The longboat was suspended by support beams on each end connected to an axis thirty feet in air above the center of the ride. An engine hidden beneath the ride powered a rotating tire that moved along the bottom of the ship to give the ride its momentum.

"Oh God," Crystal said as the ride gained speed, moving back and forth raising up in a gradually increasing arc. The wind blew her hair back and forth, momentarily blocking Laura's view of her friend's face.

"Hang on, it's going to go higher," she said with a smile. On the next swing, the longboat shaped ride went even higher, causing their stomachs to flip-flop. Crystal giggled at the unusual feeling, a smile coming to her face.

"That feels funny."

"Yeah," Laura agreed. "Let's raise our arms next time as it's going down."

"Not on your life," the younger woman said firmly, strengthening her grip on the safety bar.

"Wuss." The writer raised her arms as did many others on the ride. "Whee," she yelled as they descended, lowering them only on the upswing. "Come on, it's fun."

"Uh huh," Crystal said dubiously, refusing to release her grip. Still the smile remained on her face as they swung back and forth. The ride swung to an almost vertical position before coming back down.

"Whee," they said in unison. One of the teenagers who fought so hard to get to the back seats apparently failed to follow the attendants instructions to keep everything secured. His blue baseball cap sailed off, fluttering to the ground below. Crystal laughed at both his frantic attempt to catch it and the thrill of the speeding ride. Far too soon for Laura, the ride slowed, the arc lessened, and soon they found themselves sitting still waiting for the safety bar to be raised. The roommates became separated as they exited the ride, meeting up moments later on the ground. The first words out of Crystal's mouth was "That was fun. Can we do it again?"

Laura couldn't help but laugh. "I told you you'd enjoy it once you got on it."

"Oh man, I can't believe how fast that thing goes," Crystal said, using her fingers to hook her hair behind her ear. "It's a good thing we haven't eaten yet."

"The pirate ship is murder on the stomach," Laura agreed, similarly moving her shorter hair back into place. "But it is so much fun."

"Oh yeah. Let's do it again."

The initial hesitation in the twenty-five year old was gone, replaced by an enthusiasm associated more with people half her age. They went on the ride again, this time Laura convincing her to sit a couple of seats back from the center. Crystal still kept her hands on the safety bar but it did nothing to dampen her enjoyment of the ride. After that they decided to spend some time on the ground, walking along the Midway checking out the various games of skill and chance.

"That looks pretty easy," Crystal said. "All you have to do is knock the bottles off with a baseball."

"The trick is you have to knock them completely off the stand in order to win." Still, it does look pretty easy, Laura thought to herself. One dollar per

throw. Well, I suppose it won't hurt to try. "You want to take a shot at it?"

"Me? Hell no," the younger woman scoffed. "I couldn't hit the broad side of a barn from ten feet away. You're the outfielder."

Laura was already unzipping her fanny pack in search of some singles. She stepped up and handed a bill to the attendant. One bottle was stacked on top of two others and a ball was handed to her. She nodded at the instructions and hefted the ball in her left hand. Her first throw was high, knocking off the top bottle but leaving the bottom two standing. Immediately she pulled out another bill. I can do this. The bottles were reset.

"Come on, Laura. You can do it," Crystal encouraged. The next shot knocked the bottles down but only two rolled off the stand. The next two shots proved equally fruitless but on the fifth try she jumped with delight when all three bottles hit the ground.

"Choice, bottom shelf," the attendant said.

"You pick it," Laura said to her roommate.

"Naw, you're the one who won it."

"No really. You pick it."

Okay

"Crystal looked at the various stuffed bears. "The red one." It was almost a foot in height, far too big to be squeezed into Laura's fanny pack. "I'll hold it for you," she offered.

"Hold it for me? No Crystal. You keep it. You picked it out."

"You sure?"

"Sure." She reached out and took the bear, checking the seams to make sure they weren't split as so many of the stuffed toys won at fairs and carnivals were. Satisfied that it wasn't defective, she handed it back to Crystal. "You'll just have to win something for me later."

"How about I buy you another beer instead? I told you, I have lousy aim."

"Tell you what. I'll buy this round and you pick out the next ride." One more beer won't hurt me. We're going to be here for a few more hours yet. They walked over to the beer cart. "What kind?"

"Miller if they have it."

"Is that what we had last time?"

"Yeah."

"That was fine." Laura turned to the man. "Two Millers."

They continued on, passing cotton candy and popcorn booths. The sun was starting to set and the Midway twinkled with the glow of multi-colored blinking lights. "Oh, look at that!" Crystal said excitedly, pointing at an open tent housing gaming tables. "I bet they have blackjack in there."

"They have gambling at the fair?"

"Yeah, look. There's a dice game. Let's go look."

Laura had no choice but to follow as Crystal quickly crossed the distance and entered the tent. Indeed the area was a mini casino, with blackjack, poker, craps, and various other games of chance. Crystal set her beer on the felt covered table and pulled up a chair. "I'm good at blackjack," she said. Laura watched as she pulled two dollars out of her pocket and set them on the table. "I'm in," she said to the dealer. He was dressed in a typical fashion, white shirt with black vest, a green plastic visor on his head. He nodded and looked at Laura questioningly.

Realizing she would have to play in order to remain sitting next to Crystal, Laura pulled out two dollars as well and set them on the table. She leaned over and quietly said to her roommate "You're going to have to help me out here."

"No prob," Crystal said, picking up her beer. "Patty and I used to play this together all the time." The dealer quickly dealt the cards, giving Crystal two jacks and Laura a seven and a four. The dealer showed a seven, the other one was face down on the table. "Ooh," the blonde said excitedly. "Double down."

"What?"

"Put two more bucks up. Chances are you'll get a face card and beat him."

"And if I don't, I'm out four bucks."

"You'll beat him, trust me." Crystal looked at the dealer. "I'll stay."

Laura did as instructed, receiving another card from the dealer. "I got a nine."

"That's fine. You have twenty, just like me. If he has a face card, he can't draw. He has to stop at seventeen and over, pull on sixteen and under." The cards were dealt to the other players before the dealer flipped his face card over, revealing a ten.

"Dealer has seventeen," he said. "Pays eighteen and over." He put two Susan B. Anthony dollar coins in front of Crystal and four in front of Laura.

"You can put your money away and just play with theirs now," the blonde said, stuffing her bills into her front pocket. Laura neatly folded hers and put it in her fanny pack. She also pulled two of the four coins back off the playing area, keeping her bet even with Crystal's. She never noticed that the table minimum was only one dollar.

The cards were dealt again, Crystal getting a ten on the first pass while Laura received a six. Both women became excited when the ace of spades was laid on top of Crystal's card. "Blackjack for the pretty lady," the dealer said before giving Laura a three. He finished dealing the cards before putting three dollar coins in Crystal's betting circle.

"What do I do?"

"Hit," Crystal answered. Laura nodded at the dealer. A quick flick of the wrist and a king of hearts appeared with her other cards. "Okay, hold there," the blonde said. The dealer, understanding that the brown haired woman was taking the other's advice, moved on to the next player. In the end he had nineteen and two more coins were placed in Laura's betting circle, which she quickly added to the two sitting directly in front of her.

"This is good. Maybe we should quit while we're ahead," she said.

"Oh no, we're just getting started," Crystal said, reducing the coins in her betting circle to two. "We're still playing with their money. Come on, once we start losing we'll go, okay?"

An hour later the need for more beer and to stretch convinced Crystal to trade in her SBA dollars for paper bills. Laura kept a few for her change jar and converted the others to the more usual currency. "So how'd you do?" she asked as they headed out of the tent.

"I'm up almost forty bucks," Crystal said happily, patting her right hip pocket.

"I think I ended up with twenty. I didn't make all the high bets that you did." It was now dark out, the Midway lights all burning brightly for the fairgoers. "I'm getting hungry. Think there's anything healthy here?"

"Not unless you consider sausage and hot dogs healthy," Crystal teased, pointing in the direction of the food court, an offshoot where several tables and food carts were set in a semicircle. "Let's go see what they have up there."

Laura didn't trust anything with mayonnaise in it after a long hot day nor did she want anything deep fried. Crystal happily ordered herself a cheeseburger and chili fries along with another beer. Hoping it wasn't too oily, the writer settled on a piece of plain pizza and bottled water. She followed her roommate to a white plastic table. "Hold on," she said, setting her plate and water on a nearby table. "Let me wipe that down."

"Ah, what's a few crumbs," Crystal said, brushing her side off with the back of her hand.

"There's ketchup and something sticky there too," she said, using a squirt of her water to dampen a paper napkin. "It'll only take a minute." Laura wiped down the top and sides of the table before moving to her chair and making sure that received a good wiping as well. Crystal had already settled down and was halfway through her burger when Laura decided it was clean enough to put her food on.

"You worry about things too much," Crystal complained good-naturedly. "A dirty seat won't kill you. What are you going to do when you have to make a trip to one of the portable toilets? Squat?"

"Definitely." Laura shuddered visibly at the thought of having to use the smelly rest room. She dabbed the top of her cheese with a napkin, soaking up the excess oil. "How's the burger?"

"Good. You should try the chili fries. They're out of this world." The smile that had been present throughout the evening was still there between bites.

Laura smiled to herself and lifted the slice to her lips. She had no doubt that Crystal was having one of the best nights she'd had in a long time, if ever. Even having to breathe the second hand smoke as they played blackjack was worth it. Thinking of the money in her wallet, she smiled to realize that she was also enjoying herself more than usual. Crystal's enthusiasm was rubbing off on her, explaining why she spent over an hour gambling, something her Baptist father had viewed as a sin and strictly forbidden. The closest she'd come before was playing for chips with Jenny and the boys.

"Hey, you listening to me?" Crystal asked, snapping her out of her musings.

"Oh, sorry."

"I said you should try the chili fries." She pushed the plate across the table. "Come on, live dangerously."

"No, really. I don't think

"

"I didn't think I could handle that pirate ship ride either but I did it. One fry won't kill you."

"Fine, just one." Laura poked the fork into the chili covered pile and took a bite. "Oh, that's spicy," she mumbled around the mouthful of food as she reached for the water.

"Yeah, that's what makes it so good," Crystal said. "Beer works better than water."

"I'll stick to the water, thanks," she replied, draining half her bottle in an attempt to cool down the inferno she felt on her tongue. "So what do you want to do after this?"

"We could go back to the tent." Crystal leaned back in her chair, resting her ankle on her opposite knee. "You wouldn't have a barrette in there would you?" she asked, pointing at the fanny pack.

"No but I thought I saw them somewhere." She sat up and looked around. "I think they were a prize in those crank machines."

"Really?" Crystal ran her fingers through her shoulder length hair and shook it out. "I should have thought to bring one."

"Those games are a waste of money. It takes a miracle to win."

"Well, I've got a few bucks of theirs, I'm willing to give it a shot if it means keeping my hair off the back of my neck."

Laura passed over a napkin. "Better make sure you keep that cut clean."

"Thanks. It hasn't been hurting or anything and I forgot about it."

You haven't thought about any of those bad things today, have you? "Oh!" She opened her fanny pack. "You know what

I have

"Pushing things around, she finally located what she was looking for. "There it is." She pulled the black elastic band out and held it up for Crystal to see. "I wasn't thinking when you asked for a barrette. I've had this hairband with me the entire time."

The blonde pounced on the hairband. "Yes, perfect."

"You want help?"

"Naw, that's okay. I can get it." Twisting the band in half, Crystal gathered her hair and fastened it into a ponytail, allowing the cooling air to reach the back of her neck. "Oh, that's much better." She drained her beer and set the empty cup on top of her plate. "You ready?"

"Ready for what? You still haven't told me what you want to do next and don't even think of suggesting the tent again."

"Okay, how about another ride?"

"Sure." Laura stood and collected the trash from the table. "Which one?"

"How about the tea cups? Unless you get dizzy from spinning."

"Me? It's you I worry about. I don't want to see that cheeseburger again."

"Oh please," Crystal laughed. "After all the drinking I've done, I don't think an innocent ride on something like the tea cups will bother me."

"I don't know. I've seen you after one of those binges, remember?" Laura smiled at the way Crystal covered her face with her hands. "Don't worry about it. I'm sure you'll be fine."

The tea cup ride was a group of twelve cup shaped cars that spun around on individual tracks attached to a larger surface that also rotated, creating speed and centrifugal force. In the middle of the 'tea cups' was a wheel that the passengers could use to help make themselves spin faster. Headrests helped protect the neck from the strain during the height of the ride. They were lucky enough to not have a large line waiting for the ride, allowing them to get a tea cup all to themselves. Sitting opposite each other, they waited impatiently for the ride to begin. Crystal kept the red stuffed bear wedged between her and the seat, not wanting it to fly out once the ride started. "You know," Laura began, "If we both start tugging on this like it was a steering wheel, I bet we can get it to start spinning.

"I'm game if you are," Crystal replied, putting her hands on the top of the wheel. Because they were opposite each other, Laura had to reach around her roommate's arms to put her hands where they belonged. "Clockwise or counter-clockwise?"

"Counter."

"Okay." It started slow and required a bit of huffing and puffing but soon they had a steady rhythm going and the tea cup spun in a circle, making everything they looked at a blur of light and color. With a jerking motion, the ride began. The speed that they were able to create on their own was no match to what the ride generated. In less than a minute they were whipping around in circles, the force causing Crystal to lose her grip on the wheel. She let her head lean back against the padded headrest and giggled. Laura stopped trying to keep up with the spinning wheel and relaxed as well, closing her eyes and feeling the spinning motion with her body.

"This would be cool stoned," Crystal said without thought. "I mean

well

"

Eyes still closed, Laura smiled. "I know what you mean."

"It's fun this way too, it's just different that way."

"I'm sure it is," she said, opening her eyes and reaching for the wheel. "Let's see if we can make this go faster." Putting her hands in position, she casually followed the current speed while waiting for Crystal to reach in and help. Together they began letting the wheel slide between the fingers until it started to slow down. Working together as if team, they jerked the wheel, sending the tea cup into another fast spin. Their hands constantly tangled, sending both into fits of laughter. Both were smiling and giggling like schoolgirls, no explanation or talk necessary. "Faster," Laura urged.

"Yeah, faster!" Crystal readily agreed, picking up the speed of her pulls on the wheel. At one point both had to lean back and close their eyes, the ride and their own speed making everything spin at an incredible rate.

"Oh man, this might be too fast," Crystal moaned, resting her hand on her belly.

Oh no, don't you dare get sick on this ride. Scooting across the seat, Laura moved next to her. "Does it hurt or do you feel nauseous?"

"It hurts."

"I have an idea." Reaching between Crystal and the seat, she used her fingers to rhythmically thump the younger woman's back. "Try to burp." A quick spin sent her back against the seat but it also did the trick. Crystal let out a very unladylike belch.

"Sorry."

"That's okay. It's probably from all that beer." Feeling the ride slowing down, Laura slid back over to her side of the seat.

"Speaking of which," Crystal said, straightening up in her seat. "We'd better find the potties after this."

"Good idea," she agreed, feeling her own bladder protest. When the ride came to a stop she chivalrously held the wheel with her hands to keep the cup from moving while Crystal picked up the stuffed bear and stepped out. The attendant held the car for Laura, freely looking up and down her body. There was a great temptation to make a comment to greasy attendant but she chose against it, wanting to get away from the body odor wafting at her as soon as possible.

Crystal was waiting for her outside of the ride area. "I think they're up here," she said, referring to the portable toilets. They walked further away from the rides and game booths, soon coming upon a slight incline where they made out the silhouette of the toilets. As they approached, the sound of men laughing nearby reached them. Laura looked over and saw the dim outlines of tents and campers of the carnival workers. Whether it was the lack of light or fear that made Crystal move closer to her, she wasn't sure. "Um, do you want to take turns standing guard for each other?" she asked.

"Oh, yeah that would be a good idea," Crystal answered quietly, her eyes looking around in the darkness for any movement. Deciding that her second guess was the reason for the sudden physical closeness, Laura was glad her friend accepted her offer. After smelling the faint odor of pot and something she couldn't identify, she wasn't sure she wanted to be alone out here either.

The trip fortunately went without incident, both women doing what they had to do and they were quickly on their way back to the heart of the fair. Just before they reached the Midway, Crystal reached out and put her hand on Laura's forearm, stopping her. "Um

" The nearby floodlight gave little illumination in that particular area, barely enough for her to see Crystal's face. "Um

" the blonde tried again. "Thanks for back there. I know you did it for me." She looked around, still nervous of the shadows in the dark.

Hey

"She reached out, catching the stripper's chin and tilting her face so their eyes met. "I know it's got to be scary for you out there in the dark."

Crystal nodded and began slowly walking back to the fair, Laura quickly falling into step beside her. "But I'm having fun," the young woman said firmly. "I'm not going to let that scare me." She gave Laura a playful nudge. "Come on, let's go find a game where I can kick your ass and win you a prize." Crystal held the teddy bear up to show her. "Maybe I can even win one bigger than this one."

Laura held back her initial protests. Surely she could find room in her bedroom for a stuffed animal if Crystal wanted to win her one so bad. "Sure, sounds like fun. Let's go see what which game has the best prizes."

While searching for the biggest teddy bears, they stopped for Crystal to buy another beer and bottled water. While waiting, Laura let her eyes wander around, taking in the sights and sounds of the annual fair. People of all ages were about, from little children being carried by their parents to elderly couples using canes and trying hard to avoid being run over by the rambunctious teens. Brilliant twinkling caught her eye and Laura moved closer to the source.

Perfect, she thought when she saw the brightly painted sign. The crystal game. What had drawn her attention were the snowflake shaped crystals dangling from thin plastic string. They were the perfect size for dangling off her rear view mirror and it had been something Laura thought about buying before but never had gotten around to it. She looked at the game, trying to figure out the trick to winning. Unfortunately there wasn't really any easy way to win. A large flat table sat in the middle of the booth. Several muffin pans were pressed together, each cup a different color. The square area was roped off and a less than fully inflated ball was used. The winners were those that had their money down on the color that the ball landed on. Laura quickly did the math. There were many brown squares, followed by green, yellow, red and black. Only one silver cup was visible and that was the one that the ball had to land on in order to win a crystal. Otherwise the winner won a gift corresponding with the winning color. No wonder they're real crystal and not fake plastic, she thought to herself as she turned away from the booth. She took only one step before finding herself face to face with Crystal.

"They don't have teddy bears," she said, looking at the booth that Laura had just walked from.

"I was looking at the crystal pendants but it's impossible to win. Come on, let's go find something else."

"No, wait a minute." Crystal walked up and leaned against the rail, watching and learning how the game was played. Reaching into her pocket, she put a quarter on the silver betting square. The barker continued to call for people to join in and win a prize but when no others were forthcoming, he was forced to hand her the ball. "Throw it into the pit. If your money is on the winning color, you win choice of that color's prizes."

Crystal threw the ball, frowning when it landed on a brown square. Laura put her hand on the blonde woman's shoulder. "Come on, we'll find something else to play."

"What would you do with it if I win?"

"I've always thought it would be nice to have one hanging from my rear view mirror," Laura said, letting her hand return to her side. "But you can't win this one. It's a trick. There's only one square on the whole board and it's in the corner. That's impossible to get to." The attendant overheard the dark haired woman's complaint and snorted, turning the pan around so the silver cup was away from the corner.

"You gonna put your money down or keep trying to drive away my customers?" the barker grumbled.

"Would you really hang it from your rear view if I win it?" Crystal asked, putting a quarter on the silver tile.

"Of course I would. Why wouldn't I?"

"I dunno. Usually people hang things that are important to them there, like graduation tassels or stuff like that. From a friend or something." Realizing how she sounded, Crystal took the ball and tossed it into the pit before pulling her cigarettes out of her pocket and lighting one.

"Exactly why I would put it there," Laura said quietly. "I always display gifts I get from friends." She returned the smile she saw on Crystal's face. This is going to take a while, she thought to herself, convinced that the cute blonde would spend her last dollar to win one a pendant.

It didn't take her last dollar but it was ten dollars and three beers later before Crystal finally managed to make the ball fall in the silver cup. "All right!" she yelled before being engulfed in Laura's bear hug.

"You did it!" the writer said excitedly as she stepped back. The barker, having gotten more money than he had expected, smiled as well and picked up the display rack of pendants for the dark haired woman to choose from. Laura chose a multi-faceted octagonal shaped snowflake design. "Oh, it's very pretty," she whispered, holding it up to the light and turning it this way and that to see the rainbow of colors reflected within. Not wanting to put it in her fanny pack, she checked the length of nylon attached to it and hung it around her neck. Crystal simply leaned against the booth and smiled, finishing off the last of her beer.

"I'm glad you like it," she said, fighting off a yawn.

"I do, very much," Laura assured, fingering the pendant. "Thank you."

"No prob. What do you want to do now?"

Having seen the stifled yawn, Laura decided to call the evening to an end. It was already after nine and she still had to try and get some writing in. "Why don't we go on one or two more rides and then call it a night? We're still ahead with what we won at the blackjack table."

"I guess it is getting late," Crystal said. "But let's do some more rides first."

"Sure. You name it, we're on it," she agreed.

A huge smile crossed the stripper's face. "I'll race you to the pirate ship."

"Do we get to sit at the end this time?" Laura asked hopefully.

"How about halfway between center and the end this time and all the way in the back next time?"

"Deal," she said, following Crystal across the Midway to the thrill ride.

Part 6

Crystal smiled at the open parking space in front of the office building. A quick glance at her watch told her she had less than five minutes to get parked and up to Jenny's office for her session. After parking the car and putting several quarters into the meter, she headed through the revolving door into the building.

"Good morning, Miss Sheridan," Catherine said, marking Crystal's arrival off on the schedule chart. "Miss Foster will be right with you."

She nodded and gave a slight grunt in acknowledgement before sitting on one of the chairs near the wall. I need more coffee, she thought to herself, wishing now that she hadn't spent an extra twenty minutes sleeping this morning. Of course she had wanted an early appointment due to Jenny's rule about not drinking or smoking pot before a session. Guess I can't complain. At the sound of a door opening, she looked up and saw Jenny.

"Good morning, Crystal. Shall we get started?"

"Sit where you want," Jenny said as she closed the door behind them. Crystal's choices were still the same, the couch, chair, or bean bags. Without realizing why, she chose the chair, tucking her legs up beneath her on the thick leather cushion. "So how are you this morning?" the therapist asked as she took a seat on the couch, a clipboard with several papers on her lap.

"Fine," she wiped her hands on her pant legs, surprised at the feeling of her body temperature rising. It was a feeling she hadn't experienced since being called into the principal's office in high school. "I could use some more coffee, though."

"Help yourself. There's a pot on the table over there in the corner." Jenny said. "If you like, you can bring in a mug of your own to use."

"Naw, thanks anyway, Doc." She stood up and crossed over to the machine, pulling a white Styrofoam cup off the stack. "I don't get attached to things like mugs. Besides, most of what I had burned up in the fire."

"It doesn't hurt to have a favorite coffee cup, Crystal. Something special for you. Did you have any special things when you were a child?"

Crystal stopped pouring cream into her coffee and looked down at the mocha and black swirls blending together. "I didn't have anything special when I was a kid, Doc. Just Patty." Tossing the plastic stirrer in the trash, she went back to her chair and looked at her friend/therapist. "So is that why I'm so fucked up? Because I never had a cup of my own?"

"I would rather you didn't think of yourself as damaged goods, Crystal," Jenny admonished gently. "Speaking of damage. Let's talk about that awful looking bruise on your face."

"I told you at the game Saturday that it was nothing."

"And I believe I told you what I thought of that answer. No copping out, Crystal, remember? So who hit you and why?"

"Some punk assed college guy showing off for his buddies. He wanted more than a look and when I tried to get away he hit me."

"How did it make you feel?"

Oh great. Here we go with the touchy feely questions. "How do you think it made me feel?" she answered, crossing her arms over her chest and staring at the diplomas on the wall. They were too far away to read but it was better than having to look Jenny in the eye.

"I'd rather you told me than guess," Jenny countered. "Let's make the question even easier. Forget about that one incident. How does stripping make you feel in general?"

She shrugged. "It's a job."

"So is being a therapist."

Crystal caught movement out of the corner of her eye and turned her head to see the brown haired woman writing something. "What?"

"Hmm?"

"What are you writing?"

"I'm just making a note, Crystal. There's so much to talk about that sometimes I make notes to go back and focus on a particular subject."

"So what'd you write?" She was surprised when the therapist handed over the clipboard.

"See for yourself. There's nothing in there that is secret from you," Jenny said. "Anything written in there is only to help you, not hurt."

Crystal took the clipboard and looked at the top paper. A lined form showed today's date and several scribbled words in Jenny's handwriting. She cringed at one word circled in blue ink. Notebook. "Um, I uh

forgot about the notebook. I don't get to the store much."

"It's not going to work," Jenny said as she rose from the couch and went to her desk. "I can't make this happen for you. You have to want to change enough to do the things you need to do." She opened a drawer and pulled out a composition book. "Here. Bring it with you each time. You don't have to show me what's in it if you don't want to but I do expect you to write in it each day."

Taking the notebook, Crystal opened it and flipped the pages. Stark white with thin blue lines loomed before her. "I

I'm not really good at writing." The book was closed and set on the stand next to her coffee.

"Think of it as a diary."

"Diaries are stupid. Why write down all your secrets just so someone else can find them?"

"Is that what you're afraid of?" Jenny returned to her casual position on the couch. "That someone will use your words against you?"

"I wouldn't even know what to write about."

"Write about whatever comes to mind in whatever form you need it to be. Poetry, prose, a letter to an old friend, anything."

"Yeah, fine," she said, resigning herself to scribbling something in the notebook. Sensing a pause in the conversation, she picked up the cup of lukewarm coffee and took a sip.

"Are you comfortable?" Jenny asked, putting the clipboard down and sitting cross-legged on the couch. Crystal set the cup down and crossed her arms before nodding. "Good," the therapist continued. "Have you been reading your morning meditations?" Another nod. While she didn't take the time to think about the meaning of the passages, she did open the book each morning and glance at it. "So today's topic is about putting the blame where it belongs."

Uh oh. Crystal stiffened, shifting until her legs were tucked up beneath her. The feeling of being in the principal's office was returning with renewed force. "I know where the blame belongs," she said softly, her gaze returning to the safety of the cream colored diplomas on the wall.

"Where?"

"With him."

"Give him a name."

"Him. My mother's useless excuse for a husband."

"Your father."

Crystal grunted and took a deep breath.

"What did you call him?"

"You mean besides fucking asshole?" She shifted again, wishing she was allowed to smoke in the therapist's office.

"Besides that," Jenny said with a knowing smirk.

"We called him

" It took some effort to get the word out. "

Daddy." Crystal made no effort to keep the venom out of her voice. "He didn't deserve to be called that. I hate the bastard."

"Why?"

"You know why. I told you he hurt me and Patty."

"There are many ways to hurt someone, Crystal. What did he do?"

Her right foot began twitching nervously. "I dunno, everything I guess."

"You do know. No copouts."

Crystal turned and glared at the therapist. "He hit us," she said angrily. "He thought being our father gave him the right to beat the shit out of us whenever he wanted. That enough?" She looked back at the diplomas, waiting for the reaction to her outburst.

"You tell me," Jenny said calmly. "Are your nightmares about him hitting you and your sister?"

"They're about a lot of things," she shrugged, her anger deflated somewhat by the gentle tone directed at her. "Sometimes."

"What are they about most of the time?"

The foot moved faster. "Different things." Just say it, the little voice in her head screamed. Go ahead. Shock her ass and tell her how he used to crawl into your bed at night. Tell her what a dirty little girl you were. Crystal's breathing increased, the walls of the large office seeming far too confining. "I gotta go," she said suddenly, rising from her chair.

"Crystal, wait." Jenny stood as well, the clipboard casually tossed on the couch.

"No, I have to go."

"You can end a session any time you feel you have to but I don't want you to run off because you're afraid to face feelings that come up in here." She reached around Crystal and picked up the notebook. "Remember that whatever you say in this room, whatever you write about in this book, it stays here. No one is going to use it against you or judge you for it." Handing the notebook to Crystal, she added "Besides, I have a feeling you do enough self-judging as it is."

While the walls seemed to stop closing in, the young woman still found herself unable to look Jenny in the eye, choosing instead to stare at the black and white marbled cover of the composition book. "You think so, huh Doc?"

"Yeah, I think so," Jenny said softly. Crystal tried not to flinch when she felt the soft pressure of the therapist's hand on her shoulder. "We're going to work on that." Releasing her grasp, Jenny moved back a step. "All right, I can see the trapped rabbit look in your eyes. Read your meditations, write in your journal, and most important of all, do something nice for yourself each day."

Crystal rolled her eyes. Oh yeah, do something nice for myself each day. Keep living in the clouds, Doc. To Jenny she said "Yeah, okay Doc. I'll see you next week."

Screech! Crystal jammed both feet on her brake pedal to avoid rear-ending the truck in front of her. A second later she saw the reason for the sudden stop as a quickly moving delivery person darted between the slow moving traffic. "Oh I hate driving downtown," she said out loud. Screaming guitar chords answered back from the rear speakers. The Omni lacked air conditioning, a must in the late July heat, forcing her to leave the windows down in hopes of a passing breeze. Surrounded by multi-story buildings with mirrored windows, that hope was quickly fading.

Halfway up the next block she saw an open parking space, the first one in over ten minutes. Pulling a paper napkin from the pile wedged between the seat and emergency brake, Crystal wiped the perspiration from her face. "Ah damn." Surrounded by neatly cut grass was a bright yellow fire hydrant, revealing why the curb space was unoccupied. Deciding to take her chances, she jerked the wheel to the right and pulled the hatchback into the parking space. Stretching across the seat, she rolled the windows up to within an inch of the top, hoping the small opening would be enough to keep the interior from becoming a sauna while she was gone.

A large sign affixed to the chain link fencing surrounding the building proclaimed it to be another M. Swenson Construction project. Now the trick is to find Michael, she thought, opening the gate and stepping into the construction area. Piles of debris were everywhere, neatly organized according to material. She saw workers moving about, carrying burnt boards and twisted metal framing. He must be inside somewhere. "Hey lady, this is a hard hat area. You can't be running around in here."

She turned to see a tall man wearing a yellow safety helmet running towards her. "Lady, we're dumping things out the windows and off the roof. You shouldn't be in here."

"I'm looking for Michael Swenson."

"He's inside but you still can't run around without a hard hat." He pointed at the archway leading into the building. "Stand there for now. That way nothing falls on you. I'll be right back." He took off around the corner of the building, returning moments later with a safety helmet in his hand. "Here.

Michael's inside in the back office. Go straight down and take a right. You can't miss him."

"Thank you."

Michael was on the phone when she walked in. "Hold on just a minute, Peter, okay?" He held the phone to his chest. "Well hello there, Miss Sheridan. I'll be right with you." He put the phone back to his ear. "Peter? I'll call you back. Someone just came in. Okay good. Bye." Setting the phone back in its cradle, the large blonde man smiled and stepped around his desk. "And how are you today?"

"Fine thanks and please call me Crystal."

"So what brings you downtown?"

"You said at dinner last week that you were looking for help."

"Well yes but that's just for demolition work. You know, hard manual labor." He looked at her skeptically. "I don't think it's a job suited to you."

Crystal took the hard hat off, confident that nothing would fall on her head while in the office. "It's just hauling stuff out, right? Sheetrock and stuff? Laura said you've hired her before."

"Well, yes I have but this is a great deal of sweat work, Crystal. I don't know if you're suited for it." He pointed at the metal folding chair. "Please, have a seat." He leaned against the desk. "Why would you want to do something like this anyway and more importantly, what happened to your face?"

"Some drunk at the club," she said, answering the latter question first. "And I need the money. I can't work there looking like this."

Michael walked over to the file cabinet and picked up one of the clipboards resting atop it. "I suppose it's only fair to give you a chance," he said. "Fill these out and I need a copy of your social security card and license." He handed her the clipboard, which had several employment forms on it. "I hire by the day, pay by the week. Payday is Monday for the previous week. Ten dollars an hour, half-hour lunch and a ten minute break every hour. I'll issue you a set of gloves and a hat but you'll have to get your own boots. I'm afraid those sneakers just won't do around here."

"That's fine. I can get those today." She filled in the various lines of required information while they talked. "What hours?"

"I open the gate at seven and close it at six." He pointed at the time clock affixed to the wall. "The last six digits of your social security number will be your code."

Um

"Crystal paused at question seven on the form. "What if I don't know the answer to every question?"

"Then leave it blank. It's just the highlighted areas that are required anyway," he said, reaching for the coffee pot. "Would you like some?"

Please

and it is a highlighted area."

"Cream and sugar? Which part?"

"Both please and it's the part about who to contact in an emergency. Can't I just leave it blank?"

"Don't you have family around here?"

"No."

Michael shrugged. "I dunno. I just put down Peter. Why don't you put down Laura?" He opened the cube shaped mini-refrigerator and pulled out a pint of half-n-half. "I mean, I know you two aren't lovers or anything but you are friends, right? I'm sure if something happened to you she'd want to know about it." He handed her the mug. "Hope I didn't make it too sweet."

Crystal took a sip and shook her head. "No, it's fine. So when can I start?"

"As soon as you show up with work boots, steel toed. My insurance won't let you work without them." He looked at his watch. "It's almost noon. You have to be able to work a minimum of four hours each day so if you can be back here by two, you can work today. Otherwise it'll be tomorrow." He reach over and pulled a business card out of the dispenser. "Here," he said, writing something on the back of the card. "If you go out fifty six toward the airport, there's an outlet store near the old Miller's factory." He handed her the card. "This guy will give you a really good deal, just show him the card."

"Friend of yours?"

"Ex-lover actually but he gives discounts to people I send over." He glanced over at the clipboard. "Almost done?"

"Just about." She pulled her sport wallet out of her pocket. "Here's my license

and there's the social security card."

"Good." Michael took the cards over to the copy machine in the corner. "I do expect at least a few days notice before you quit."

"Oh, sure. I wouldn't just run out on you," she assured.

"Well, don't make promises until you've actually seen the work." He handed the cards back to her. "I can't count the number of men that have taken this job and quit within a day." He shook his head. "Guess some people are afraid of a little hard work. Well, I have to go check on a few things." He donned his hard hat and removed a walkie-talkie from the charger. "Enjoy your coffee and perhaps I'll see you this afternoon."

As Michael had promised, the manager of the outlet store gave Crystal a discount on the work boots. Coming out of the store with her purchase, she was surprised to hear her name being called. "Crystal, is that you?"

"Hey Steph, how's it going?"

"Oh the usual. Tom's being a jerk and the kids are little monsters but what else is new, eh?" The redhead pointed at the bulge in Crystal's shirt. "Got an extra cig?"

"Sure. So what are you doing out here?" she asked while handing over a cigarette and her lighter. "I thought you guys were over in that trailer park on Ohio."

"We were but Tom got into a huge fight with that asshole landlord over the dog and we had to move. We're over on Essex now."

"That's too bad."

"Yeah, this landlord's a real asshole too but at least we were able to move in without references," the redhead said, taking a long drag on the cigarette. "Tom sent me over to buy some beer. You wanna come over?" She leaned closer. "We just got an ounce of the most fabulous stuff." She brought her fingertips to her lips. "Tasty and out of this world. I'm telling ya, Crys, this bag is really primo. One joint and you'll be high for hours."

"Oh, I'd love to but I have to get to work. You got a phone yet?"

"No, damn phone company. I have to pay at least half of my old bill and make arrangements on the other half before they'll give me a new one. You'd think because I have kids they'd be more lenient. Hey, you wouldn't

"

"No, I have an old bill too," Crystal lied.

"Damn, that's too bad. We've already used Ricky and Marci's names. Oh well. Hey, why don't you come over when you get done with work? It's the white trailer with yellow trim just after you enter the park."

"All right. I think I'll be done around six or so. I'll come over after that."

"That'd be great. Hey, if you can spare it feel free to bring a twelve pack or so. We'll have plenty of weed."

"Deal." Crystal pulled the keys out of her pocket. "I have to get going. I'll see you later. Good seeing you, Steph."

"You too, Crys. Later."

Crystal walked to her car, surprised by the chance meeting. She had not seen Stephanie for almost a year. It was a pain to drive over just to see if they were home and there was no way to predict what kind of mood Tom would be in. Still, if they were home, it was almost a guarantee there would be marijuana. Looks like I won't have to use up my stuff tonight, Crystal thought as she unlocked the Omni.

Returning downtown, she was pleased to discover a parking space not far from the building. Pushing the seat back, Crystal exchanged her sneakers for the beige work boots. Am I nuts? I'm not some butch construction woman, I'm a stripper. Still the job had come easy and the pay was too good to ignore. Well, like he said, if I don't like it I'm only out the cost of the boots. Oh well, they'll be useful in the winter anyway.

She found Michael in the office. The large bear of a man smiled when he saw her. "I'm so delighted you returned. I put you in the computer already just in case." He looked at her feet. "I see you found a pair that fit. Good. Let's get you punched in on the clock and then I'll show you where you'll be working." He walked over to the cabinet next to the copier and opened it, pulling out a brand new helmet and leather gloves. "They're sized for men so I figure small would be about right for you."

After showing her how to use the time clock, Michael led Crystal up the rear stairs to the third floor. "The service elevator works but don't use it unless you have a full load to go down. It's not the greatest and we don't want to use it any more than necessary." They stepped through an open doorway a hall ruined by smoke and water damage. Around them were the sounds of power tools and radios trying to outblast each other. "We'll start you out here," Michael yelled over the din. "The supervisor always has a red hardhat so he should be easy to spot." Crystal nodded her understanding. "The guys will knock the sheetrock down and haul it into the hallway. See that open window down there? There's a chute attached leading to the dumpster. Your job is taking the piles the guys throw out in the hall and putting it in the chute, got it?"

"Got it," she replied.

"Good. I'll leave you to get started then."

The doors were absent from the row of offices, making it easier for the guys to throw the broken pieces of wall out from the rooms. Great, with my luck I'll be walking past just as one of them throws some out. Picking up the flat shovel leaning against the wall, Crystal slid it under several pieces of sheetrock and tried to lift it.

"You ain't never going to get anywhere doing it that way," a male voice said. Crystal turned to see a short man wearing a red safety helmet standing there. "I'm Josh Thompson. Michael just told me you were here."

"So if you don't use the shovel, how do you get all this stuff all the way down there?" she asked. Josh smiled and picked up several pieces in his arms.

"You use a little sweat and muscle, lady," he said, handing the pile to her. "That's what the gloves are for. Otherwise your hands will get all blistered." He looked at his watch. "Okay, you might as well get started. I'll let you know when it's break time." He turned and left into one of the rooms.

Use a little sweat and muscle, she grouched. I'll show you some sweat and muscle, you son of a bitch. Why aren't you big strong boys out here doing this? Piling as many pieces of the broken walls as she could in her arms, Crystal stepped over the series of piles to the end of the hallway. The large window had no glass, broken during the fire and removed after to make room for the chute. Crystal dumped the first armful, leaning out to watch it slide down the sturdy tarp chute. That's not so bad. I can do this. Smiling to herself, the blonde headed back for another pile.

By four o'clock, the confidence she held at two was long gone, replaced with a steady ache in her arms. She discovered the shovel was only good for scooping up the tiny pieces after the larger ones were removed. The men ignored her for the most part, concentrating on their work and running downstairs the instant break was announced. Crystal spent her break alone, leaning against the window frame and looking down at the street below. That's twenty bucks so far, she mentally calculated. Two more hours and I'll earn back what I spent on boots. She took a last drag on the cigarette and threw it out the window. She turned and looked at piles of busted up sheetrock looming at her. Well

it isn't going to move itself.

By five minute before six o'clock, Crystal figured out an easier way to move the sheetrock, using the shovel to push the pieces down the hall, then it was a simple matter of scooping the pieces up and throwing them out the window. It made the work go faster even if her back was screaming from the strain. "Miss Sheridan." Crystal turned to see Josh and Michael standing there. "You certainly did your share today," the supervisor said. Michael nodded in agreement.

"You did indeed. I can't begin to tell you the number of men who've walked off after an hour."

"That's because no one has a work ethic these days," Josh added. He looked at Crystal. "To be honest, lady, I didn't think you'd last the afternoon."

Well fuck you, I did. And I'll do it tomorrow too. "What time do we start tomorrow?"

"Remember I said I open the gate at seven and close it at six. Whatever shift you can get yourself in here for is fine. Just be responsible. Nothing irritates me more than someone just not showing up."

"I'll be here," Crystal assured him.

"You show up at that hour and I'll buy you your first cup of coffee," Michael offered. "Now go get punched out and have a good night. Say hello to Laura for me."

The Omni turned onto Essex Street, Crystal instinctively reaching around and locking her doors in the process. A dead end street leading to one of the oldest trailer parks in the county, Essex was a haven for people wanting to operate outside the law. It was common to see the skeletons of stolen cars littering the empty corner lot and children without shoes playing in the street. Crystal avoided eye contact with the people sitting on porches or leaning against cars as she guided the hatchback into the park. She spotted the white and yellow trailer immediately and parked in front of it, the driveway taken up by a old red pickup truck. Heavy metal music blared from behind closed windows. I guess you're the same asshole as ever, eh Tom?

"Hey Crystal, glad you could make it," Stephanie said as she opened the door. "Oh good, you did remember to stop and get some beer. Come on in, Tom's just rolling up one."

"Great, I could use it after the day I had." Stepping inside, the smell of stale cigarette and marijuana smoke assaulted her senses. Damn Steph, open a fucking window, will ya? At least turn on a fan. A green couch lined one wall while the television and a recliner took up the adjoining one. Tom was seated in the recliner, the television tray next to it covered with rolling papers and empty beer cans. The arm of the chair held the overflowing ashtray.

"Hey Crystal, how the hell are ya?" he asked. "Just about to light one up. Have a seat."

"Hi Tom."

"I'll put these in the fridge," Stephanie said, taking the twelve pack from Crystal.

"Make sure you leave one of those for me first," her husband demanded.

Crystal sat down on the couch and pulled her cigarettes out of her pocket. "I'll take one too."

"Why bother putting them in the fridge then?" the redhead said, sitting down next to her on the couch and opening the cardboard package. "Tom, stop fucking around and light that thing."

"I'm lighting it, I'm lighting it. Jeez, don't be a bitch just because your friend is here. You're really gonna like this shit, Crystal. One hit wonder for sure. I had a joint by myself this morning and it knocked me on my ass for hours."

"That's why I had to go get the beer earlier. He woke up before I did and wouldn't let me have any until I got him the beer."

"That's the only way I can get you to do anything," Tom said.

Oh fuck, don't start already, Crystal groaned inwardly. That's right, take a hit and stop thinking about being an asshole. She took the joint eagerly from him and brought it to her lips. Oh yeah, this is tasty stuff. "Damn, where do you guys get such good shit?"

"My cousin has a farm about three hours north of here. He grows it in his barn," Tom said proudly. "Man, he always has the best fucking stuff going. Hardly any seeds and just look at all the red hairs in here." He held out a sandwich bag half filled with dried out buds. "Fucking beautiful stuff. Not like that shit Smoky sells."

Crystal took another hit before passing the joint to Stephanie. "Oh yeah, this is very nice."

"So what's with the shit kickers?" the redhead asked, pointing at Crystal's boots.

"Oh, I got a job clearing out the old credit union building on Exchange."

"You mean where they had the fire?"

"Stop talking and take your fucking hit," Tom growled, leaning forward in his seat to reach for the joint.

"Yeah," Crystal said, answering Stephanie's question. Stop being such a dork, Tom. "Pay's pretty good. Ten an hour and the hours are flexible."

"You hear that?" the redhead addressed her husband. "Ten bucks an hour. Are they hiring?"

"I think so. I was just hired today." Crystal reached out to take the joint from Tom, who insisted on getting at least three hits in before passing it.

"I don't work for less than twelve," he said, reaching for his beer. "So how come you ain't working down at the Tom Cat anymore?"

"I'm just doing this temporarily while my lip heals. I got hurt in a bar fight last week."

"Oh." Tom took a several gulps from the can. "Gonna say, with an ass like yours you're better off making some money with it than doing work some fat bitch can do." He reached out to take the joint from Stephanie. "Not like this cow can get paid to take off her clothes."

"Fuck you," the redhead said. "Keep it up and you can sleep at your fucking mother's house tonight."

"At least her house isn't a fucking pigsty like this place," he said, passing the joint to Crystal. "She doesn't work all day. You think she'd be able to

run the fucking vacuum once in a while."

Oh man, please don't fight tonight, Crystal silently pleaded. I just want to catch a good buzz and get going.

"Like you head off each morning to work, right?"

"Oh fuck you, Steph." He grabbed the baggie and his cigarettes off the tray and stood up. "I don't have to sit and listen to this shit."

"Fine, go to Mark's or something. I don't give a shit."

"Fine."

"Just leave me some pot, will ya?"

"Go to hell. Get your own." He stormed out the door, not bothering to close it.

"Where's he going?" Crystal asked, taking advantage of the commotion to take an extra couple of hits on the joint. "Hey, you got any clips?"

"On the shelf behind you," Stephanie answered. "Screw him. I knew he wouldn't leave me any." She walked into the bathroom and returned with a canister of hair spray. Crystal found a set of forceps, the tips sticky with built up resin, and clipped the e.g. of the joint.

"Here you go. There isn't much left."

"Don't worry about it, Crys." Stephanie took the seat vacated by Tom and took the offered roach clip. "Thanks." She inhaled sharply, making the tip of the joint blaze orange. Handing it back, she exhaled slowly to avoid choking. "Oh that's good. Here." The redhead held the hair spray canister in both hands and gave it a twist. The bottom unscrewed to reveal a small metal pipe, rolling papers, lighter and a black film canister. "Tom doesn't know about this. Whenever he's got a new batch, after he falls asleep I come out and pinch a few buds for myself. He thinks he's punishing me, the stupid asshole." She opened the film case and dumped the hidden stash of marijuana out onto the tray. "You feel like switching to the pipe? I hate fucking around with papers."

"Sure, no prob," Crystal replied. "So you and Tom are obviously back together. You're not working anymore?"

"No, fuck that. I had a job delivering pizza but the truck broke down and I couldn't afford to get it fixed. Asshole boss wouldn't let me use the company car because I had a minor fender bender with it last winter."

"That sucks." I wouldn't loan you my car either. I know how you drive. Crystal took the metal pipe and reached for her lighter. "Where are the kids?"

"Marci is staying with my mother until the hearing next week. They won't tell me where Ricky is." Stephanie took the pipe. "Tom and I were fighting and the fucking neighbors called the cops. Well, you know how that goes. They came in and saw the pot out and busted us and took the kids."

"Oh no. So what happens now?"

Stephanie shrugged and lit the pipe. "I don't know."

"Well, did you call legal aid?"

"Why bother? They'll give me the kids back. Tom will agree to go into a rehab for thirty days and we'll get benefits while he's in there. It's happened before. Here."

Crystal took the pipe and sucked hard. How can you sit there and not care where your kids are and what they're doing? What are you still doing with that asshole? Finally the outrage within her was too much. "Steph, what are you still doing with him?"

"Oh, you know how it is, Crys. He says he won't do it again and I fall for it. Same shit all the time."

"But you keep going back to him. Why? At least I was smart enough to get away from shit like that."

"I know I know," the redhead said. "He's an asshole loser and always will be but what can I do? He's their father."

"So what? He's not a good one if he isn't bringing in any money. Steph, you deserve better than him. The kids do too." God! she screamed inside. She's acting just like my mother. "You think Marci likes waking up to him throwing one of his fits?"

"He's still their father." She shrugged. "I don't think it bothers her much." She held out the pipe. "Here, have another hit."

You have got to be kidding me. In her mind Crystal saw her mother sitting on a similar couch, drinking herself blind and ignoring the animal that terrorized her kids. Crystal held the lighter over the bowl and pressed the pipe to her lips. What am I doing here? Why am I sitting with this reincarnation of my mother? As she exhaled, another thought hit her. How the fuck am I gonna get home? "Steph, keep the beers but I've gotta get going here."

"You sure? Come on, sit down and have another beer. You can handle another one, can't you?"

"Of course I can but I really have to get going. I forgot I promised my roommate I'd help her with something tonight." Crystal grabbed her cigarettes and lighter, stuffing them into her pocket.

"You have a roommate? Since when?"

"My apartment burned down a few weeks ago. Listen, I really gotta go." Crystal stood up only to sit right back down. "Whoa." The pot hit hard, making it an effort to keep her eyes open.

"Hey, sit back and relax." Stephanie held the pipe out. "Come on, one more won't hurt. I never get company."

No shit, who'd want to? "No, I really do have to get home." Okay Crystal, you can do this, she told herself. Just get to your feet. Again she rose but this time managed to stay upright. "You know my beeper number right? Give me a call when you get a phone."

"Well, now you know where I live. Don't be such a stranger. Maybe with the kids not here Tom and I will have a party on the weekend or something. You should stop by."

"Yeah, maybe I will." Crystal reached for the doorknob, leaning her weight against it. "Thanks for the smoke."

"Anytime, Crys. Stop by soon."

Turn the knob, don't fall. Crystal tried to follow her own instructions but the steps proved to be too much of a challenge. She stumbled on the last one, ending up sitting on the ground. Shit. She looked up to see if Stephanie noticed but the porch was empty. Don't even give a shit enough to make sure I made it to the car, eh? Rolling onto her knees, Crystal forced herself to focus and stand up. Oh shit I had way too much to smoke. Leaning her hand against the side of the trailer, she made her way forward. Tom wasn't kidding about it being a one hit wonder, was he? Shit, I can barely stand up. She stumbled the remaining feet between the front of Stephanie's home and the Omni.

Open the door. Shit, unlock the door first, dummy. It took three tries to get the door open, then it was a challenge to wiggle the tortured key out of the lock. Oh shit, how am I supposed to drive? I'm not going to be able to see the fucking road. Crystal leaned against the headrest. Come on, Crys, you gotta get outta here. Stabbing blindly at the ignition finally resulted in getting the key where it belonged. Oh man, I shouldn't be doing this. Grabbing the steering wheel, she pulled herself upright and started the engine.

The window was down but was of little help. The Omni veered from side to side on its slow trek up Essex Street. A blaring horn jerked her out of her trance in time to avoid striking an oncoming vehicle. Shit, I can't do this. Turning the steering wheel, Crystal pulled into the corner lot and threw the car in park. On the corner stood a blue and white phone booth. Yeah, that's it. I'll call someone to get me. Then came another problem as a check of her pockets revealed two nickels and a penny. I bet I've dropped a quarter somewhere around here. Course there's not a chance in hell I'm bending over to look. I'd probably pass out.

Laura stared in disbelief at the screen. Three months? The response from the publisher had been swift. Upon missing her deadline, the print date for her book was pushed out three months, putting it past the big fall fair and ruining any chances she had of getting holiday sales. The print date change meant many things but of an even higher importance was the effect it had on her income. With the book now unavailable until after the new year, there would be no quarterly royalty checks for at least six months. Her previous works provided enough to pay the monthly bills but rent and day to day needs was a different matter. The phone rang but she made no effort to get it. Probably another telemarketer. Sighing, she closed the email and loaded her web browser. Guess I'll see if I can afford a tune-up before winter or if I have to conserve toothpaste. The phone continued to ring until the answering machine picked up. See? No message. Knew it wasn't important. Seconds later the phone rang again. Deciding this time that it wasn't a telemarketer, she walked over to the nightstand and picked up phone. "Hello?"

"This is the operator. Will you accept a collect call from Crystal Sheridan?"

"Yes."

"Thank you. Go ahead." There was an audible click followed by mild static.

"Crystal?"

"Laura, that you?"

"Yes, it's me. You're going to have to speak up, Crystal. I can barely hear you."

"Can you hear me now?"

"Yes."

"Are you busy?"

"Crystal, is something wrong?"

"Well

can you give me a ride home?"

A ride

yes, of course I can. Did it break down again?"

"No. I just can't drive." A passing truck distorted the rest of her words.

"What? Why can't you drive? Were you in an accident?" While talking, Laura picked her sneakers up and began putting them on. "Where are you?"

"I'm up on Essex near the airport."

"Is your car driveable?"

"Yeah but I don't think I can drive, Laura." Snickering giggles were heard through the poor connection. "Can you come get me?"

"Yes Crystal, I'll come get you. Where are you again? Up by the airport?"

"At the phone booth on the corner. Near the telephone pole."

"Fine. Listen to me. Get back in your car and lock all the doors. I'll be there as quick as I can."

"Laura?"

"What?"

"Are you gonna come get me? Really?" Laura heard a thunk followed by Crystal yelping. "Ow. I hit my head on the phone."

She is really wasted. Essex Street was not a good section of town by any means. "Crystal? Crystal are you still there?"

"Yeah, I'm here."

"Did you here me? I want you to go wait in the car and keep the doors locked until I get there, okay?"

"Okay, Laura?"

"What?"

"I really can't drive."

Oh great, now she's rambling. "No you shouldn't, Crystal. Get in the car and stay there."

"Are you mad at me?"

"No. I'm glad you called me instead of trying to drive home like that. Have you been drinking?"

"I only had one beer."

"So you're stoned, right?"

"Oh yeah. Very much stoned." Crystal giggled. "Petrified, in fact."

"Uh huh. Stay there. I'm on my way."

"Laura?"

"What?" The writer tried to keep the growing irritation out of her voice.

"You sure you're not mad at me?"

Laura sighed. "No, I'm not mad at you."

"Okay. I don't want you to be mad at me."

"I'm not mad at you. Now hang up the phone so I can come get you."

"You sure?"

"Yes I'm sure."

"Good 'cause I don't want you to be mad at me."

"Crystal! For the last time I am not mad at you so hang up the phone!" Laura pressed the pressed the off button. She stoned. She stoned out of her mind out in the middle of nowhere. Pressing the button, she heard the dial tone and pressed the familiar digits.

"Hello?"

Jen? It's Laura. Can you help me pick up Crystal and her car? I'll explain on the way."

By the time Laura pulled the Jeep into the lot, Jenny had been filled in what she knew. As expected the gray Omni was parked near the phone booth. "There she is." Laura pulled her vehicle up alongside and put it in park. "Are you going to drive hers or mine back?"

"I'll drive hers," Jenny said. "Let's see who she feels like riding with."

Together they walked over to Crystal's car and stood by the driver's side. Laura reached out and tapped the window. "Crystal? Crystal, wake up. We're here."

"Hmm?"

"Wake up. It's Laura. Jenny's with me. We've come to take you home." She reached for the door handle. "Crystal? Hey." She rapped the glass with her knuckles. "Unlock the door."

"Hi Laura," the stoned woman mumbled.

"Unlock the door." As soon as she heard the click, Laura pulled on the handle. The door opened and it was only Jenny's quick moves that kept Crystal from sliding out onto the ground.

"Easy now." Once they had the semi-conscious woman back in her seat, the therapist mode took over. "Crystal? Crystal, focus on me."

"Hmm?"

"How much have you had to drink tonight?" Crystal proudly held up one wavering finger. "One what? Beer?"

"Yeah, just one," the blonde mumbled, her head rolling listlessly from side to side. "I'm stoned."

"So I see." Jenny looked up at Laura. "Any suggestions on how we're going to get her over to the passenger seat?"

"I haven't a clue," Laura replied.

"I'd say pull her over the seat but the gearshift is in the way."

"This car really has no room, does it?"

"Not much." Jenny tapped Crystal's cheek lightly. "Crystal

Crystal wake up. We have to move you."

"Mm? I'm awake. Wha?"

"Uh huh, let's move it, roomie." Laura looked at Jenny. "I think our best chance is to pull her over the gearshift. If we get her outside and she ends up on the ground there's no way we're going to be able to move her."

"I agree. I'll hold her while you go around to the passenger side," Jenny said.

"Let me get the keys. I'm sure that side is locked too." Laura walked around and opened the passenger door. "What's this?" she asked, holding up a composition book.

"Throw it in the back seat," Jenny answered, not revealing that she had seen Crystal earlier in the day.

It took some maneuvering on their part to get the stoned woman over the gearshift and into the passenger seat. Crystal struggled and squirmed, giggling to herself and mumbling incoherently.

"Hold still," Laura chastised. "I can't get the seat belt on you."

"Hi Lauraaa."

"Hi Crystal. Hold still and let me get the seat belt on, okay?"

"Okay." The blonde closed her eyes and rolled her head to the side. "I'm really stoned, you know."

"I know. I can tell." Laura smiled when she felt the click of the seat belt. "There. Jen, you want to drive her?"

"Sure. I'll meet you back at your place."

"No-o-o," Crystal whined, fidgeting around in her seat. "Why can't you drive me?"

Laura smiled at the petulant face before her. "Because I have my own car to drive, that's why." Standing up, she closed the passenger door and walked around the car. Handing the keys to Jenny, she bent down to look through the glass at Crystal. "She's really out of it."

"You heard her. She's stoned out of her mind. I doubt she even knows where she is right now."

"Why does she get this way?" Laura straightened and shook her head. "I just don't understand it."

"Have you ever asked her?"

"What?"

Jenny took Laura's hand and turned it palm up. "She asked you to drive her home." Placing the keys in the open hand, she turned and walked toward the Jeep. "Seems to me it's a perfect opportunity for you to ask her."

"Don't run any lights with my car," Laura called out, receiving a half-wave of Jenny's arm. I know you will, she silently grouched. Closing her fingers around the keys, she reached for the door handle. "All right Crystal, let's get you home."

"Hi Laura."

"Hi yourself." She closed the door and felt around for the ignition.

"You're not mad at me, are you?"

"I told you I wasn't." Finding the elusive ignition, Laura put the key in and started the engine. "Would I have come out to get you if I was mad at you?"

"I dunno." Crystal shrugged. "I wasn't sure you would."

"Of course I would," Laura said, following Jenny out of the parking lot and onto the main road. "I wouldn't leave you out here all alone, no matter what condition you were in." She slowed down for the traffic light. "So what were you doing out here?"

"I was visiting someone I knew."

"Is that who got you so stoned?"

"Yeah, I didn't know it was so strong." Crystal leaned her head against the window. "I don't think I could drive home."

Laura glanced over briefly before turning her attention back to the traffic. "No doubt about it, you have no business behind the wheel of a car." She drove several blocks before a quiet voice spoke.

"That's why I called you."

Flexing her fingers on the steering wheel, Laura kept her eyes straight ahead. "Well

I'm glad you did."

"I never did that before."

"Did what?"

"Called someone to come get me." Crystal rubbed her eyes with her knuckles. "Wow those lights are bright."

"I'm surprised you can see anything through those slits."

"My eyes are wide open," the stoned woman protested. "I can see everything."

"Uh huh," she said dubiously. "So were you at your friend's house all day getting stoned?"

"I went there after work."

"Work?"

"Oooh!" Crystal's face lit up and she squirmed in her seat. "I got a job today," she said excitedly.

"Really? Where?"

"Working for Michael. I hauled sheet rock all afternoon."

"You really took a job working for Michael?" Checking quickly to make sure she wasn't too close to the rear of her Jeep, Laura looked over at her companion. "Congratulations."

"It's only 'til my lip heals."

"It could be longer than that if you wanted, I'm sure. I thought Michael said there was enough work for a few months."

"Then what?" Crystal lifted her hand only to have it flop down onto her lap. "It doesn't matter."

The light from the street lamps pulsed through the windshield, giving Laura only passing glimpses of her roommate's face. "What doesn't matter?"

"Everything." Crystal gave another limp wave of her hand. "Once the place is cleaned out he won't need me anymore and I'll be back there again."

She shrugged her shoulders. "Might as well stay where I am."

You don't think there's anything better for you than stripping, do you? "But if you got some experience maybe Michael could help you find something else to do." Laura kept her attention divided between the road ahead of her and Crystal. "So what were you doing all the way out here besides getting stoned?"

"Hmm?" Crystal's eyes were closed, her lips turned in a lazy smile. "Oh, visiting someone."

"Someone you work with?"

The blonde snorted. "Hardly. Steph's just someone I knew from parties and stuff." Her hands groped her shirt pockets in search of her cigarettes. "Her husband is a real asshole."

"Was he there?"

"For a while before he got pissed and took off." The lighter slipped from her fingers onto her lap.

"Are you sure you can handle a cigarette? I don't want you dropping it on yourself or anything. Maybe you shouldn't smoke."

"My car." Crystal lit her cigarette and stuffed the lighter in her pocket.

"At least open the window. I don't want your second hand smoke." Crystal did as she was asked and within seconds the smoke was drawn out into the night air. "Now," Laura continued, "So he became upset and left?"

"Yeah, he's an asshole."

"You said that before."

"She's an idiot."

You didn't say that before. "So why is she an idiot?"

"She is. She's just like my mother." Crystal took a hard drag on her cigarette. "Doesn't stand up for her kids, lets him treat her like shit. She's stupid." She flicked an ash out the open window. "Aw, ya know? She's so afraid of him that she lets him treat her like a dog. He drinks and screws around and when he feels like coming home he does and she doesn't do a damn thing about it." The car followed the Jeep onto the bypass, leaving the sodium lights of the city for the darkness of the highway. Crystal exhaled another stream of gray smoke. "Just always giving in to him," she said quietly. "Always letting him do whatever the fuck he wanted. Doesn't matter he beats his kids, doesn't matter he spent all the money each week, she didn't fucking care." The half finished cigarette went flying out the window. "She never cared," she whispered, staring through the glass at the darkness.

Laura quickly realized the subjects of the conversation had changed from Crystal's friends to her parents. She opened her mouth to speak but found herself unsure of what to say. Finally she said the only thing that came to mind. "I wish she had."

There was a long silence before Crystal spoke. "I wish she had too."

Without thought Laura reached over and rubbed her roommate's shoulder. "I know."

"She used to drink a lot, you know." Crystal continued to look out the window. "She'd get mad for no reason. All the time." Feeling the shrug, Laura removed her hand, letting it rest on the gearshift between the seats. "He'd rag on her in the morning before he'd go to work and she'd take it out on us when we got home from school." Crystal shook her head. "But we didn't do anything wrong." She let her head fall back against the headrest. "You ever get punished for something you didn't do?"

"A few times," Laura admitted.

"It sucks." Leaning forward, Crystal fumbled with the opening of the glove compartment.

"What are you looking for?"

"I just want one hit." The compartment open, she pulled out a film canister and a small blue metal pot pipe.

"Uh, no, not while I'm in the car. I think you've had enough anyway. You can barely keep your eyes open." Activity on the road ahead of her drew Laura's attention away from what was going on in the passenger seat. Jenny had apparently become annoyed with the car ahead of her and was now pushing the Jeep faster than Laura ever had. "Jen, what are you doing?" she said, pressing down on the gas pedal. An acrid smell filled the car. "Crystal!"

The pipe and canister filled with pot were thrown back into the glove compartment. "I said just one," the blonde said impishly.

"That's it." Using her left hand to roll down the window, Laura steered with her right, slowing the Omni down and pulling over to the shoulder of the road.

"Wha

?"

Laura ignored her and shut the car off. She reached over with the keys and locked the glove compartment. "I said not with me in the car," she admonished. "You know how much trouble I would be in if a cop pulled us over and smelled that?" Forcing the key back into the ignition, Laura continued her rant. "If you want to ruin your life with drugs, that's your choice. I can't control what you do but you have no right to take a chance with mine. It's bad enough you bring it into the house." Turning the engine on, she glanced in the rear view mirror before pulling back out onto the highway. "Damn it, Crystal, don't you ever stop and think?" Not hearing a reply, she thought perhaps the stoned woman had fallen asleep. Just as well. I don't want to fight with her tonight, she thought to herself. Looking at the road, she noted the Jeep was nowhere in sight. You'd better not get a speeding ticket, Jen. Confident the smell of marijuana was gone, Laura rolled the window up.

"Sorry," Crystal said in a small voice. "Are you mad at me?"

"Why don't you just sit back and relax until we get home, okay?"

"I don't want you to be mad at me."

"I'm not mad. Annoyed maybe, but not mad," Laura said, pressing up on the signal indicator when she saw the sign for the upcoming exit.

Crystal unbuckled her seat belt and was turning sideways in the seat when the Omni turned onto the exit ramp. Too stoned to control her balance, she pitched toward the left, her head bumping against Laura's shoulder. "Ow."

"What are you doing? Get your seat belt on." She reached over and rubbed her shoulder. "And what are you saying 'Ow' for? You've got a hard head there, Sheridan."

"Laura?"

The pot made the blonde's eyes nothing more than little slits and those little slits were having a hard time keeping focused. Laura waiting patiently for Crystal to continue but the stoned woman apparently forgot what she was going to say. "Yes?" Laura prompted.

"What?"

"You were going to ask me a question. What was the question?"

"What question?"

"Forget it, you're too wasted to know what you're saying." Reaching over, Laura grasped the seat belt. "This time leave it on, okay?"

Okay

Laura?"

"What?"

"I don't want you to be mad at me."

"Crystal, I'm not mad at you." Oh please don't start this again. "Look, let's just go home now. Jenny's going to wonder what happened to us." Laura started the car. "We can talk about it in the morning." She put the car in gear and edged the car onto the street. She drove along in silence for several blocks before Crystal spoke again.

"Promise you aren't mad at me?"

I'm going to be mad if you don't stop it. "No hon, I'm not mad at you." She reached over and squeezed Crystal's shoulder. "We're friends, right?" She had hoped her words would make the stoned woman smile but to Laura's dismay she saw tears. "Hey, what's wrong?"

Crystal shook her head vigorously and rubbed her face with her hands. "Nothing," she croaked, taking a haggard breath. "It's just

" She shook her head again. "I dunno."

Laura knew she was holding back but let it pass for the moment, concentrating on guiding the unfamiliar car through the winding side streets and into the main entrance to their complex. As expected, her Jeep was parked in the appropriate space, several lights shining through the curtained windows of the townhouse. Can tell Jenny's here, she thought as she pulled the Omni into its parking space. Removing the keys from the ignition, she reached over and put her hand on Crystal's arm. "Wait, before we go in

I want to know what's got you so upset."

"I dunno." Crystal jerked the handle, forcing the door to open. "Laura, please," she said when the firm hand maintained its hold on her arm. "I can't."

Laura swore she heard a crack in her roommate's voice. Letting go, she watched Crystal step out of the car. The marijuana had done a good job of decimating the blonde's sense of balance, causing her to fall onto the pavement. She tried to get to her feet only to fall twice more before Laura got to her side. "Here, put your arm around my shoulders. I'll help you inside."

"No, just leave me. I'll make it in there eventually."

Laura grabbed Crystal's hand and put it where she wanted. "I don't think so, roomie. What would the neighbors think?" With a grunt she rose to her feet, pulling Crystal up with her. To her relief, Jenny must have heard the car pull up. "Want to give me a hand with her?"

"Where did you go?" Jenny asked as she made her way down the walk to the parking area. "I looked in the rear view and you were gone."

"I had to pull over a couple of times," Laura said. "Crystal, Jenny's here. We're going to take you inside now, okay?" She nodded at her ex-lover. "Grab the other side. She's too stoned to walk."

"How was the ride home?"

"Eventful. She wouldn't shut up. For someone who never says anything, she sure had enough to say tonight. Must have asked me fifty times if I was mad at her."

"You said you weren't," Crystal pouted, her eyes fixed on her feet in an attempt to move in them in the same direction without stepping on Laura or Jenny's toes. "You said so."

"Yes I did. I'm not mad with you." She looked over at Jenny. "See what I had to put up with?"

"Sounds like a handful."

"Just a bit. Watch it, Crystal. We're at the steps now."

"I can walk by myself," the blonde protested, weakly trying to pull her arms off the other women's shoulders.

"Just the same I think it's a good *i.e.* for us to help you," Jenny said.

"Oh, hi Doc," Crystal practically hollered. "How the hell are you tonight?"

"Apparently not as well as you're doing. Laur, hold on to her while I get the door."

"She likes me," the stoned woman continued. "I wasn't really sure but

yeah. Did you know that?"

"Know what?" Jenny asked, not following the rambling talk.

"Laura likes me," Crystal said proudly, swaying on her rubbery legs. "She told me we're friends."

"Yes I did, now let's get you inside, okay?" Laura asked, guiding her wobbly charge through the front door.

"Okay," Crystal agreed good-naturedly, bumping into the doorjamb, then into Jenny before finally getting finally stumbling through the threshold and into the living room.

Once inside, Crystal managed to stumble her way to the recliner. Laura hung the keys to the Omni on the appropriate hook, frowning when she saw her own keys lying on the counter. "Think we can get her upstairs?" she asked, picking up her keys and hanging them on the hook.

"I can make it myself," the groggy blonde said, pushing herself to her feet only to sit right back down. "Maybe not." Her hands fumbled at her shirt.

"No smoking in the living room, remember?" Laura reminded her.

"Hey Doc, did I tell you I got the job with Michael?" Crystal stopped searching for her cigarettes and flung a leg over the arm of the recliner.

"No you didn't tell me." Jenny said as she settled herself on the couch. "When do you start?"

"I did already. I worked this afternoon."

"Really?"

"Yeah, I went over and saw him after I left your office."

Laura's eyes widened. "Your office?"

Um

"Jenny looked from her ex-lover to Crystal and back again. "You have to ask her," she said.

"Crystal?"

"Doc said I could." She rubbed her face and yawned. "Oh man, I'm tired."

"Or something," Laura said. "Let's get you upstairs. Jen, you want to help?"

Together they helped Crystal upstairs. Once inside her room, the blonde clumsily broke free of the helping hands and flopped onto the bed. "Jen, go down and make some tea," Laura said. "I'll be there in a minute."

Perhaps I should go home

" Jenny began.

"Don't even think about it," Laura warned. "We need to talk." She waited until her ex-lover left the room before sitting down on the bed next to the sprawled out form. "You still awake?"

"Hm?" The soft pillow quickly drained any energy Crystal had left.

"You have to get your boots off. Do you want me to help?"

"Hm? Naw, s'okay." Crystal's eyes remained closed.

"I'll get them," Laura said, moving down and pulling one booted foot onto her lap. "You know I meant it when I said I wasn't mad at you," she said, tugging the brown lace free. "Even if I was, I wouldn't do anything to hurt you." Using her fingers, she loosened the laces from the eyelets and hooks, allowing the boot to come free. "When I was about thirteen or so, Dad was stationed at Fort Bragg." She peeled the white sock off Crystal's foot. "We were there about a month or so when Captain Brewster was transferred there. He had a daughter my age. Let me have your other foot." Receiving no assistance, Laura reached over and pulled Crystal's other leg over. "Anyway," she continued. "Candice used to always have bruises on her arms and face. At first I believed her when she said it was from accidents on her bike." The other boot and sock removed, Laura found herself with Crystal's bare feet on her lap. Without thought she began massaging them. "After I figured out the truth, I couldn't stand seeing her father." Her grip increased as the old anger surfaced. "I hated him for what he did to her. I couldn't understand why anyone would want to hurt someone else like that." Deciding Crystal had fallen asleep, Laura continued to let her hands gently run over the blonde's feet. "Why did you get upset tonight when I said we were friends?" Her left thumb moved back and forth in a lazy arc over Crystal's arch. "Sure you can be a pain in the ass sometimes and that clear shower curtain is driving me nuts but still

" Realizing what her hands were doing, Laura gently placed Crystal's feet on the bed and stood up. "I don't think we need little bits of tobacco between the sheets," she said, reaching over and pulling the half empty pack out of the shirt pocket. Reaching for the coverlet, she pulled it up over the sleeping woman. As she tucked it around Crystal's shoulders, she leaned in close and whispered "I wish you didn't abuse yourself like this. There's a beautiful woman hidden behind the tough attitude and the drugs, I know there is." Laura stood up and reached for the lamp. "Sweet dreams."

Part 7

She found Jenny sitting at the table, flipping through the newspaper. "Didn't you read it already?"

"I was running late this morning and only had time to check on how the Mets were doing. Your tea is steeping in the brown mug." The wind from the open window on the ride back from picking Crystal up had blown Jenny's hair from its usual wedge shape into a puffed and disheveled mass of brown. Laura reached into her back pocket and pulled out a comb.

"Here, you look like a groundhog who stuck his paw in a light socket." She walked over to the counter and reached for her mug. "So when were you going to tell me that you were seeing Crystal?" She pulled the teabag out of the water and threw it in the trash. "You could have said something earlier."

"No I couldn't," Jenny protested, running the comb haphazardly through her hair. "It's not up to me to tell you. It was Crystal's decision."

"So what happened today? Did she tell you she was going to hang out with her druggie friends?" Laura crossed the room and pulled out the chair next to Jenny. "You couldn't have talked her out of it?"

"Laura, I can't talk to you about what happens in my office with her. You just have to accept you can't ask me questions about her." Jenny took a sip of her tea. "Besides, you know me. Do you honestly think I wouldn't have tried to talk a patient out of putting themselves in a potentially dangerous situation if I had known about it?" Reaching out, she took Laura's hand in her own. "I have to be very careful here. Crystal has to be able to trust me to keep her confidences."

"Does this mean she's not a topic that we can discuss?"

"Just you being her roommate is enough for me to be hauled up in front of the ethics committee. I shouldn't be seeing her at all."

"Then why are you?" Laura asked. "You know me too, Jen. You know you're the one I turn to when I need to talk. How am I supposed to censor what I talk about?"

"Don't you think I thought about that before I made my decision?" Jenny snapped. "Do you think I like having to be careful what I talk about with you? I'm not real thrilled with the *i.e.* either, Laur, but you have to understand where I'm coming from too."

"And where is that? I don't mean to sound selfish but after sharing my soul with you for the last seven years, it isn't easy to accept."

"Not all of your soul was shared with me, Laura," Jenny said in a warning tone. "There's a reason we live at separate addresses now, remember?"

Looking down at her cup, Laura found words escaping her. "I thought we weren't going to talk about that," she finally said.

"I'd rather not talk about that tonight either," the therapist admitted, withdrawing her hand and draining her mug. "I'm going home, Laur. You know you can always talk to me about your feelings and thoughts but we can't get into discussions about Crystal. It won't be easy but that's the way it has to be."

"Why do you have to go home? You can stay here." Looking up into Jenny's eyes, she added "I'd really like to hold you tonight."

"Not tonight." Leaning over, she kissed Laura's cheek. "I'll see you this weekend for the game."

Seeing Jenny rise, Laura got to her feet as well. "Please, stay for a little while longer? I promise I won't try anything. I just need to talk." Come on, Jen, she silently willed.

"What about?"

Now that the time came, the writer found it hard to reveal the problem that had been in the back of her mind for most of the evening. "I um

I got email from the publisher."

"From the look on your face I'd say it wasn't a good email, was it?"

"Not really." Laura sat back down, resting her elbows on the table while her chin rested on her hands. Jenny resumed her seat as well. Laura's gaze settled on the napkin holder. "You know how I've been worrying about missing the deadline?"

"Yeah?"

"I missed it."

"What did they do?"

"Moved my print date back three months. That's going to drain the last of the money Dad left me." Laura shook her head. "I thought about getting a job but if I do that I won't have time to work on the story."

"You won't be working every minute of the day, Hon," Jenny said. "I'm going to make more tea. You want another one?"

"No thanks." She watched her ex-lover walk over and pick up the tea kettle. "Jen, I don't know what to do about it anymore. They're yelling at me to get the book done and I can't figure out where to go after Alexandra is rescued from the warehouse."

"The writer's block isn't letting up any, hm?"

"Not one bit." Laura sighed. "Remember when I'd be sitting up there writing for hours on end and you'd bring me coffee?"

"I remember. There were nights I couldn't get you to come to bed."

"The characters would get into my head and just not let go until I finished the scene. I felt so good when I had that drive."

"And now?"

"Now? I told you, now I can't figure out what to do with Alexandra."

"No, not how is the story going, how are you feeling?" Jenny stepped up behind her and rubbed her back. "You're not exactly the best when it comes to dealing with stress. I'm surprised you're not frantically cleaning the place."

"I'll save that for after you leave," Laura said, cracking a small smile. "You know me too well, Jen."

"So answer the question."

"How do I feel that they pushed the book back three months?"

"No, how do you feel knowing you missed the deadline?" Jenny slid into her seat. "I know you, remember? I remember that story you worked on for months only to erase it from the hard drive when you became frustrated."

"It wasn't going anywhere, just like this one."

"Yes it was. You were at least three quarters of the way through when you got too stressed. That's the same night you emptied all the cabinets and scrubbed them down if I remember correctly."

"It's that anal nature of mine, I guess," Laura sighed. "When I had a wrinkle in the bed, Dad wouldn't just let me fix the wrinkle. He'd tear all the bedding off and have me start over."

"There's a difference between making the bed and throwing away months of hard work," Jenny pointed out. "You're the one who wanted to become a writer. You can't blame anyone but yourself for missing the deadline and you can't go back and change what happened." The whistle of the tea kettle made Jenny stand up. "You know the answer to your own question, Laur." Removing the screaming kettle from the stove, she poured the steaming liquid into her cup. "You know, someday they'll figure out a way to keep the tag from falling in when you add water." Setting the kettle on a different burner to cool, she added milk and sugar to her mug and returned to the table. "So? Have you figured it out yet?"

"You're playing therapist again, Jen."

"So I am. So are you going to have a fit and destroy the story, ruining any chance you have of ever getting it published and making money from it or are you going to take advantage of the extra time you now have to sit down and make the story the best you can?"

"It isn't that easy." Laura rubbed her face. Why do I get myself into these discussions with her? I always lose. "If the ideas won't come, I can't force them in order to finish the story."

"Then maybe you should look at what is keeping the ideas from coming," Jenny said, blowing at her tea before taking a sip.

"I just can't seem to concentrate on the story. Alexandra seems

I don't know

flat I guess."

"How so?"

"I don't know. Maybe it's just me. I'm just distracted, I guess." Laura's fingers traced the rim of her mug. "You know she became upset when I said we were friends? I don't think she had many friends growing up. How could she with a father like hers?"

"Laura, we can't go there," Jenny said softly.

"How can someone do that to their own kid?" she continued, ignoring the warning.

"There is no good reason, Hon, you know that. But I would say that anyone who can make it through that kind of horror deserves all the support he or she can get, don't you?"

"I hate him, Jen. I've never met the man and I hate him for what he did to her."

"We can't

"

"I'm not talking about her," Laura said firmly. "I'm talking about me, about how I feel." She pushed the mug away, making sure it stayed on the

coaster. "How am I supposed to be supportive and listen when all I want to do is have my father get some of his military friends to go over and beat the hell out of him?"

"Do you think answering violence with more violence will solve the problem?"

"Don't play therapist, Jen. I don't want the high road answers." Laura pushed her chair back and stood up.

"You never did." Jenny set the tea cup down and patted the empty chair next to her. "Come sit down."

"No, I can't. I have things to do." Walking over to the sink, Laura opened the lower cabinet and removed the mop pail. "This floor is a mess."

"The floor is fine and I'm sure you've mopped it at least once in the last twenty-four hours. Come on, Laur. Sit down and talk to me."

"I need to get this done, Jen," she said, testing the water temperature with her fingers. Once it was warm enough, Laura filled the pail before adding a healthy amount of cleaner to the water. Shutting off the tap, she hefted the pail out of the sink and set it down on the floor. When she turned to get the mop, she was surprised to find that Jenny had left the table and was now standing before her.

"Well if you won't talk to me then I can't stay any longer. It's getting too late. I know better than to try and talk you out of it. Do me a favor, though?" Jenny pulled her into a tight embrace. "Stop beating yourself up about missing the deadline," she whispered into Laura's ear. "It doesn't make you any less of a writer or any less of a person, despite what you think."

"You don't have to go."

Patting Laura on the back, Jenny replied "Yes I do. I'm not in the mood to fight you off, you octopus."

"Hey."

"Don't even think about it. I know you too well, Laura Taylor. If you think I'm going to believe that you're going to behave yourself tonight then I have a bridge in Brooklyn to sell you." Leaning in, Jenny gave her ex-lover a friendly kiss on the cheek. "I'll call you tomorrow."

An hour later the kitchen floor was mopped to a brilliant shine and the counters also reflected the same luster. Laura took her cleaning frenzy into the living room. Deciding that the table near the entryway needed a good polishing, she pulled out a fresh rag and the bottle of polish from the cleaning closet. While rubbing the cloth over the wood, Laura let her mind wander. You could have stay, Jen. I would have behaved. Her lip curled up as a devilish look crossed her face. Well, maybe not. Oh well, guess it's just me and my imagination tonight. The bright lights showed the multitude of fingerprints smudging the table surface. I can't believe you two. I just polished this yesterday. The pleasant scent of lemon filled the air as she moved the polish covered rag over the wood. I'm going to have to talk to Crystal about putting her fingers all over the place, Laura thought to herself, knowing her roommate was just as responsible for the smeared tabletop as her ex-lover. Deciding to check up on her wayward roommate, she quickly finished polishing the table and headed upstairs.

Laura quietly opened the door to Crystal's room. The night light plugged into the far wall outlet provided enough illumination for her to make her way over to the bed without stumbling into anything. "You awake?" she asked softly. "I just came in to check on you." Receiving no answer, Laura leaned over and tucked the edges of the blanket around the sleeping form. "I really wish you wouldn't get so wasted all the time," she whispered. "You don't need the drugs."

"Hmm?" came the groggy voice.

"Shh, it's just me," Laura replied, shifting back so her body wasn't too close to Crystal's. "I was just checking up on you."

"Oh." Crystal rolled onto her back. "What time is it?"

"Close to ten. What time do you have to be at work tomorrow?"

"round seven or so," the half-asleep woman mumbled.

"Well then roll over and get some sleep. It's going to be a long day tomorrow." Laura stood up and took a step toward the door. "Have a good day if I don't see you in the morning." She almost reached the door when she heard Crystal call to her.

"Laura?"

"Hmm?" It was several seconds before she heard the soft reply.

"Thanks for not being mad at me."

Laura walked back over to the bed and knelt down, resting her forearms on the soft blanket. "Hey, that's what friends are for, right? To help you when you're down?" Reaching out, she tugged the blanket up over Crystal's exposed shoulder. "I told you I'd rather come get you than have you driving like that. Now get some sleep."

After leaving Crystal's room, Laura returned downstairs to finish cleaning up before retiring to her own room. While the bed was a tempting sight, the computer proved to be a more powerful draw and Laura found herself watching the familiar startup logos and tests flash across the screen. Maybe something will come to me, she thought hopefully, reviewing the handwritten notes she kept next to the computer. Her main character, Bobbi, just saved a family from being killed in a warehouse fire and that was where Laura's creative juices trickled up. So now what? The family thanks Bobbi and she falls for the oldest daughter? Somehow the *i.e.* that seemed so good when Laura first started the novel now felt cliché and simplistic. Why would she fall for the daughter of the furniture baron? Laura rubbed her face. "This just isn't working," Laura said an hour later when

no new words appeared on the screen. The sound of a door opening drew her attention away from the frustrating characters. Laura listened as Crystal made her way into the bathroom. A thump followed by a muffled curse drew her out of her chair. "Crystal? Are you all right?"

"Yeah, I just ran into the hamper, that's all," came the reply. Laura turned her attention back to the paper before her. This just doesn't make sense. The whole family is there so why would Bobbi notice Julie and not pay most of her attention to Julie's father? The one that makes all the money? It's not like Julie looks ravishing all disheveled and covered with dirt. Laura struggled with the problem until she heard a gentle knock on her door. "Come in."

The door opened and Crystal poked her head inside. "It sounded like you were still up."

"I am." Laura motioned at the monitor. "I'm just working on my story but it doesn't seem to be cooperating tonight."

"It's your story. You don't know what happens next?" Crystal stepped inside and looked at the screen. "I don't see anything but a green screen."

"I minimized it." Laura reached out and clicked on the mouse. The screen filled with text. "I just had Bobbi rescue the furniture baron and his family from the arsonist who tried to blow them up in a warehouse fire. Now Bobbi meets the baron's daughter Julie for the first time and I can't figure out how or why she'd run into her again."

"And you're trying to put the two women together?"

"Well it is a lesbian novel, Crystal," Laura said, a smile forming on her lips. "The *i.e.* is that Bobbi and Julie become lovers and live happily ever after. Of course they have to go through all sorts of challenges and trials before that happens. But nothing's going to happen if I can't figure out what to do next." She leaned back, giving Crystal more room to look at the words on the screen. "See right now Julie's father is going to thank Bobbi for rescuing them and then the police are going to arrive. I can't figure out how to get her and Julie to talk to each other or even what they would talk about."

"Maybe Bobbi, that's the one that's the hero, right?"

"Yeah, she's the private investigator who gets there just in the nick of time to save them from the bomb. Here, you can sit on the cabinet if you want." Laura pointed at the small two drawer file cabinet next to the desk. Crystal took the suggestion, resting her back against the wall. The blonde hair hung limply against her head, her shirt and pants rumpled from sleep. Laura noticed the bright red polish adorning the bare toes. The chipped surface led Laura to believe that Crystal had not bothered to paint them since the last time she worked at the Tom Cat Club. With a start Laura realized she had missed what Crystal said. "I'm sorry, what?"

"You said Bobbi just rescued them from a fire, right?"

"Right, arsonist sets warehouse full of flammable chemicals on fire with the family trapped inside."

"So what if whatever her name is got burned and had to go to the hospital? Then Bobbi can go visit her."

"Well I don't think I want to disfigure one of my main characters. Doesn't exactly make for the best visual images for the readers."

"You don't have to disfigure her, just give her a small burn, like on her arm or something," Crystal picked up a spongy ball from the desk and squeezed it. "What's this?"

"A stress ball," Laura replied. Looking down at her neatly written notes, she nodded. "I suppose I could put a mild burn in there. It's between semesters so it's not like Julie would have to worry about carrying books or anything. I could have her go visit Bobbi's office to thank her for saving her life." Picking up her pen, Laura busily scribbled notes into the margins of the paper. "Then of course if Julie goes to Bobbi's office she'll see the books on the shelf and suspect Bobbi's gay and that would lead in perfectly with the bar scene"

"Laura's voice trailed off as she flipped pages in her notebook and made additional notes. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Crystal rhythmically squeezing the stress ball. "Jenny gave that to me. She says it's supposed to help when I get stressed."

"Does it?"

"I don't know. If I think of it, I suppose it does. Usually I just go on a cleaning spree."

"You must not think of it often," Crystal said, tossing the ball back on the desk. Laura smiled at the gentle ribbing and set the pen down.

"So what are you doing up, anyway? I left you over an hour ago and you were basically dead to the world."

"I dunno." Crystal shrugged her shoulders. "Too many years of working nights, I guess. I woke up to pee and now I'm wide awake."

"Still stoned?"

"I still got a buzz on but I'm not stoned stupid like before." She shook her head. "I could work if I had to."

"Well, you still have quite a few hours before that happens," Laura said. "Do you remember what we talked about in the car tonight?"

"No, not too much. I was pretty out of it." Crystal looked down at her lap and flushed slightly. "I know I kept asking you if you were mad at me," she said sheepishly.

"Oh, once or twice"

a minute." Laura smiled. "It's all right, really," she said, reaching out and giving Crystal's foot a quick squeeze. "I told you I didn't mind and I meant it. And hey, I do appreciate the help with Bobbi and Julie. I'm sure I can make that work."

"Really?"

"Really. Sometimes I just need someone to jump start my creativity." Laura smiled and withdrew her hand from Crystal's foot. "You know

" Picking up the notebook, Laura scanned through the neatly scrawled notes. "Yes, I think it will work

I haven't said anything about her past yet so

" The pen returned to her hand and more notes were added to the margins. "Why didn't I think of this before? Julie would make the perfect troubled teen." Drawn into full writing mode, Laura pulled the keyboard tray out and began typing rapidly. "Oh, that would be perfect," she said to herself as words started to appear on the screen. The dam holding back her talent had burst open and now nothing mattered but taking advantage of it. So focused on getting the ideas from her mind onto the screen, Laura never noticed when Crystal spoke to her. Endless clacking filled the room as she continued to type, the story coming more and more into focus with each passing word. The back of her mind registered the click of the door when her Crystal left but Laura was too focused on the story to pay any attention. She had long ago forgotten her roommate was in the same room. All that mattered was the scene unfolding on the screen between Bobbi and Julie. For the first time in weeks Laura felt a sense of direction with her story. The writing fever settled in, causing her world to narrow to the fantasy land in her mind and the screen before her eyes.

Time lost all meaning as she continued to write. Hours later, even the rising sun lightening the sky outside failed to capture her attention. The sound of Crystal's alarm clock buzzing through the walls was just another sound tuned out by Laura's mind. Finally the sound of the shower running broke through and caused the writer to break her tunnel vision and look at the clock. Six fifteen? Not believing what her eyes told her, Laura turned and looked at her alarm clock. The red numbers confirmed what the computer had told her. The whole night had been spent writing and if the page numbers were any indication, it had been a productive night at that.

Stretching her arms high above her head, Laura gave a healthy yawn and stood up. Now the bladder that had been quiet all night awoke with a vengeance, making clear what was to be the first priority.

"Oof," Laura grunted when her body came into full contact with the unyielding door. The urgency of the situation caused Laura to forget that Crystal was in the bathroom and thus the door was locked. "Crystal?" Laura banged on the door. "You almost done in there?"

"Gimme a minute," came the reply.

"I can use the one downstairs if you're going to be a while."

"No, I'm done," Crystal said just as she opened the door. The blonde woman found herself not so gently moved out of the way in Laura's dash for the toilet.

"Sorry," Laura said as she watched Crystal shut the door. "I didn't realize how bad I had to go."

"It's all right, I was just finishing up," Crystal said through the closed door. "I'll get the coffee started."

"Okay. I'll be down in a minute." Laura frowned at the balled up towel sitting atop the hamper. That's the quickest way to make this room smell musty, she thought to herself. When Laura left the bathroom, the towel was draped neatly over the shower rod and the countertop was wiped clean.

"Sorry about running you out of the bathroom like that," Laura said when she entered the kitchen. Crystal was at the table, the newspaper in her hand. Laura walked over to the coffee maker and frowned at the half-full pot. "One of these days I'm going to have to break down and buy one of those pause and serve models. I hate waiting for coffee." Laura was unable to stop herself from yawning. "Oh my, I'm just about asleep on my feet."

"Were you up all night?" Crystal asked.

"Yes," Laura said proudly as she walked over to the table. "Once I start writing, nothing else matters. I think I got ten pages done last night."

"Well good for you then."

"You know how long it's been since I was able to just sit and type ten pages without stopping?" Laura pulled out a chair and sat down. "I can't believe it. It's like someone turned on a faucet in my brain and everything is just flowing." Yawning, she looked over at the coffee pot.

"Maybe you should forget about coffee and just go to bed," Crystal said.

"Oh no, are you kidding? I'm on a roll. Some coffee to wake me up and I'll be good as new." Standing up, Laura walked over to the cupboards. "Cream and sugar, right?"

"Right."

Another yawn escaped Laura's lips as she reached for the mugs. "So what time are you coming home tonight?"

"I dunno. Whatever time I get finished, I guess."

"Do you want me to make dinner for both of us or are you going to stop somewhere along the way to pick up something for yourself?"

"Are you offering real food or rabbit food?" Crystal teased.

"You liked my lemon chicken and there's nothing wrong with vegetables." Filling the mugs with coffee, Laura did a quick mental inventory of the refrigerator. "We could have linguine with clam sauce." She licked her lips. "I haven't had that in a long time."

"Clams? Ugh."

"How about some vegetarian chili? I haven't used the crock pot in a while."

"I'll pass on the chili too," Crystal said. "Guess I'll go through a drive-through and get a burger."

"Burgers aren't healthy. Don't you read the health reports?" Laura put the lid on the sugar bowl and turned to catch the look on Crystal's face.

"Me? Read the health report?" The blonde woman gave a snort. "Puh-lease."

"Do you have any *i.e.* what that does to your body?" Laura set the mugs down on the table and resumed her seat.

"Look who you're talking to," Crystal said. "Do you really think one hamburger is going to do more damage than my smoking and drinking?"

Unable to resist, Laura leaned forward and smirked. "You could always quit those too."

"Well not today, Laura. Here." Crystal smiled and pushed the folded up sections of newspaper across the table.

"Thanks." The pair read in silence for a few minutes until Laura piped up from behind her newspaper.

"How about braised chicken and leeks?"

"What's a leek?"

"Now don't be afraid but it's a vegetable."

"Naw."

"So what do you like?"

"I dunno. Don't worry about me. I'll get something."

"Well if you change your mind, call me and I'll whip something up."

"You know, I can swing by the Tom Cat Club and pick up my check. We could order pizza." Crystal set the paper down and reached for her mug. "I'll even compromise and get just mushrooms on it."

Laura smiled at the gesture but shook her head. "I can make a dozen pizzas for what those places charge. I have some dough in the freezer and it's nothing to run out and

"She was unable to stifle a yawn. "Oh excuse me. I was saying it's nothing for me to run out and pick up some cheese and sauce."

"Naw, stay home," Crystal said. "You need to catch up on your sleep." She rose to her feet and picked up her now empty mug. "I've gotta get going. See you later."

"Crystal, do me a favor?"

"Sure, what?"

"If you're going to be late, call me, okay?"

"You don't have to worry about me going over to Steph's or anything."

"I know I don't have to worry but I will anyway. Just call if you're going to be late, all right?"

"All right. If I'm gonna be late, I'll call. Anything else, Mother Hen?" Crystal handed Laura the empty mug. "I'll see you tonight."

"Miss Sheridan? Miss Foster will see you now," Jenny secretary said as she hung up the phone. Crystal nodded and entered the therapist's office.

"Good afternoon, Crystal. I wasn't expecting to see you again this week." Jenny took a seat on the couch while Crystal took the recliner.

"Yeah well, I dunno." Crystal looked everywhere but at Jenny. The feeling of discomfort that she felt whenever she was in the room felt stronger than ever. "I just thought that since you had the hour open and all

"She picked at a thread sticking out from the *e.g.* of the armrest. "I didn't like today's meditation."

"And what about it didn't you like?" Jenny countered. "Today's passage was about putting the blame where it belongs, on the abuser and not on the victimized child."

"It's stupid. Of course it's all his fault." Crystal shifted in her chair, finally meeting Jenny eyes. "He's the bastard that couldn't keep his hands off his own kids." Again her fingers went to the dangling piece of thread and began tugging on it as she looked away from the therapist. She waited for a response but Jenny simply continued to look at her. "Aren't you going to say something?"

"What do you want me to say, Crystal?"

"I dunno, something."

"All right. How about you tell me what it is about that passage that has you so riled up today?"

"I don't want to talk about it. It's stupid."

"Your feelings aren't stupid," Jenny said gently. "They may be hard to understand. They may even be too painful to deal with but they are not stupid."

"Easy for you to say, Doc," Crystal snorted. "You didn't live with that bastard." Shifting until her knees were under her chin and her arms wrapped tightly around her calves, Crystal let her eyes settle on a spot on the floor. "You didn't have to put up him throwing your dinner against the wall because he ran out of beer. You didn't have to put up with all the yelling and swearing and screaming and hitting." As she spoke, Crystal's voice grew more agitated and her grip tightened. "You didn't have to hide under your blanket praying for him to die. You didn't have to listen to him

" Feeling her throat tighten, Crystal shook her head and clenched her jaw tightly.

"You are right, Crystal," Jenny said. "I wasn't there. I wouldn't know firsthand of all the horrors you've suffered. Only you can tell me what that feels like. Try using I statements."

"You don't-"

"Use I, Crystal."

"The tightness in her throat felt like a vise cutting off her words. "I

I hate him." Tugging hard on the loose thread, Crystal finally succeeding in breaking it free from the recliner.

"Please don't destroy my furniture," Jenny said, planting her feet on the floor and leaning forward until her forearms were resting on her thighs. "If you're feeling destructive, I have a whole chest full of stress relieving aides."

"I'm not feeling destructive," Crystal grumbled, crossing her arms to keep her wandering fingers from going after another loose piece of thread.

"Well that's good to hear. So why don't you tell me why you called at lunchtime today looking for an appointment? Something must be troubling you."

Crystal remained silent for a moment, trying to find words to express the turmoil raging inside. Finally she blurted "Why do you make me read that damn book? I hate it."

"Why?"

"Because it makes me remember!" Crystal shouted, her hands balling into fists. "I read that damn thing before I left for work this morning and that's all I could think about all day." She reached for her cigarettes.

"How about a nice piece of sugar free hard candy instead?" Jenny offered, gesturing at the candy dish next to the coffee maker.

"I need a cigarette, not a piece of candy," Crystal grumbled, pushing the pack back into her pocket. Pushing out the chair, she crossed the room and retrieved a Styrofoam cup from the stack next to the coffee maker. "You know throwing shit out a window doesn't require a whole lot of brain power," Crystal said over her shoulder as she prepared her coffee. "I just walked up and down the damn hallway with no one to talk to but myself. Everyone else is in the rooms tearing down walls or whatever the hell it is they're doing in there." Instead of returning to her seat, Crystal walked over to the window and stared out. "I tune out all the different radios playing and get that tunnel vision, you know?" She continued on without waiting for an answer. "I dunno. I just couldn't get that stuff out of my mind. It

it just

"Crystal shook her head in frustration. The words that wanted to escape were too dangerous to give voice to but nothing else would come forth. "Forget it."

"You know I'm not going to let go that easily," Jenny said. "You said it makes you remember." Crystal stiffened, taking a purposeful swallow of her coffee before turning to meet Jenny's gaze. "What does it make you remember?"

"Everything." Crystal quickly drained the contents of the Styrofoam cup and tossed it in the wastebasket. She looked at the recliner but opted instead to place some distance between herself and the therapist. She planted herself on the blue beanbag, resting her wrists on her knees.

"Does it make you remember how you felt?" Jenny asked gently.

"Angry," Crystal replied, settling her focus on a brightly colored ball made of foam.

"What else?"

"Mad, angry

what else are you looking for?"

"Anger masks an emotion we're too afraid to face." Jenny shifted closer, remaining on the couch but now sitting closer to her. "What are you thinking about right this minute?"

"Nothing," Crystal answered quickly, knowing from the look on Jenny's face that her answer would not be accepted. "I was just remembering, that's all." Shoulders shrugging, she reached out with her foot and kicked the ball away.

"Share with me."

"Ah, it's not a pretty story, Doc."

"Tell me," Jenny urged more firmly.

Crystal shifted her position on the beanbag, reaching out and picking up a hand strengthener. "It's like a movie clip playing over and over in my mind," she began, her gaze never leaving the floor. "I'm in my bed and I can hear him coming down the hall." Crystal squeezed the rubber grips until her knuckles were white before releasing them.

"It must have been scary for you, knowing what was going to happen and being unable to prevent it," Jenny prodded.

"There had to be something," Crystal said, increasing the rhythm of her squeezes on the grips. "I should have run away earlier or locked the door or something."

"You tried to run away, several times if I remember correctly. As for locking your door, what do you think your father would have done if you had locked it?"

"I did lock it once." The hand strengthener was tossed onto the red beanbag. "He bashed the door in. It never closed right again." A wry smile came to Crystal's lips and she raised her head to look at the therapist. "He beat the shit out of me that night, Doc." Finding Jenny's serious gaze too much to handle, Crystal looked away. "I think it was only a month or so after that when I finally got away from the bastard." She shook her head. "Nope, nothing but anger in there, Doc. I'm too numb to feel anything else."

Jenny gestured at the red beanbag. "May I?" Crystal reluctantly nodded and watched the therapist settle into a comfortable position. "Crystal, I'd like for you to do something, okay? First, uncross your legs and get comfortable."

Crystal raised an eyebrow and pushed her legs straight out.

"Good, now close your eyes."

"You trying to hypnotize me, Doc? I'm not up to walk around clucking like a chicken."

"I knew there was a sense of humor hidden inside there somewhere," Jenny said with a smile. "I promise I'm not going to try and hypnotize you. Now close your eyes." Crystal did as she was told, allowing herself to be enveloped in darkness. "Good," she heard Jenny say. "Now I want you to think about the clip you keep seeing in your mind." Instantly the vision of lying in her bed listening to the sound of her father's heavy footsteps coming down the hall filled her senses. "I want to think carefully," Jenny continued, her voice low and smooth. "Think about the temperature of the room, the sounds going on around you, the feel of the room around you. I want you to concentrate on the details." The blurred images came into sharper focus.

"I see it," Crystal said.

"Good. Now Crystal, I want you to concentrate. What do you look like?"

"What?"

"Close your eyes. Better. I asked you what you look like in the scene. Describe yourself to me. What are you wearing, how tall are you, that kind of

stuff."

"I dunno." Crystal shrugged, her forehead furrowed with thought. "I don't really see myself, just a shape where I'm supposed to be."

"Think hard. What did you look like then?"

"I was short for my age. I didn't really sprout until I was sixteen and by then I was out of there so I guess I was probably around five foot or so. Maybe five one or two."

"Where you a strong girl?"

"I did okay in sports but I wasn't a standout or anything."

"So about average for a fourteen year old."

"Yeah, I guess so," Crystal said, the image in her mind gaining shape but still very fuzzy. "I can't see my face, though."

"Do you have any old photographs from when you were younger?"

"No. I didn't think to pack those when I snuck out, Doc," Crystal said sarcastically. "I guess when I think about it I see myself like I am now."

"I want you to think of yourself when you were fourteen. Think about the hair, the pimples, the clothes, everything you can." Jenny's encouragement brought a clearer face to the child in Crystal's vision. "Now," Jenny said gently. "Do you see yourself better?"

"Yeah, I think so," Crystal replied.

"Okay, think about how small you were in comparison to your father."

Crystal flinched at the mention of her father and frowned, knowing Jenny saw her movement as well. "Yeah?"

"I want you to think about something else. Keep that image in your mind." Crystal kept her eyes closed, following Jenny's direction. "Who decided what time you woke up in the morning?"

"My parents did."

"And the time you went to bed at night?"

"They did."

"What about what you ate for breakfast? Dinner? What you wore to school?"

"Them."

"Sounds like you had very little power there," Jenny said.

"I picked out my underwear, that's about it," Crystal replied angrily, old feelings bubbling to the surface.

"So how can you possibly expect yourself, as a teenager with nothing but turmoil and chaos around you to be able to defend yourself against someone so much more powerful than you?"

Unable to think of a quick response, Crystal opened her eyes and looked at her therapist.

"You've never thought about it, have you?" Jenny continued, leaning forward until her knees were only inches away from Crystal's. "When you think about the past, you expect that child to be able to think and act as you would now as an adult."

"No I don't," Crystal protested, hugging her knees closer to her chest.

"Look deep down inside," Jenny insisted. "You keep saying if only I had a stronger lock or if only I had done this or done that. You were a child, Crystal. A little girl at the mercy of someone much bigger and stronger than yourself."

If Jenny said more, Crystal didn't hear it. Her thoughts were far away, in another time and place, where the monsters were real and the person who was supposed to protect her turned out to be her worst nightmare. Crystal tried to stiffen up, to put forth her tough persona, but it felt hollow and empty, even to her. Slumping her shoulders, she let her head fall forward. The painful memories and feelings that had been resurfacing all day finally found the strength to break through the dam and burst forth. Rapid blinking did nothing to ease the stinging in her eyes and Crystal knew the battle was lost. Burying her face into her arms, she felt the hot tears come. Her shaky breathing threatened to turn into an all out sob but years of self-preservation helped Crystal quickly regain control. Wiping her wet face on her sleeves of her shirt, she stood up and walked over to the window. Looking through the tinted glass, Crystal watched various cars and trucks drive up and down the street. Taking several deep breaths, Crystal began to speak, not at all certain she would be able to keep her emotions in check. "I

I think that's enough for today, Doc."

"You can't run away from yourself," Jenny said gently, her voice coming from just behind Crystal's shoulder. "I know you like to think of yourself as a one woman island capable of existing without human comfort but you aren't."

"I can handle it," Crystal said firmly, refusing to look away from the window as another tear rolled down her face.

"Sure you can, Jane Wayne. Just you, your horse and a trusty six-shooter to kill anyone who comes near you, right?" A friendly hand landed on Crystal's shoulder. "You have a million feelings going through you right now and no *i.e.* how to sort them all out. I thought that's what you came here to do, not to run away the minute things started getting hard."

Crystal sniffed and wiped her eyes, still refusing to turn around. "I hate this," she said quietly. "I

" She watched a van make its way down the street while she collected her thoughts. "I hate feeling this way."

"What way is that?" the soft voice behind her asked.

"I dunno." Shrugging her shoulders, Crystal moved away, keeping her back to Jenny. Returning to the blue beanbag, she slumped down into it, letting out a deep breath of air when she finally felt in control of her rarely used tear ducts. She watched Jenny return to her beanbag.

"You know, you just don't want to admit it," Jenny said. "I told you no cop outs here." The distant sound of the church bell caused her to look at her watch. "But I'll give you a break tonight. It is getting late. Look at me." She waited until she had Crystal's full attention before continuing. "I want you to go home and write tonight." Ignoring Crystal's groan, she continued. "I want you to write about the dream you keep having. Try to put as much detail in it as you can. Don't forget that the people in your life today aren't the same as the ones in your past. You're around people who care about you. Don't forget to reach out if you need to."

"I don't want to write tonight," Crystal said, rubbing her eyes and standing up. "I just want to get numb."

"Getting numb won't make the pain go away," Jenny replied as she rose to her feet. "The definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting a new result. Try doing something different for a change. I guarantee you won't wake up with a hangover."

"It takes a really rough night for me to wake up with a hangover, Doc. I can hold my liquor."

"Yeah, so I've seen," Jenny smirked. "I don't take bullshit either, Jane Wayne. Go home and remember you're a woman, not a tank."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning go easy on yourself," Jenny said. "You're a woman who needs comfort from time to time. Don't be so afraid to take it, okay?"

"I'll see you Saturday at softball, Doc," Crystal replied, reaching for her keys.

"Hey, rule twenty six." Jenny stood in front of her and reached out. "I believe everyone needs at least five hugs a day. You are way overdue for one, I'm sure."

"You're kidding." As she found herself enveloped in a gentle hug, Crystal knew the answer. "Yeah yeah, okay, you've given me a hug. Leggo now."

"Read your meditations, write in your journal and don't forget to reach out to the people who care about you," Jenny said as she pulled back. "I'll see you Saturday."

Part 8

The parking lot of the liquor store was dark, the overhead light broken some time ago by vandals and never repaired. Crystal parked her car near the front door, wanting as much light around her as possible now that darkness had fallen. Leaving the store with the brown paper bag in her hand, she looked around the dim lot carefully before leaving the safety of the doorway for her car. Once inside the small interior of her Omni, Crystal locked her door and set the bottle on the passenger seat. I can't do this, it's just too hard, she thought to herself, reaching out to start the engine. All I think about is that fucking place and all the shit that happened. Pulling out onto the street, Crystal pushed her foot down hard on the accelerator, quickly passing the speed limit. At least when I'm wasted I don't think about it. The bottle sitting on seat screamed out from within the paper bag but Crystal knew in her present state of mind that if she started drinking, she'd have half the bottle finished before she reached home, if she made it home at all. "Ah, who cares anyway," she said aloud, reaching out for the bottle. Her fingers barely closed around the bag when she saw the bright blue lights flashing in the rear view mirror. "Oh shit," she said, letting go of the bag and reaching for her seat belt. Oh shit, is there any weed in the car? Crystal tried hard to remember as she guided the car to the shoulder of the road. Reaching between the seats and putting the car in park, she shut off the engine and rolled down the window. Did I put the new insurance card in the glove compartment? Crystal looked at the rear view mirror, not at all happy with the sight of the police car parking behind hers. The blue lights continued to strobe incessantly as seconds passed. What are you doing, running my plate? Please just get up here and give me a speeding ticket and go away.

As any marijuana in her glove compartment. The registration is in there. What if he sees something when I reach for it? Maybe I should get it now, just in case. But on the other hand, if he sees me moving around in there, he might become suspicious and want to search the car. That would not be a good thing. Over a week ago she had dropped her pipe and at the time simply kicked it under the front seat. The sound of a car door closing made the decision for her. Do nothing and see what happens.

Crystal's heart began pounding as the uniformed officer approached her vehicle. Watching through her side view mirror, Crystal's eyes grew wide when the cop stopped at her rear bumper and appeared to be looking at something. Don't tell me I have a broken taillight or something. Oh damn, when was the last time this thing was inspected? Wiping the sweat from her upper lip, she nervously poked her head out the window. "Um, is something wrong, officer?"

"Stay in the vehicle, Miss," the deep feminine voice said with authority. Crystal immediately turned around and faced forward, both hands gripping the top of the steering wheel. What if she frisks me? Crystal knew she had rolling papers in her back pocket. Finding those would most surely be enough cause for the policewoman to tear the car apart. Damn damn, this isn't good. She heard her name come over the police radio and the officer respond before walking up to her door. "License, registration and proof of insurance, please."

Un

sure." Crystal shifted in her seat to reach for her wallet, all the while nervously watching as the policewoman shined her flashlight throughout the car's interior. "Um, here's my license. The insurance and registration are in the glove compartment."

"Are there any weapons or illegal drugs in this vehicle, Miss

Sheridan?" The officer's voice sounded familiar to Crystal but she couldn't pinpoint it.

"No." Leaning over and noting that the flashlight beam followed her hands, Crystal reached into the compartment and removed the flimsy plastic sleeve that held the papers for the car. Removing the registration and insurance cards, she handed them over.

"Is this your current address?"

"Um, no. I live in the Terraces." Crystal watched as the officer flipped the license over and scribbled something down on her pad.

"You're required to notify the department of motor vehicles within ten days of any change in address and mark it clearly on the reverse of your license," the officer said, her flashlight still weaving a pattern of light throughout the interior of the car. "Have you had anything to drink tonight?"

"No, I'm on my way home," Crystal replied.

"Mm hmm," the officer said noncommittally. A few more notes were scribbled before she put the pad down and took a step back from the car. "Step out of the vehicle, please."

Oh fuck. Taking a deep breath, Crystal unbuckled the seat belt and opened the door. Please let that pipe be waaay under the front seat. She was trying to remember the name of a lawyer when the police officer spoke.

"Aren't you Laura Taylor's new roommate?" Now standing under the street light, Crystal now knew the reason why the voice sounded familiar. It was Alex Duncan, the shortstop from the Falcons softball team.

"Yes," Crystal said happily. The odds of needing a lawyer just dropped considerably. Alex was smiling and leaning against the open door. "I didn't know you were a cop."

"Yeah, it's my job to keep these streets safe at night," Alex replied. "Speaking of which, not a good *i.e.* to be doing fifty in a thirty five."

"Oh, yeah

sorry." So much for getting out of a ticket.

"You swear you haven't been drinking?"

"Not a drop." Crystal thought about the bottle sitting on the front seat. "Actually I just picked something up to take home to drink." She motioned at the passenger seat, pointing out what hadn't been visible to Alex's eye before, the whiskey bottle wrapped in a brown paper bag.

"You have a light out over the license plate, by the way," Alex said as she leaned in and removed the whiskey bottle from the bag. "Good thing this seal isn't broken. I would have had to charge you with carrying an open container." Alex returned the bottle to the seat and handed Crystal's documents back to her. "I suppose I can let you off with a warning this time on the speeding but I have to give you a ticket for the defective light." She opened her pad and clicked open her pen. "I'd already started to write it out. No fine if you get it replaced and have this ticket signed by a licensed mechanic or bring it down to the police station to have it checked before dusk tomorrow." Officer Duncan held the pad and pen out. "Signing is not an admission of guilt, only of receipt of your ticket. So you're off work and just heading home to have a few drinks, hm?"

Crystal signed the ticket and handed the pad back to Alex. "Yeah, well

"

"Shame I'm on until midnight." Alex stepped out of the way of the door, silently telling Crystal it was all right to get back in the car. "I'd love to buy you a drink sometime," the officer said softly as Crystal walked past her to get into the driver's seat.

"Oh, um yeah." Now that the danger of a search was gone, Crystal smiled at the flirtatious cop.

"I know Laura's number. I'll call you sometime then?"

"That sounds nice," she said, using the same tone she used so many times before on horny men wanting her phone number. "Tell you what. I'm never home. Why don't I give you a call sometime?" Making sure to buckle her seat belt, Crystal tossed the license and other documents on the passenger seat and started the engine.

"There's a speed trap set up near exit six."

"Thanks for the tip. Good night." Crystal began rolling up the window as soon as Alex stepped back. Oh my god, I got away with it. Watching in her rear view, Crystal waited until the police officer was back in her own unit before she pulled away from the shoulder and onto the roadway. That's it. Tomorrow I'm going to clean out the car. The overhead street lights caught the bright white of the ticket sitting on the seat. "Guess I'll be going to the auto parts store too."

"Oh what is that horrid noise?" Crystal shouted as she stepped into the townhouse. The music was coming from Laura's bedroom and as the stripper listened to a few bars, she recognized it as one of the Carpenter's signature songs. Finding the door to Laura's room open, Crystal knocked lightly on the jamb and stepped inside. "Why are you listening to such depressing music?"

"It's not depressing, it's thought provoking," the writer defended as she shut the tape player off.

"Sure, if you're thinking of killing yourself." Crystal walked over to the short file cabinet and sat down atop it. "How ya doing?"

"Hello yourself and I'm fine." Laura gestured at the monitor. "I think I got over fifteen pages done so far. It's been a most productive day."

"Good for you."

"What's that? Refilling your stock?"

"Yeah well

" Crystal set the whiskey bottle on the floor, out of Laura's sight.

"Yeah." Laura let the subject drop. "So how was your day? You look like you've been playing in a dirt pile. Make sure you spot soak those stains with detergent before you put them in my washing machine."

"You're the only person I know who worries about keeping your washing machine clean." Looking at her roommate, Crystal noticed Laura's drawn face and puffy eyes. "Did you take a nap today at all?"

"I didn't have time. Those ideas you gave me yesterday were just what I needed to bring Bobbi and Julie together." Laura stretched in her seat, rolling her head from side to side until she heard a satisfying pop. "I'm almost ready for them to have their first kiss."

"Oh yes, let's get them into bed as soon as possible," Crystal said teasingly. "I think you need a break. Tell you what, I'll make dinner tonight."

"You know how to cook?"

"Bite me," Crystal replied, hopping off the file cabinet and retrieving her bottle from its hiding place. "Come on, you need to get away from this depressing music."

As they made their way down the stairs, Laura continued to defend her musical tastes. "The Carpenters aren't depressing. And melancholy music is the perfect setting for the scene I'm working on."

"I hope it isn't a love scene," Crystal quipped as she stepped into the kitchen. "So what are you in the mood for? I know nothing that resembles real food." She opened the refrigerator and glanced at the contents of each shelf. Oh, I didn't know she had green olives hidden in here, Crystal thought to herself, making a mental note to come down later and help herself to a few. "What's this thing that looks like a burger?"

"It a veggie burger."

"How do you cook it? Just like a regular one?"

"Pretty much. I add some fried onions and cheese for flavoring."

"Sounds good. I have a piece of cube steak in here somewhere

" Crystal moved jars of unidentifiable concoctions around but her meat was nowhere to be found. "Where is it?"

"I moved it away from my leftover rigatoni. Look on the bottom shelf in the back."

"Of course, why didn't I see it before?" Crystal said sarcastically, moving the baskets of fresh berries out of her way to reach the steak. "Do you have onions and cheese?"

"Cheese is in the dairy compartment on the door and the onions are in the bottom drawer."

Crystal found the ingredients and placed them on the counter. Opening several drawers turned up the good cutting knives. Laura had buried herself in the newspaper, leaving the blonde to her own thoughts. As it did so many times during the day, Crystal's mind went back to the past. It shouldn't keep hurting so much. Picking up the knife, she began slicing the onion. I know what Jenny wants. She wants me to break down and tell her what he did like that's going to make any kind of difference. The force of the knife through the onion increased and Crystal soon felt stinging tears come to her eyes. With her back to Laura and her fingers covered with onion juice, she let the tears fall, knowing it would be worse if she tried to rub her eyes. Bet this would make her happy, seeing me cry like this again. Sniffing and rubbing her cheeks against the upper sleeves of her shirt, Crystal shoved the knife away and scooped the slivers on onion into the frying pan. I miss you Patty. I really need a hug. A small half sob escaped her lips, the onions no longer to blame for the tears.

"You okay?" Laura asked from the table.

Crystal sniffed and lowered the temperature of the burner. "Uh yeah, strong onion, I guess." Everything else could wait a few minutes. "I'm going to step outside for a smoke." Lowering her head and looking away from Laura, Crystal quickly made her way out to the deck.

The moon was still below the tree line, casting very little light on the deck. Gripping the rail with both hands, Crystal faced the darkness, unable to stop the stinging tears from falling. The anger that used to come so easily to her couldn't break through the stronger emotion, pain. The memories of being a lonely girl with no one to turn to refused to go away and Crystal felt herself slipping back to that painful time. She never heard the sliding glass door slide open or Laura stepping out onto the deck. Crystal jumped at the feel of a gentle hand on her back.

Hey

" Laura spoke softly. "Com'mere." Before she could react, Crystal found herself wrapped within Laura's gentle embrace.

"Shh, it's okay," the writer said. Crystal felt the hold tighten, her head pressed into Laura's shoulder. "Once in a while we all need to just let it out."

"I c-can't stop," Crystal sniffled, awkwardly letting her arms go around Laura's back. "It j-just

it just hurts so much." Unable to stop herself, she burrowed deeper into the hug, feeling the heat of Laura's body through the thin cotton shirt. The tears fell freely for the first time in many years and Crystal found herself helpless to stop them. Just as she sought comfort in her sister's embrace as a child, Crystal now tightened her grip around Laura's back as sobs wracked her body. As her tears soaked into Laura's shirt, she felt a hand rubbing gently up and down her back. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be." Crystal felt Laura's grip tighten. "I told you, sometimes we all have to just let it out." The hands rubbing her back and hair stopped. "Do you feel like going inside now?" Laura asked. Crystal nodded and allowed herself to be led through the kitchen and onto the couch where Laura insisted on sitting next to her.

"I-I'm sorry," she said, wiping at her face with her sleeve. "I thought it was the onions but

"She looked everywhere but at Laura, embarrassed by the crying jag. "I'd better get back to dinner." Crystal tried to get up only to find herself held in place by a firm hand on her chest.

"Dinner can wait," Laura insisted. "You're more important." As she spoke, Laura moved her hand up to cup Crystal's chin, forcing their eyes to meet. "Talk to me." Crystal found herself looking into Laura's hazel eyes, finding both care and concern within them. "Come on, Crystal, talk to me," Laura repeated softly.

"I just keep thinking about the past," Crystal said, breaking the gaze and focusing on the laces of Laura's sneaker instead. "My father was such a bastard." Unsure what to say, Laura remained quiet, giving Crystal the time she needed to collect her thoughts. The smell of cooking onions began to filter through the air. Laura made a mental note of it but remained where she was, one arm around the back of Crystal's shoulders. The shrill ringing of the phone interrupted the silence.

"Let the machine get it," Laura said. Three rings later she heard the familiar click and the recorded sound of her own voice.

"This is Laura. I can't come to the phone right now, so please leave a message." Beep.

"Laura, it's Jenny," the distorted voice said. "Call me when you get in." There was a click then the room returned to silence.

"I saw her today," Crystal said quietly.

"I thought you usually saw her on Mondays?"

Crystal nodded. "I do but I've been feeling like this all day."

"Oh, so she saw you again today?" Crystal nodded. "Good," Laura continued. "What did she say?"

She said I need to

reach out more, I guess." Crystal shrugged. "I need to talk about what happened." She shook her head. "How am I supposed to talk about something like that?" She looked up at Laura again, still finding the gentle look of concern on her face.

"Just like you're doing now."

"Easy for you to say. I feel like I'm coming apart at the seams," Crystal said.

"Interesting visual image," Laura said. "Maybe you feel that way because there's something inside that's trying very hard to come out."

"Now you're sounding like Doc," the blonde said, causing them both to smile briefly. "Maybe," she admitted with a nod, the smile leaving her face.

"I told you before if you ever needed to talk, I'd be here."

Crystal nodded and looked away. "I don't think I can."

"I know you can," Laura said firmly. "You're strong. You can handle it."

"Strong?" Crystal snorted. "I don't think so."

"How can you say that?" Laura shifted and waited for Crystal to look at her before continuing. "Have you ever seriously sat down and thought about it? I don't know many people who would have survived what you have. After all the horrible things your family did to you, you still managed to get away and support yourself all these years." Laura shook her head. "At fifteen I was worrying about passing Biology and not getting too many pimples. I don't think I could have made it on the streets all by myself." Laura paused, choosing her words carefully. "Especially if I'd been raped." The word caused an immediate reaction. Crystal stiffened noticeably and crossed her arms in front of her chest. Her eyes took on a faraway look. The now burning onions couldn't be ignored any longer. "I'll be right back," Laura said as she rose to her feet. She went to the kitchen and shut off the burner, deciding that the pan could be cleaned out later. When she returned to the living room, she found Crystal in the same position, lost in deep thought. "Hey."

Crystal looked at her, blue eyes rimmed with red from her crying. Laura fought the urge to pull Crystal into a hug, instead resuming her seat next to the emotionally pained woman. To her surprise, Crystal reached out and grasped her wrist, pulling her hand back to its previous position around the blonde woman's neck. Taking the invitation, Laura wiggled closer until she had Crystal's head resting on her shoulder and their bodies touching. "So do you want to talk or just sit here for a little while?" she asked softly, letting her thumb move back and forth across the curve of Crystal's shoulder.

"Did you have a bike when you were a kid?"

Um

yeah," Laura replied, remembering now Crystal's habit of changing subjects without warning. "It was purple with a white flowered banana seat and a matching basket on the front."

"I had a bike too. It was Patty's before she gave it to me." Crystal continued to let her head rest against Laura's shoulder, a move that surprised them both. "It was a boy's bike but that didn't matter to us. It was a bike. She won it, you know."

"Patty?"

"Yeah, there was an art contest put on by the school and they gave away a bike to the winner. She bought herself a bigger one at a garage sale with some money she had saved. Patty was good at saving money, not like me."

"Not one of your strong suits, hmm?"

"I never have any money to save but even when I do get some extra, I usually spend it right away."

"I've always been a saver," Laura said. "Dad used to make me put a third of my allowance each week into the bank. By the time I graduated high school I had enough to pay for my own car."

"After Patty bought the ten speed at the garage sale, we used to ride our bikes everywhere. Of course that was before that drunken bastard ran over them with his fucking car. Took us almost a year of returning bottles before we could get new ones." Crystal sat up and leaned forward, resting her elbows on her knees and rubbing her hands together. When seconds passed with no further words from Crystal, Laura wondered if that would be the end of the conversation for the night but finally her roommate began talking again. "I loved having a bicycle," Crystal said. "It gave me freedom. When I was out riding it, no one could touch me." Crystal blinked several times. "He couldn't touch me," she added in a lower voice.

"He can't touch you here either," Laura said softly, hoping to encourage Crystal to continue talking.

"For all I know the bastard could be dead. I wish he was." Crystal sat back and looked at Laura. "I really need a drink and a smoke."

"Cigarettes or something else?"

"Does it matter?"

"Depends on whether you want to keep talking or not. If you want a cigarette, we can go out onto the deck. If you want the other, you'll have to go up to your room and I don't want to be around that stuff." Laura hoped she wasn't making the wrong move. It seemed that Crystal was on the verge of really opening up and Laura certainly didn't want to do anything to hinder that but at the same time she didn't want to encourage the drug use.

"I guess a cigarette it is then," Crystal said, rising to her feet. "But it is getting cool out there with the wind and all. Can we go upstairs to my room? I have that orange chair in there that you can sit in if you want."

Laura hesitated, knowing it put the pot within easy reach and she was certain Crystal wouldn't stay away from it for long in her current state. "I'll tell you what. Do you know how to play rummy?"

"Sure, Patty and I used to play it. I kicked her butt."

"You clear a way through that minefield of a room of yours and I'll bring the cards."

"Deal."

It had been several days since Laura had seen the inside of Crystal's room and thus was surprised to see that her assumption of disarray was on the mark. Dirty clothes were scattered about the floor, no doubt remaining where they were originally thrown when Crystal was changing. The small waste basket near the bed was filled to the brim with cigarette butts and empty whiskey bottles. Crystal's newest purchase was sitting on the nightstand, the glass next to it already filled with the amber liquor. Crystal was sitting cross-legged on her bed, the ashtray and lit cigarette next to her. "How do you find your way to the bed?" Laura joked as she pulled the orange chair next to the bed.

"Well the bed doesn't move. I know where it is. I'll pick all this up when I do laundry. Come on, let's play cards."

"Can you light one of those incense before your cigarette kills me?"

"Help yourself. You know where they are. Here."

Laura caught the thrown lighter and soon had an incense stick burning in the holder. Settling into her chair, she smoothed the bedspread and began shuffling the cards. "Regular or gin rummy?"

"Regular. I hate getting caught with all those cards in my hand," Crystal said. She took a long drag on her cigarette before picking up her cards. "So you're always trying to get me to talk about myself. Tell me about you for a change."

"There isn't much to tell," Laura said as she arranged her cards. "What do you want to know?"

"I dunno." Crystal shrugged her shoulders. "When did you figure out you were a dyke?"

"I prefer lesbian," Laura corrected. "And you go first by the way." She waited for Crystal to put a card in the discard pile before reaching for the deck. "I was in college so probably around nineteen or twenty or so." She set three aces down on the bed before tossing a useless queen into the discard pile. "I figured out what I was months before I slept with another woman, though."

"How did you know if you didn't

?"

"You need to throw a card out and I didn't need to have sex with a woman to know that emotionally I could only connect with one. There's more to it than just sex." Laura picked up a card and rearranged her cards, seeing if the jack could be of any use.

"Have you ever been with a guy?"

"Again how do I know if I don't try it, right?" Giving up on the jack, she tossed it on top of the discard pile. "When did you put that run down? I didn't notice." Laura looked through her cards, debating about ruining two possible runs just to play off of Crystal's cards. "And for the record, I have slept with a guy before."

"And?"

"And it was okay but not what I want. A woman is

just different, I suppose." Setting down a run of hearts, Laura smiled as she set down the discard. "You'd better start moving there, I only have one left."

"So that's where all the damn hearts were," Crystal said, taking another long drag on her cigarette. "I needed that nine and you had it all this time?"

"I didn't know you needed it."

"Funny." Crystal tossed the jack of hearts out, not wanting to be caught with a face card should Laura be able to set down her last card and go out.

"So what about you? I know you're straight but have you ever

?"

"No. Some greasy old man offered me money once if I'd do it with his girlfriend while he watched but I turned him down." Crystal's eyes lit up when the card she pulled from the top of the pack was the one she had been waiting for. "I'm out," she announced, setting down a five card run and throwing the extra card on the discard pile.

"I see you had all the clubs. Do you want to keep score?"

"Sure. I don't have any paper though."

"Don't worry about it. I'll get some from my room. I'll get a bottle of water while I'm at it and make sure everything is locked up downstairs. Do you need anything while I'm down there?"

"No, I'm all set." Crystal motioned at her bottle of whiskey.

As soon as Laura left the room, Crystal rolled over and opened the nightstand drawer, retrieving a black film case and a silver tube known as a one-hitter. Tamping a small amount of pot into one end, Crystal put her lips to the other and lit it, drawing just enough to fill her lungs but not send her into a choking fit. While holding her breath, Crystal reached into the drawer again and pulled out an empty toilet paper tube covered on one end by a dryer sheet. Putting her lips to against the dryer sheet, she blew the smoke into the tube, effectively masking the odor. Crystal was able to take three more hits before she heard Laura coming back up the stairs. Tossing the one-hitter and film case back in the drawer, she shoved the tube under her pillow and was lighting a cigarette when her roommate returned.

Laura didn't notice the narrow eyes right away but her sensitive nose did pick up a strong scent that reminded her of burnt rubber and air freshener. "Did you light a different incense?"

"Um, no but I did just light another cigarette."

"Oh, that must be it then." Laura moved some trash out of her way to make room for her bottle of water on the nightstand. "It's your deal."

"Okay. Do you want to play poker instead?"

"You should have said something before I went downstairs. All the game things like the chip racks are in the closet." Laura sat down in the orange chair. "Let's just keep playing rummy. If I go downstairs again, I'll get the chips."

"Okay." Crystal began dealing the cards, smiling to herself. The smile gave way to a snicker.

"What?"

"Nothing," Crystal said, the silly smirk still on her face.

"Come on, share with me."

"It's nothing."

"Yeah, it really looks it," Laura said dubiously.

"You really wanna know?"

"Of course."

"Okay." Crystal paused and looked at the cards in front of them. "How many am I supposed to deal out?"

"Seven." Laura looked at the hands as well. "You misdealt. I have eight and it looks like you have at least nine over there." Laura handed her cards over to Crystal and reached for her water. "So what's so funny?"

Crystal looked up, confused. "Funny?"

"Two seconds ago you looked like you knew the world's funniest joke."

"Oh, that." Crystal shrugged her shoulders. "I dunno. I can't remember."

"Uh huh." It was then that Laura finally noticed the slitted blue eyes. "You got into your pot while I was downstairs, didn't you?"

Um

"Crystal looked at her. "If I say yes, will you stay anyway?"

Laura sighed and leaned back in her chair. "I really don't like it but I guess it's too late to do anything about it now."

"I won't have any more," Crystal assured. "I just needed a little to take the *e.g.* off, you know?" Holding the deck of cards in her hand, the blonde woman shrugged her shoulders and looked down at her lap. "Sometimes things just seem more manageable when I've had some pot." She let the cards fall to the bed and reached for the glass of whiskey. "It's been a really fucked up day." Crystal looked at the bottle sitting on the nightstand. "You really want to know what's funny? My asshole father drank the same kind of whiskey." Draining the glass and setting it down, Crystal picked up the cards. "Seven, right?"

"Right."

Crystal sighed and dealt the cards. "I remember once I was about nineteen or so. I had a really rough day and all I wanted to do was just get drunk and forget about it. I went to a liquor store and bought the first thing I knew would get me rip-roaring drunk, the same whiskey he drank." Setting the rest of the cards in a neat pile between them, she flipped over the first card. "I should have been carded but I guess the guy at the liquor store realized that I really needed it."

"What you needed was someone who cared about you, not to hide inside a bottle."

"Yeah well I certainly didn't have it then, did I?" Crystal replied bitterly. "I think I've done a decent job of taking care of myself all this time. I'm not a junkie or locked up in jail somewhere."

"That's very true," Laura said, picking up a card and looking at her hand. "And I give you a lot of credit for that. I just wish you wouldn't abuse your body with all these drugs and booze. Your turn."

Crystal reached for the whiskey bottle. "What the hell. They abused my body, I abuse my body. What's the difference?"

"The difference is you deserve better than that." Laura set her discard down and looked at Crystal. "Maybe they couldn't see what a special person you are but I can."

"You need to get your vision checked," Crystal said. "I don't have a damn thing going for me but my looks and they won't last forever."

"You're selling yourself short."

"Maybe, but I'm not like you. I don't have degrees and a family that cares for me or any of that stuff. There's just me and that's not saying a lot."

Laura's grip on her cards tightened at Crystal's words. What is it going to take to get her to see that she's a worthy person? she asked herself. "You have more than just yourself. You have me and Jenny and we both care for you."

"You know when I was a little kid, when I believed that prayers and dreams could come true if only I wished for them hard enough, I used to dream that someday the authorities would come and say that they've made some terrible mistake and that Patty and I weren't really Sheridans. That they'd come and take us away to our real family, a nice loving family that didn't beat on their kids."

The pain in Crystal's voice tugged on Laura's heartstrings. "You know," the writer said, reaching out and putting her hand on Crystal's knee. "Now there's a wish that I wished had come true for you."

Crystal set the cards down on the bed and leaned back, lacing her fingers behind her hand and resting it on her pillow. "Patty and I used to talk about it. We'd take off to the fields and just lay there under the sun talking about what life would be like if we lived somewhere else."

"Did you two talk about what you wanted to be when you grew up?" Laura asked, putting all the cards into a neat stack, assuming the game was over.

"Oh, all the time." Crystal smiled and stared at the ceiling. "She wanted to be a doctor or a lawyer depending on which TV show we watched the night before."

"And you?"

"Me? Oh, I wanted to be many things. I wanted to be a firefighter, a nurse, even a private detective. I loved watching *Charlie's Angels*."

"Sounds like you wanted to help people."

Crystal snorted. "Yeah and all I ended up doing was giving men something to look at so they could go home and jerk off." She shook her head. "It doesn't matter now. Without a high school diploma I'm only good for manual labor or stripping."

"You know you can get your GED if you try hard enough."

"For what?" Crystal lifted her head from the pillow long enough to look at Laura. "Can you see me filing out a job application? Oh where have you worked before? Let's see, I worked at the local strip joint taking my clothes off for money and before that I worked the alley near Smith's. They'd hire me in a minute, right?" Her head flopped back down on the pillow and gave a defeated sigh. "Don't you see, Laura? I can't just start over. I can't escape the past."

"Maybe the goal isn't to escape the past but face it where it belongs." Kicking off her sneakers, Laura put her feet on the e.g. of the bed. "Face it, accept it, and move on."

"Easy for you to say."

"Yes it is," Laura admitted. "I've never had to go through the things that you have."

Crystal sat up, pressing her back against the headboard, lost in thought. She filled her glass with whiskey and drained it before finally speaking. "Jenny wants me to talk about it. She says it'll help."

"She's the therapist," Laura said. "I'm sure she knows what she's talking about. I know when something is bothering me and I talk about it, it makes me feel better."

"Nothing will make this feel better," Crystal disagreed. "There's this pain deep inside that never goes away." She reached for the whiskey bottle again. "Sometimes it's all I can think about." She took another drink. "How am I supposed to talk about it?"

"You're talking now, just keep going."

"I'm not talking about 'it'. I'm just talking about how it feels."

"That's still better than nothing at all." Sensing Crystal was on the edge, Laura chose her words carefully. "How do you feel right now?"

"Other than buzzed and drunk?" Crystal smiled and set the bottle down. "How am I supposed to feel?"

"I don't care how you're supposed to feel. I care about how you do feel."

"I feel like an old rag doll that's been used and tossed aside." Pulling her knees to her chest, Crystal folded her arms and rested her chin on them. For a long time neither spoke, both lost in their own thoughts.

Thinking that perhaps the stone wall had been hit and the conversation was over for the night, Laura wrapped the rubber band around the cards and collected the paper and pen that she had brought into the room with her. She was about to stand up when Crystal began speaking in a halting tone.

"I was fourteen," the blonde began, her eyes never looking up from the bedspread. Laura immediately let go of the cards and paper, giving Crystal her full attention. "I knew what he had done to Patty but I never thought he would actually come after me

"

Lying in bed later that night, Laura found herself unable to sleep. The living horror that she had heard relayed from Crystal haunted her mind, refusing to give it any peace. She had expected it to be bad based on what Crystal had alluded to before after hearing the actual details, Laura found it to be much harder to handle. She left the emotionally drained Crystal and returned to her own room, fully expecting to be able to just crawl between the sheets and fall asleep. Now an hour later, the night shadows on the walls kept her wide open eyes company. Reaching in the dark, she found the telephone and pressed in the familiar number.

"Hello?" the groggy voice answered.

"Jen? It's Laura."

"What time is it?"

"I don't know. After midnight, I'm sure."

"What's wrong?"

"I just needed to talk. Crystal and I had a long talk tonight."

"How is she?" Jenny's voice was clearer, the thickness caused by sleep quickly disappearing.

"Pretty good considering all she's been through." Laura sighed and rested her head against the headboard. "I don't know how she managed to survive as long as she did. Has she gotten into detail with you about her father?"

"Laur, you know I can't answer that."

"Yeah, I know but I just can't help thinking about it. What a bastard he was. Even if half of what she says is true, he was a monster that should have been castrated a long time ago."

"We can't talk about Crystal or anything about her life that she tells you, no matter how bad it is but I will say this, I have no doubt if she told you something about her past that it was most likely true. At least as true as memory will allow." Laura heard the sound of Jenny moving about her apartment. "By the way," her ex-lover continued. "It's quarter to one."

"I'm sorry about calling so late but I just can't get to sleep. I just keep seeing her as a teenager unable to protect herself from him."

"You can't change the past."

"I wish I could," Laura said earnestly. "If I had been there, I would have

"

"You would have been just a few years older than her and in no position to play Wonder Woman," Jenny interrupted. "If her own sister couldn't protect her, what makes you think you could have?"

But

"

"But nothing. You can't change what happened to her. All you can do now is help her pick up the pieces and heal from it."

"How do you get over something like that? I mean I know people are raped and most get past it with time but how can she recover from being attacked night after night?"

"Laura, you're getting close to crossing the line here," Jenny warned. "Hell, we've probably passed it already. If the state board ever got wind of this

"

"Forget the board for a minute, Jen. This is Crystal we're talking about."

"No, we're not talking about her, we're talking about you and how you're going to handle being friends with someone who is a survivor." Jenny sighed. "I'm sorry if I sound grouchy but you can't wake me up from a sound sleep and expect me to be in the best frame of mind here, especially when you keep wanting to push the envelope. Don't you understand if she ever found out we talked about this that it could ruin her trust in me?"

"So what am I supposed to do?" Laura asked, running fingers through her hair. "All right, look at this way. I have a friend who's been raped. What can I do to help her get past it and move on with her life?"

"The best thing you can do is just be there to listen. Don't treat your friend any differently than you do today. If she wants to talk let her but don't try to force conversations about it."

"And if she wants to destroy herself with drugs and alcohol?" Laura heard yet another sigh through the phone. "Come on, Jen. How am I supposed to keep her from going off the deep end with the booze and pot?"

"You can't. You just have to make sure you don't get so deeply involved that you become an enabler and make the problem worse. Maybe an Al-Anon meeting or two would be good for you."

"I need Al-Anon?"

"And why does that thought bother you so much?" Jenny asked. "If someone else's drinking is a problem for you, then you need Al-Anon."

"I don't need Al-Anon," Laura said adamantly. "I just wanted to know how to help Crystal."

"It's time to say goodnight, Laura," Jenny said. "Your stubborn streak is coming out and I'm too tired to fight with you about it. Remember tomorrow that she's the same person she was yesterday and the day before. If she doesn't do what you want when you want it and it bothers you, that's your problem, not hers. Be her friend, that's what she needs, not a superhero to fly in and rescue her. It's too late for that."

"Sometimes I wonder which of us is more stubborn," Laura sighed. "All right, all right. I'll try to keep what you said in mind but I still think there's something more I can do than just sit here and be a sounding board."

"Try being her friend."

"Hey, why did you call before? We were home but we were talking and I didn't think it was a good *i.e.* to get up and answer the phone."

There was a pause before Jenny answered. "I was concerned and just wanted to see if Crystal made it home okay."

"Uh huh. Doing a good job keeping friend and therapist separate, aren't you?"

"Hey, a good therapist can call the home of her patient if she's concerned."

"When was the last time you called a patient's home for anything other than to reschedule an appointment?"

"My secretary takes care of the appointments and I'm going to take the fifth on the rest of that question. Get some sleep. Goodnight Laura."

"Night Jen. Thanks for listening."

Hanging up the phone, Laura found talking with Jenny did little to slow down her racing mind. That doesn't help. There has to be a way to get her past this, there just has to. But how? Knowing that sleep was a lost cause, Laura sat up and slipped her feet into her slippers. I have to get that frying pan cleaned or those onions will be stuck there permanently. Stepping out of her room, Laura was torn between going downstairs and cleaning or checking on Crystal. That's silly. She's sound asleep and safe. Besides, I don't want to scare her or anything. As if it had a mind of its own, Laura's hand reached out and closed around the doorknob. I won't go in, I'll just open the door a little and see if she's sleeping okay. She could be having a nightmare or something.

The light in the hall provided little illumination in Crystal's room but the night light plugged into the wall did give enough for Laura to see that her roommate was indeed sound asleep, a light snore coming from her lips. Good. Satisfied that everything was all right, Laura made her way downstairs to spend the rest of the night cleaning.

Part 9

With the radio playing low, Laura quietly moved about the first floor, giving it a good cleaning right down to moving the table and chairs out of the way to mop and dusting all the woodwork. By the time the morning sun broke over the horizon, the kitchen and living room were spotless and once again up to Laura's standards. Hearing Crystal's alarm going off upstairs, Laura put the frying pan on the stove and retrieved a coffee mug from the cupboard. Reasoning that the previous day had been hard on her roommate, Laura was determined to at least get Crystal's day off to a good start. When the blonde came downstairs several minutes later, her hair still damp from the shower, she was greeted with a plate of scrambled eggs, toast and a steaming cup of coffee. "I thought you could use a good breakfast before your busy day," Laura said as she set the mug down on the table.

"Good morning to you too," Crystal said as she took her seat. "What time did you get up?"

"Actually I never went to bed. I think the night owl in me is trying to get out." Laura picked up her empty mug and walked over to the coffee maker. "I had a period once when I was writing my last book where I couldn't sleep at night for almost a month. What time do you think you'll be home tonight? I have some fresh sea bass I can defrost. Some lemon pepper and rice and it's a meal fit for a king."

"My lip looks better," Crystal said quietly. "I have to go to the club after work and see what's going on."

"I thought all you had to do was pick up your paycheck?" Laura asked as she took her seat at the table.

"I never said I was quitting, just that I would think about it. You know I make more an hour working at the club than I do working for Michael." Crystal pushed her fork through the scrambled eggs. "Maybe I can work at the club part time and keep both jobs."

"Nothing like burning your candle at both ends. Couldn't you find another job at the club besides taking your clothes off? Don't they have waitresses?"

"They didn't hire me to wait tables, Laura. My job there is to go out on stage and take my clothes off to music."

Laura tried not to let the disappointment show in her face. "I don't think working there is a good idea. Look what happened to you. Who knows what could happen if you go back."

"Well, I'm not going to know what's going on until I get there. For all I know, they replaced me and I don't have a job to go back to."

I can only wish, Laura thought to herself. "I'm sure Michael will give you extra hours if you need the money. He's good about things like that."

"I can make in one night of dancing with tips what Michael pays me for three days work. That kind of money is hard to pass up." Crystal drained her coffee mug. "We'll see what happens."

"What if I lowered your rent?" Laura knew she could never afford to lose the extra money that Crystal's rent gave but the *i.e.* of the blonde taking her clothes off for a bunch of horny men was even harder to swallow.

"No, the rent is more than reasonable. Speaking of which, you need to tell me what my half of the utilities are so I can pay you. I'm sure you've gotten some bills in." Crystal shoved the last forkful of *eg.* into her mouth. "The best time to hit me up for money is tonight after I pick up my check. Wait until tomorrow and I might have it spent already."

"Don't worry about it. I don't think your share is more than fifty dollars or so."

"Oh please. There's the lights and cable not to mention the phone. I'm sure I've made the water bill go up too."

"The complex takes care of the water bills and you never use the phone."

"I'm still responsible for half of the phone bill whether I use it or not," Crystal said, putting her fork down and pushing the plate away. "That was very good, thanks."

"You're welcome." Laura took a sip of her coffee, trying hard not to bring up the subject of the Tom Cat Club again. Finally it was Crystal that could stand the silence no longer.

"Look, I know you don't like the *i.e.* of me stripping

"

"No I don't," Laura agreed.

"But it's what I did before you met me and most likely it's something that I will continue to do. I may not be proud of it, I may not even like it most of the time but I can't walk away from the good money it gives."

"There has to be a point where the money isn't enough to keep degrading yourself like that."

"Well if there is, I haven't found it yet," Crystal said firmly. "It's legal and certainly a damn lot better than working the alley behind the place, that's for sure."

"I'll agree with you there," Laura admitted. "Can you at least promise that you won't do that, no matter how hard things might seem to be?" This time Laura earned at least the hint of smile from Crystal.

"I haven't done that in years and I have no intention of doing it again. Those days are behind me."

"And maybe someday stripping will be behind you too."

"Maybe. Right now I have to finish getting ready for work and write in my journal before Doc has my head." To Laura's surprise, Crystal reached out and clasped her hand. "Listen, about last night

"The hand retreated and the blonde looked at her empty plate. "Thanks for listening. I

I've never told anyone all of that before."

"Anytime you need to talk, I'll be here."

"I would have thought you'd be shocked and disgusted by all of that."

Laura reached out and cupped Crystal's chin, forcing the blue eyes to meet her own. "Yes, most of what you told me was shocking but as for disgust, any that I have is toward your father, none of it toward you." She let go of Crystal's chin, pleased that the young woman didn't turn away but continued to meet her gaze. "It takes a great deal of courage to survive something like that and even more to share with someone about what happened."

"I didn't tell you everything, you know. I figured if I told you everything at once that you'd go screaming out of the room."

"That'll never happen," Laura assured. "Anything you want to tell me, I'll listen."

"You know, sometimes you remind me of Patty. She was really patient with me."

"I'm sure if I met Patty that I'd like her too." Laura looked at her watch. "But you're right, you need to get ready if you're going to get to work on time. You'd better not have left that bathroom a mess."

"Your definition of a mess and mine are totally different but I made sure the towels were picked up and the sink was wiped down."

"Close enough. I'll clean it later." Laura watched Crystal rise to her feet. "Can you at least call me and let me know what time you're coming home tonight?"

"Sure." She reached for her plate only to have Laura stop her.

"I'll get them. You go get ready."

The parking lot of the Tom Cat Club was blissfully empty when Crystal pulled in. After a quick check in the rear view mirror to make sure everything was in place, she walked over to the side door and pressed the doorbell. With three hours before the first show, Crystal was certain she would be able to find Rick in his office.

"Crystal!" the burly bouncer said in surprise when he opened the door.

"Hi Randy. Is Rick in?"

"Yeah, he's up by the bar talking to someone. Come on in." The muscle bound man stepped aside and waved his hand. "So when are you coming back?"

"I'm not sure. I have to talk to Rick first."

"Well talk nice. He's been a really fucked up mood the last couple of weeks. Sara and Monica both quit on him and he just found out today that someone's been helping themselves to the liquor. We're about ten cases short."

"Oh great," she moaned. Rick was hard enough to deal with when things were going well. When they weren't, he could be almost impossible to reason with.

"Just use your charm," Randy said. "After the week he's been having, seeing you will brighten up his day."

"We'll see about that," Crystal said nervously as she headed down the hallway.

Rick wasn't at the bar but rather in his office by the time Crystal found him. His door was slightly ajar, allowing her to see him pouring over the club's ledgers. Well here goes nothing. "Rick?" she called, knocking lightly on the open door.

"Crystal, what a pleasant surprise," he said, pointing toward a chair. "Come in and have a seat. I was hoping you'd stop by. I paged you a couple of time but you never returned my call. I was beginning to think we'd never see you again."

"I told you I'd be back after my lip healed," she said as she took a seat.

"Well you look great. Maybe put on a pound or two but you can take that off with no problem, I'm sure. After all, can't hide anything in a G-string, can you?"

Um, no I guess not. Rick, about coming back to work

"

"Oh man, you have no *i.e.* how hard it's been lately," he continued, pulling a cigarette out of his pack and lighting it. "First Sara says her boyfriend won't let her work anymore and then Monica goes and has one of her little fits and quits on me. I'm telling you, you are a gift from heaven walking in that door."

Oh great. Lay it on, Rick. Deciding that if she let Rick keep on talking he'd have her on stage in ten minutes, Crystal took a deep breath and played the carefully rehearsed lines in her mind one more time.

"It's kinda late notice but I think I can get you in tonight for a set or two."

"Actually that's what I wanted to talk to you about."

"Well what? You did come to tell me you were ready to come back to work, didn't you?" The joviality he showed when she first stepped into his office was quickly disappearing.

"I'm not sure I want to do the shows anymore."

"Not sure? What the hell are you talking about?" Rick leaned forward, making the large desk separating them seem smaller and smaller. "What else are you going to do?"

"What about waitressing? Or even helping behind the bar?"

"Men don't pay good money to see your ass sitting behind the bar, they pay it to see you up on stage taking it off for them."

"Well maybe I'm tired of taking it off for them, maybe I want to do something else."

"Crystal Crystal Crystal," he said in the most condescending tone she had ever heard. "Look, if you're trying to hustle me for more money it isn't going to work."

"It isn't about the money."

"Well what is it about then?" the manager asked angrily. "I don't need another waitress or bartender. What I need and what I hired you for is to put your ass up on stage and wiggle that fanny for whoever is holding the almighty dollar, you got that?"

"Yeah I got it, Rick," she replied just as angrily. "You know you're not the one up there. You don't have to put up with those greaseballs trying to touch your body. I'm sick of it."

"So why the fuck are you here, huh? You find yourself a new boyfriend or something and he's putting you up to this?" Rick smiled, thinking he had figured out the problem. "I'll tell you what. You can tell your boyfriend you're waitressing if that makes you feel better."

"I don't have a boyfriend. That's not why I'm doing this," Crystal insisted, lighting a cigarette. "I'm just tired of stripping."

Rick let out a long breath and leaned back in his chair. "When you first came here, you didn't have a dime to your name. I don't think you even had a car then." He shook his head. "I don't know. I'm just trying to help you here. You're lucky to have a job like this. You know how many women would love to have a chance to be the star of the show?" With a heavy sigh, Rick opened his desk drawer and pulled out a manila folder. "I was going to save this for later but since you leave me no other choice

remember I told you I wanted to talk to you after the show that night?"

"Yeah?"

"I was going to offer you a chance to make some real money. Not the ones and fives you get here but twenties and fifties."

There's only one way to make that kind of money, Crystal thought to herself.

"I'm not planning on working here forever, answering to some corporate head in New York. I have this side business going and I was planning on giving you a chance to make some serious cash with it."

"Rick, you know I don't

"

"Relax, babe. I'm talking about a few private parties, not standing out on the corner. And hey, if you want to make a few extra bucks that I don't know about, fine by me so long as the customer is satisfied."

The walls began to close in and Crystal quickly turned her head to see the door still ajar. Knowing that escape was easy, she forced herself to stay in her seat. "I can't do that Rick. You know how those kind of things turn out and I won't turn tricks for you."

"Babe, we're not talking about turning tricks, just a few private parties. You're blowing this all out of proportion." He put the folder back in his desk. "But if you want to waste the rest of your life working the club, go ahead. Six months from now I'll be able to quit this place and be a self made man."

you want to jump on the bandwagon you're welcome to but don't think for a minute that you're going to do anything here but be a kitten on stage." Rick stood up, his six foot frame towering over her seated position. "So it seems you have a choice to make sweetheart. Get your ass in costume and get to work or hit the streets. The choice is yours."

Now the office was definitely too small for her comfort. Crystal had hoped to come back part time if she couldn't get a job off stage but Rick made it clear that was not an option. She also knew that if she came back to work that Rick would never leave her alone until she was working his private parties, entertaining visiting businessmen in the horizontal fashion. Well Laura, I guess you got your wish. "If I can have my last paycheck I'll get out of here."

"Should have known you'd make the stupid choice," Rick said, walking over to the file cabinet. "You aren't going to find anyone who'll pay you what I was paying you to shake those tits around. I can't believe you're giving up this chance." He removed an envelope from the file cabinet and threw it on the desk. "Don't even think of trying to file for unemployment."

"Don't worry, I wasn't planning on it." Crystal rose to her feet and picked up the envelope containing her last paycheck. As she turned around, she found herself face to chest with the intimidating club manager.

"You know out of all the girls I've seen come in and out of this place you were the one I could have made something out of but you always thought you were too good, didn't you? Look but don't touch Crystal, right?" He stepped closer, forcing her to step back until she felt the unyielding hardness of the wooden desk behind her. "Someone should have taken you over their knee long ago and taught you some manners."

"Let me go, Rick," she said, trying to step to the side. The angry man quickly moved to cut off her escape.

"Maybe you just never had a man to teach you how to behave, is that it?"

"Rick, please, just let me leave." Crystal's heart pounded furiously in her chest.

"Hey Rick." Randy pushed the door fully open. "The delivery guy is demanding payment before he unloads. Something about our bill being too high. Sorry, didn't know you were busy."

"I was just leaving," Crystal said, moving past Rick and practically shoving Randy out of the way in her haste to escape. She felt a sense of relief when she reached the long hallway that led to the side door. Does he think I'm stupid or something? No way in hell I'm going to work for him anymore. I was stupid to think he'd do anything to try and help me. She pressed down on the crash bar and was greeted by the stark gray of the parking lot. Reaching her car, Crystal found her hands were shaking as she tried to get the key into the lock. It didn't help that she kept looking back at the door fearing Rick would come bursting forth. By the time she was inside her car, Crystal found tears she couldn't explain running down her cheeks. I have to get away from here. I have to get home. Not bothering to wipe her eyes, Crystal put the car in gear and sped out of the parking lot.

The townhouse was dark when Crystal arrived home, save for the single bulb illuminating the front door. A quick look around showed no sign of Laura's Jeep. Wonder where she went, Crystal thought as she made her way up the short walk to the door.

Tossing her keys on the table, Crystal walked into the kitchen, feeling around in the dark for the light switch. Looking at the door of the refrigerator, she frowned to see no note waiting for her. "She'll probably be back in a minute," she said to the empty room. What did she say she wanted for dinner? Some kind of fish. Wrinkling her nose at the thought, Crystal opened the freezer and pulled out a frozen pizza. What the hell, at least it's edible. A few minutes later the pizza was in the oven and Crystal was sprawled out on the couch. With the television remote in her hand, she began flicking through the channels. Boring, crap, boring, oh God not the Waltons. No, no, naw, Oh please that is so fake. Who the hell is going to believe two guys can beat the hell out each other like that and still be standing? Sixty channels and there's nothing on. Settling on a game show, she tossed the remote on the coffee table and looked at her watch. Where the hell are you? I thought you were going to be home tonight.

Two hours later the pizza was long gone and Crystal found herself sitting in the quiet living room staring at the clock on the wall. The television had been shut off in favor of the radio which proved to be no more entertaining and it also found itself shut off. Come on Laura, where are you? Her question was answered when she heard the sound of a key being put into the lock on the front door. Crystal jumped to her feet and opened the door. "Where the hell have you been?" she demanded.

"Hi there. I didn't expect you to be home yet," Laura said, her arms full of white plastic grocery bags. "I figured I'd get some shopping in. We're almost out of everything."

Crystal followed her roommate into the kitchen. "How long can that take? I've been home since seven."

Laura set the bags down on the counter and began putting the groceries away in the cupboard. "I go over to the super center near the interstate. They have the best prices but it usually is a mob scene there. Took me almost half an hour just to get through the checkout line." Laura peered into the bag. "I hope you like oranges. They were on sale so I picked up two bags "

"Forget the oranges for a minute," Crystal said. "You couldn't have left me a note? I had no *i.e.* where you were." Taking the jar of olives, she opened the refrigerator and carelessly tossed them on the shelf. "You bitch at me to make sure and let you know when I'm not coming home but you couldn't take two seconds to leave me a note?"

"I'm sorry but I didn't think you'd be home until later. You said you were going to the Tom Cat Club and I figured when you weren't home by six that you wouldn't be in until later," Laura said, neatly folding the empty grocery bags.

"Yeah well I've been here staring at the walls for the last two hours wondering where the hell you were. Give me those." Taking the bags of oranges, she walked back over to the fridge. "You'll be happy to know I'm not working at the Tom Cat anymore," she said, shoving the oranges into the

Bottom drawers.

"Yes, I am happy to hear that and easy on those. I wanted oranges, not orange juice."

"I had a rotten day at work and if one more moron insists on playing that damn rap shit I'm going to shove that frigging boom box down his throat. Then I go see Rick and he's his usual conniving asshole self then I get home and you're nowhere in sight." She jerked the pound of butter out of Laura's hand. To Crystal's annoyance, her roommate was smirking. "What the hell's so funny?"

"It's nice to know you care," Laura said, handing over the bottle of milk. "Did you eat?"

"I made a pizza but it tasted more like the box it came in. What about you?"

"Not yet. It's too late now. I'll just grab a snack."

"I thought you were going to make fish and rice or something like that."

"Sea bass and rice. I'll make it tomorrow night. The fish will keep." Laura handed over the last of the groceries and put the bags away. "So tell me what happened at the Tom Cat."

"Oh Rick was just being a jerk. Screw it. I hated working for him anyway. He's too sleazy." Crystal put the can of soup into the cupboard before heading for the sliding glass door. "I'm going out for a smoke."

Fall was definitely on its way. The temperature was dropping quickly, making the usually balmy evenings just a memory. A particularly cold burst of wind caused Crystal to shiver and she had to cup her hand in front of the lighter to keep the flame from going out before the cigarette was lit. I'll be damned if I'm coming out here in the winter. Guess I'll have to go up to my room if I want a smoke from now on. Ah fuck what a day. Slumping into the plastic patio chair, she casually tossed her feet up on the railing, crossing her ankles and leaning back so only two of the four chair legs were touching the deck. It was too dark to see anything except dark shadows cast by the light from the kitchen. Crystal took advantage of the darkness to brood over the day's events. Tomorrow we'll finish the seventh floor then I don't know what Michael will have me do. Shit, what if he doesn't come with something else? Naw, he's got to. He knows I need the job and he always smiles at me when he sees me. He'll find something else for me to do. Turning her head at the sound of the door sliding open, Crystal watched Laura step out onto the deck.

"Care for some company?" Laura sat down without waiting for an answer. "Are you sure you don't want something else to eat?"

"Naw, I'm all set. Not really hungry anyway." Crystal reached up with her free hand and rubbed her upper arm. "Damn it's getting cold out here."

"That's what happens when you live in the northeast. Summer leaves, Fall arrives and before you know it you're up to your hips in snow."

"Oh don't mention snow. That's the last thing I want to think about. That rust bucket of mine gives out practically nothing in the way of heat. I can let that thing warm up for half an hour in the morning and it wouldn't clear the whole windshield." Crystal reached out in the dark, feeling for the ashtray she knew was on the table. "Guess I can't ask for much for five hundred dollars. I'm lucky it moves at all."

"Jenny bought that Thing for five hundred too," Laura said. "It was her project for about a year. Every warm day she was out there playing Miss Mechanic. I can think of a dozen cars more interesting to restore than that orange monstrosity."

"I take it you don't like the square pumpkin on wheels?"

"It's more than just the car. I've gotten used to it by now but when she first got it we were having problems and Jenny using the kitchen sink as a place to clean her engine parts and tools didn't help the situation."

"So are you ever gonna tell me what happened between you two or is that going to stay some deep dark secret?" Crystal asked, withdrawing her feet from the railing and sitting up in her seat. Her curiosity was piqued and since Laura mentioned it she wasn't about to let the subject drop without trying.

"It certainly isn't a secret but it's also not something I like to talk about," Laura said. "Are you done with that cigarette? I'd rather talk inside where it's nice and warm."

After taking a quick detour to the bathroom, Laura and Crystal settled at opposite ends of the couch, both using the armrest as a backrest. "All right, so what happened?" Crystal urged.

Well

"Laura rubbed her face with her hands, taking a few extra seconds to focus her thoughts. "You have to understand that this happened about four and half years ago. It was for both of us our first serious long term relationship and I thought we'd be together forever no matter what. I had just released my third book and it was doing well in the lesbian circles. I even had a few write ups in the major lesbian magazines. I was getting a fair share of fan mail and I let my newfound fame get in the way of my relationship. The breakup was completely my fault." Laura looked away.

"What did you do? Doc seems like she'd forgive just about anything."

"Jenny is a very forgiving and understanding woman but she couldn't take having her trust violated the way I did it." Laura looked up at Crystal. "This isn't something that's easy for me to talk about. I loved Jenny very much and I still do. If I could go back and change what happened I would in a heartbeat." Laura face mirrored the guilt she felt in her heart. "But time isn't something I have any ability to change and once a trust is ruined it can't be restored."

"I don't get it," Crystal said. "You and Jenny both seem to be these 'deep in touch with your feelings' kinda people. You two couldn't have worked whatever it was out?"

"Apparently not," the writer said sadly. "We tried for about six months but we just couldn't get past it. Jenny waited until after Christmas to finally make her decision and move out." Laura shook her head sadly. "It was pretty much over by then anyway. Jenny was sleeping in the spare room by then anyway."

"Jeez, I guess you did piss her off."

"Infidelity will do that," Laura said. "I had a brief affair with a fan while I was in Colorado at a lesbian writer's festival."

"And you didn't think Doc would find out?"

"I didn't plan on it to happen. Well, I guess deep inside maybe I did. I knew Lisa was interested in me she had made it clear to me more than once that she didn't care I had a lover. I knew she was going to be there and I didn't say a word to Jenny about it."

"So when the cat's away the mice will play?"

"It wasn't like that," Laura protested. "I had plenty of opportunities before that to be with other women and I never ever took them up on the offer." The writer leaned back and ran her fingers through her dark hair. "This is going to sound so shallow but I let myself become attracted to all the attention and fawning Lisa was giving me. I worked for a year and a half on Moonbeam Mysteries and now I was getting my due for all that hard work. I was on the recommended lists and when I was at that conference I felt like a celebrity. That had never happened to me before. From the moment I walked into the hotel Lisa was by my side, getting me drinks, sitting next to me in every workshop, following me around like a puppy."

"Sounds more like a fox than a puppy," Crystal said. "So she wanted the great writer and she got you, hmm?"

"I didn't just open the door to my hotel room and rip all her clothes off. We were there for five days and it didn't happen until the last night."

"So how did Doc find out? Your guilty conscience?"

"No. That's probably what hurt her the most. She found out by accident. After I got home from the conference, Lisa wouldn't stop emailing me. I told her that it was a one time thing and couldn't happen again, that I was in love with Jenny, all of that. Sometimes I'd have four or more pieces of email from her a day. I finally stopped answering them hoping she'd get the message."

"And she didn't, right?"

"Oh, she got it all right. Lisa became angry when I wouldn't answer her emails and began calling here. I even called the phone company to change my number but before they could get it done Lisa had called while I was out and left a rather detailed message on the answering machine about what happened in Colorado. Jenny got home before I did."

"Oh boy," Crystal said, shaking her head. "You fucked up good, didn't you?"

"I most certainly did although I wouldn't use quite the same words to describe it."

"Of course not, Mary Poppins but that's what you did."

"Yeah it is. I messed things up horribly. I should have known something was up when I came home and all Jenny wanted to talk about was the conference. It was at least a month later and I never made the connection."

"So you pretended nothing had happened, right?"

"Exactly. Then Jenny played the message on the machine and I just about died. After lying to her there was no way I could minimize the damage that message caused. I think after that Jenny spent all her free time working on that Thing and I spent my time hiding up in the bedroom writing. We grew apart and it got to where we wouldn't even go to bed at the same time anymore." Laura looked away sadly and wiped her eyes. "But the night Jenny slept in the spare room instead of coming to bed with me, that was when I knew it was over."

"That really sucks," Crystal said quietly. "I don't know what to say."

"I've never really talked about it. Peter and Michael knew we were having problems but they made it a point not to take sides or get involved. Even

now Peter knows only the barest details about what happened." Laura shook her head. "But I guess it's all water under the bridge now. I live here and Jenny lives there. I suppose it all worked out for the best anyway. We're still very close as you can tell."

"Do you want her back?" Crystal asked, needing to satisfy her curiosity.

"I tried for quite a while after she moved out but now I think things are best the way they are. I think being single suits me." The dark haired writer leaned back, sinking further into the overstuffed couch cushions. "At least that's what my track record tells me."

"Yeah, I don't see any great romances in my future either," Crystal lamented. "You remember those colored cubes back when we were kids? The ones with different colors on each side and you had to get all the same colors on the same side?"

"A Rubik's Cube," Laura said. "Yes, I remember them."

"Sometimes I feel like one. Like I'm all mixed up and I'll never get everything back in order again." A mischievous grin came to her lips. "I used to break it apart and put the pieces back in the right way."

"I bought the book on how to solve them," Laura admitted. "I hated not being able to solve them."

"I bet you showed off to all your friends about it too, didn't you?"

"Me?" Laura feigned an innocent look. "I have no deep inner need for approval." The innocent face lasted for barely a second more before she broke into a smile. "Everyone who had one they couldn't solve knew to bring it to me. I could do those and the snake ones too."

"Figures. My friends came to me for cigarettes," Crystal said proudly. "Patty showed me how to get them. The bowling alley had a cigarette machine in the same room as the video games. I'd buy a pack for three bucks and charge my friends twenty-five cents per cigarette. That's how Patty and I had any spending money."

"Ah, you were the kind of girl my mother warned me not to hang around with," Laura said with a smile. "She thought keeping me away from the bad element would make me grow up to be a prim and proper military wife like her. Her best chance at grandchildren and I turn out to be a lesbian mystery writer with no intentions of parenthood."

"I'm sure the scrapbooks just open right up at our mother's places, eh?" Crystal said with a wry smile. She sat up straight and pantomimed opening a scrapbook. "Here's your mother showing off pictures of you graduating high school." The blonde pretended to turn the page. "Here you are graduating college. Oh what a catch. Brains and beauty. I bet she was thinking about your wedding as the next pages."

"Right down to the color of garter belt and order of songs," Laura agreed, assuming the same position and opening an imaginary scrapbook of her own. "She had it all planned for years. The only thing missing was the dashing young military boy to marry me off to. The best she could look forward to was a blessing ceremony Jenny and I had here in the back yard and I think she was madder that I didn't let her plan it than who I was committing myself to. She came to it but didn't take any pictures. Must have complained to me six times about the centerpieces not being symmetrical."

"Yeah, isn't it horrible how we manage to disappoint our mothers so much?" Crystal asked, turning the fake page. "Mine didn't even get a high school graduate. I can just imagine what she'd put in hers." Crystal shifted slightly and pretended to be her own mother opening a scrapbook. "Oh look, here's my Patty and Crystal with the police officer right after they were caught taking candy bars from Coulson's drug store. Oh, and here's my little angels with another nice police officer after they were banned from the mall for shoplifting."

"At least you were consistent," Laura joked.

"Yeah, she probably figured we'd be in jail by the time we were adults," Crystal said with a touch of bitterness in her voice. "Jail or shackled up with some useless drunk and a couple of kids like her."

"That's the wonderful thing about being an adult," Laura said gently. "We don't have to live up, or live down as the case may be, to our parent's expectations. Like it or not, we all disappoint our mothers at some point or another. Look at me, I may not be in quite the same position as you but I'm certainly not the devoted military wife that my mother thought I'd be. You think she proudly touts me to all her friends?" She shook her head. "Trust me, Mom talks about Bobby graduating and which college he's off to but she tries her damndest not mention me to her friends."

"Why? I mean, you have your degree and all. You're a writer and all that."

"A lesbian mystery writer," Laura clarified. "If she mentions that I'm a writer, they want to go buy the book and that's the last thing she wants to happen. You have to remember my parents are republicans. They're still not thrilled with the don't ask, don't tell rule."

"But I saw her here that day. She seemed happy with you."

"Oh she is for the most part," Laura said. "There's just certain things about my life that she doesn't like, my sexuality being number one of course. But it's not just that. Mom likes theater, I don't. She likes long boring trips to museums and art galleries. I'd rather go bowling or play softball. I'm not the daughter she imagined I would be and that's not always the easiest thing for a parent to handle. There was a time when she would find excuses not to stop over when Jenny and I were together but that was a long time ago. She's gotten past that and accepted me as I am, differences and all."

"Must be nice," Crystal said, shifting back into a more comfortable position on the couch. "I don't think my mother could ever accept me." Running her fingers through her blonde hair quickly, she added. "You know something? It's nice to know your life isn't perfect either."

Laura laughed. "Far from it, Crystal. I have problems just like you do, it's just that I have a different set. We're not so different."

"Like night and day you neat freak."

"You might be right about that, chimney stack," the writer teased back. "But I think I'll keep you around anyway." The comment earned Laura a rare full smile from her roommate. "Now there's something I like to see."

"Yeah well don't get used to it," Crystal growled playfully. "I wouldn't want it to get around and ruin my reputation."

Laura picked the remote up from coffee table and turned the television on. "I think there's a basketball game on tonight. You like women's college basketball?"

"I don't follow it or anything but if I see it on I might watch it once in a while," Crystal said, watching the channels flick by as Laura repeatedly pressed the button. When the dizzying pictures stopped, it was on the game. "I'm going to get something to drink. You want anything?" Laura asked as she got up.

"Beer but I think I'm out. You got any cola?"

"Just bought some. You want it straight or with that rotgut you drink?"

Crystal hopped off the couch and headed for the stairs. "I like my drinks with a little kick in them," she said. "Just get the glass, I'll take care of mixing it."

While Crystal was upstairs, Laura went to the kitchen. How much can she drink at this hour? Not more than a couple, I'm sure. She has to work in the morning. Humming a familiar tune to herself, Laura opened the cupboard and removed two glasses. So you were worried about me, hmm? I bet that's something you haven't done in a while. Laura was certain the walls Crystal had put up were quickly crumbling. While she hasn't meant to reveal the reason behind her breakup with Jenny, Laura realized it was important for her to be able to reveal her secrets to Crystal if she wanted her roommate to continue to share personal things. A brightly colored glass almost completely hidden in the back of the cupboard caught her attention. I forgot all about this one, she thought as she pulled it out and looked at it. Perfect. This has to make her smile. Putting away the glass she originally chose for Crystal, Laura filled both with ice and was just opening the soda when her roommate came down the stairs.

"Sorry, took me a minute to find it," the blonde said, walking into the kitchen and unscrewing the top of her bottle. The distinct scent that followed her told Laura the real reason she took so long.

"No problem. I'm surprised you can find anything in that disaster area." Had to take a couple of hits while you were up there, didn't you? One of these days you'll see you don't need that to protect yourself. I won't hurt you. "So what kind of a drink is this one going to be? A little taste of the grain or is this a killer knock you under the table drink?"

Crystal laughed and began pouring the whiskey into the glass. "This is an average end of the day, sit back and relax drink."

"Oh, three parts whiskey, one part soda?"

"Don't forget about the *i.e.* that has to count too," Crystal said.

"Yes, you're right. Three parts whiskey, one part soda, one part *i.e.* Better?"

"Now you've got it." In reality Crystal only poured the equivalent of one shot of liquor into her drink, barely lightening the dark color formed by the cola. Laura wondered if the drink would have been stronger had she not teased Crystal about it but decided it didn't matter. They were going to relax on the couch and watch an exciting game of basketball together.

"Cute glass."

"You like?"

"It's nice." Crystal held up the yellow glass and looked at the brightly colored words proclaiming that she should smile because someone loves her. "Corny but nice."

"Well, it's true," Laura said, taking the soda bottle from her. "Whether you like it or not, people do love and care about you."

"Uh huh," Crystal said dubiously, picking up Laura's glass. "I'll take these out there."

"Make sure you use a coaster."

Crystal feigned shock. "I wouldn't dream of doing anything else," she said.

"Sure, I believe that," Laura said. "I believe that as much as I believe you have some prime swampland in Florida for sale."

"Cheap too," Crystal replied. "I'll make you an offer you can't refuse."

An hour later the two empty glasses sat on coasters on the coffee table, the ice having long since melted away. The score was lopsided, the visitors taking advantage of the home team's bad luck when their leading scorer fouled out early in the game. Laura found her attention often wandering away from the television to a more interesting subject. Crystal's hair was in need of a visit from a brush, the blonde locks going in all different directions. Laura's gaze moved down, studying the delicate curve of Crystal's nose and the soft full lips. There was no doubt that her roommate was beautiful but Laura found herself looking at Crystal in a different light than she had before. Stop that, Laura, she admonished herself. She's straight and you're not interested. Too much baggage, remember? At that moment the buzzer sounded and the television station broke to a commercial. Out of the corner of her eye Laura noticed it was a public service announcement about helping to prevent child abuse. Crystal's eyes never left the

screen but even in profile her face told volumes about her feelings. Laura watched as Crystal's jaw clenched and her lips were drawn to a thin line. Still trying to protect that little girl inside, aren't you? The urge to reach over and hug Crystal grew but the writer remained steadfast in her seat. That's the surest way to send her running upstairs. She'd probably think I was hitting on her. As the commercial ended and the game resumed, Laura noticed happily that the sad look on Crystal's face disappeared. That's right, you just forget all about that and enjoy the game. "That Henderson girl is something, isn't she?" Laura asked.

"She can play basketball, that's for sure," Crystal replied. "I can't believe she made that one shot."

"The one where it kinda wobbled there on the hoop for a few seconds before it went in?"

"Yeah."

"That was a good shot," Laura agreed. "She was back past the half court mark when she threw that one."

"They're not going to win at this point. There's only two minutes left in the game."

"You're right. I'm sure Peter will be disappointed. He always has some money down on them." Laura leaned forward and picked up the remote. "So what do you want to do now? I think there's a late movie on ten."

"I have to get to bed," Crystal said before giving a long yawn. "Hopefully Michael has something else for me to do. We're almost done with the demolition."

"I'm sure he does," Laura said, pressing the red button and shutting off the television. "I didn't realize how late it was. You're going to be dragging tomorrow."

"Naw, I'm used to being up late and having to work without a lot of sleep." Crystal stood up and gave a cat like stretch, drawing her hands high above her head. "Are you going to bed?"

"I don't have to be up early. No, I'll probably turn the computer on and get back to work on my never ending story." Laura stood up as well and walked over to the light switch. "I need to do some research online for the next part."

"You think tomorrow you can show me that GED site you mentioned?"

"Sure. I'll find it tonight and bookmark it so we'll have it right there for you."

"You'll do what to it?" Crystal shook her head. "Never mind. It must be computerese or something."

Laura flipped two switches, shutting off the living room lights and turning on the ones over the stairs. "One of these days I'll get you so you're not afraid of computers."

"Yeah right," Crystal said dubiously. "Right after I win the lottery."

Laura started up the stairs behind her. "I hear that works better if you buy a ticket once in a while." When they reached the upper landing she reached out and touched Crystal's arm. "Wait a minute." Laura finished climbing the stairs and stood face to face with her roommate. "I just wanted to say good night," she began, pausing to choose her words. "You know if ever you want to hang out and watch TV with me, you're more than welcome."

"Thanks." Crystal looked away uncomfortably, then looked back. "I don't want to

"

"Don't worry about it," Laura said, cutting off the younger woman. "You're good company and we had a nice chat." She seriously doubted Crystal ever had a close friend she could relax and just talk about everything and nothing to. Probably no one since her sister, Laura mused. "I'll find that GED site and we'll look at it together tomorrow night." She gave Crystal's arm a friendly squeeze. "Don't you worry. We'll get you through it with flying colors, I promise. I used to tutor my friends when I was in school and I helped them all raise their grades." Not releasing her hold on Crystal's arm, Laura stepped forward until they were only inches apart. "How do you feel about a hug goodnight?" Sensing Crystal's ambivalence, Laura took the initiative and wrapped her arms around the younger woman. Unlike the first time they had hugged, this time Laura was aware of the feminine body pressed against her own. Crystal was warm and soft, her shirt smelling faintly of sweat and cigarettes. "Sweet dreams," she whispered softly, smiling when she felt Crystal's arms go around her to return the embrace. See? It's okay to let someone in, Laura thought, giving one last squeeze before stepping back. "Sleep well."

"You too," Crystal said, reaching for her door handle. "Don't stay up too late."

"I won't," Laura promised. "I just have a few things to care of and then it's off to bed for me."

The 'few things' turned out to be not only finding the GED site but printing out all the different practice tests on each subject. While waiting for each page to print, Laura looked over the different questions. Oh that's easy. Everyone knows a triangle with all equal sides is an equilateral. This will be easy for her. Another test came out of the printer. Ugh. I forgot about history. I never could get those dates straight. She looked at the printed list of dates the exams would be given locally and felt certain that Crystal would be able to pass the test by the Spring. Hmm, six months to learn three plus years of high school stuff? Maybe by summer. The printer made one last pass before a beep announced that the print job was finished and the last page fell into the tray. Laura picked up her empty cup and stared at it as if that would make it suddenly fill with tea. Oh well, it's too late to bother making any more, she thought, setting the cup down and looking at the screen. Okay Laura, you've spent the last two hours printing out just about everything there could possibly be on this site. She looked at the nearly half a ream of paper neatly stacked next to the printer. Better not show

Crystal that whole stack at once or she'll go screaming the other way. Heck, if I saw a stack like that of stuff to study I'd run the other way too. She absently clicked on the search icon, bringing up her favorite search engine. There was another matter involving her roommate that might be solved via the internet and despite the late hour Laura felt compelled to research it.

"Come on, let's see just how much information is out there," she said as she typed the words Finding Missing Persons and clicked the send button.

Part 10

"Good to see you," Jenny said as she held the door open. Crystal stepped through and into the therapist's office.

"How ya doing, Doc?" she asked, heading for the recliner.

"I'm well, Crystal. You seemed to be enjoying yourself at the game Saturday. Where do you want me to sit?"

"Uh," Crystal looked at the couch, then at the bean bags. "I dunno." Shrugging her shoulders, she looked at the therapist. "Wherever you want, I guess."

"You don't like to make decisions, do you?"

Crystal watched Jenny take a seat on the couch, the ever present clipboard on her lap. "So what are we gonna talk about today?"

"Is there something you feel the need to talk about?" Jenny asked. "You said last week you weren't sure what you were going to do about your job at the strip club. Have you made your decision?"

A smirk came to Crystal's face. "Oh yeah," she said. "I'm not there anymore and Michael showed me how to screw drywall into place and he told me he'd show me how to use a paint sprayer when it came time."

"Sounds like he has confidence in your ability to adapt to change and learn new things." The knowing smile on Jenny's face caused Crystal to frown. She hated that look because she knew what it meant.

"I dunno. I guess."

"That's what it looks like to me. You're very good at adapting, aren't you?"

"So you tell me, Doc," Crystal answered in a bored tone. She looked down at her fingernails. "I need the job so I learn how to do things. It's not a big deal." Feeling stiff, Crystal moved out of the chair and flopped down on the floor, her back pressed up against the red beanbag. "I do what I have to."

"It's one of your survival skills," Jenny pointed out, moving forward until she was barely on the e.g. of the e.g. of the couch. "You've learned to adapt to what's going on around you."

"Yeah, whatever," Crystal said, staring up at the ceiling. "I did what I had to do in order to get by. This time it's something useful. I can always put down on a job application that I know how to handle a screw gun. That'd look a lot better than saying I'm a stripper."

"That is true but you have gained skills from all your experiences, good and bad."

"It all goes back to that, doesn't it Doc?" Come on, give me a break. Crystal allowed her eyes to follow the jagged pattern of the acoustical tiles. "Everything we talk about goes back to my rotten childhood and the shit that happened to me."

"I didn't say anything about your childhood this time," Jenny pointed out. "You know what tells me? It tells me something is on your mind."

"I dunno."

"I told you no excuses, no bullshit in here." Setting the clipboard on the couch, the therapist pulled the blue beanbag over and settled herself on it. "You can stare at the ceiling all night if you want to."

Great, Crystal thought to herself. You're a real pain in the ass, Doc. Fine. "I told Laura." She knew Jenny was waiting for elaboration. "I

I told her what happened when I was a kid."

"And how did telling her make you feel?"

Crystal didn't have to turn her head to feel the therapist's eyes upon her. She continued to stare at the ceiling. Shrugging her shoulders, she used her familiar defense. "I dunno."

"I dunno is not an answer. Try again. When you first began to tell her, how did you feel?"

"Nervous," Crystal admitted, shifting her position to put her hands behind her head. "When I started, I was worried she'd freak out and not want to talk to me anymore or something."

"And when you realized that wouldn't happen?"

Crystal swallowed, wishing now she had made herself something to drink when she arrived. "It felt

I dunno, good I guess. She didn't look at me weird or anything. I don't think she did anyway. I didn't really look at her too much when I was talking." She looked over at Jenny, thinking back to what Laura had told her about their breakup. "She talked to me too about things." Crystal paused. "I guess that made me feel good too."

"How did it make you feel to share your story?"

Crystal looked at the ceiling again. "It was scary at first. My heart kept pounding, like I was worried he'd come in and catch me talking about it or something." Taking a deep breath, she let it out slowly and gathered her thoughts. "She just let me keep talking and talking, no matter how stupid I sounded. You know what the best part was?"

"What?"

"She believed me." Crystal shifted again, leaning her elbow on the beanbag and looking at Jenny. "No matter what I told her or how I said it, Laura believed me."

"You will find as you fill your life with healthy people there will be people you can trust. Friends who will believe anything you tell them and won't judge you. Those are the ones you need in your life. Not the toxic people."

"You mean my old friends."

"As you grow up your friends change. Growing up is not something that happens when you turn eighteen and become a legal adult. Throughout your life you will find what I call the special friends."

"Like Laura," Crystal said. "After that talk with her, I feel like I can tell her almost anything."

"It's a good feeling to build trust with another person, isn't it?" Jenny asked.

"It felt good to tell the truth about what happened." Crystal was only willing to give a little, feeling a speech about trust coming up. To her surprise, Jenny had a different idea.

"And every time you tell your story to another person, you take some of that load off your shoulders. You lessen the power it has over you."

"It doesn't have any power over me. I'm in total control," Crystal protested.

"You are, are you?" The annoying smirk returned. "When was the last time you rode an elevator alone with a man and not had a panic attack? When was the last time you had a good night's sleep that wasn't drug or alcohol induced? We haven't even begun to look at any sexual dysfunction that might be going on." The words hit home and Crystal knew it showed on her face. She scowled and looked away but her therapist and friend continued to talk to her. "You haven't had control over anything except how to stuff your feelings away by whatever means possible. Whether you want to admit it or not, you act and react based on your experiences and until you let go of the past, you can't move forward. Crystal, I want to talk to you about joining a group that meets here on Tuesday evenings."

"A group?" What the hell are you talking about? Sitting up and turning to face Jenny, Crystal gave the therapist her full attention.

"There are a group of women who meet here every week to talk to each other about their feelings and experiences. It's for survivors of rape and sexual abuse."

"You're kidding. Sit in a room with a whole bunch of strangers and tell them about what happened?" Crystal shook her head vehemently. "Not a chance."

"What about that scares you?" Jenny asked. "Every woman in there is a survivor just like you are."

"Not a snowball's chance in hell, Doc. No way, no how."

"You could just sit there and listen. You're not obligated to say anything. The only thing is that the same rule applies to group as it does to our sessions. No drugs, no alcohol beforehand. Many of these women are in recovery from substance abuse as well." Jenny stood up and walked over to the couch, picking up her clipboard before sitting down on the leather cushion. Crystal's eyes followed her progress, wondering what the therapist was up to. She got her answer. "Do you remember what you wrote in your journal

" Jenny looked down at the composition book and checked the date. "Friday night?"

Crystal's eyes widened as she tried to remember what she had written. The journal had become her nighttime ritual done while having her last cigarette before bedtime. Very often she would forget that Jenny would be eventually reading it and just let her mind flow with thoughts and feelings transcribed to the paper by her hand. "I um

I try not to think about you reading it when I'm writing."

"I see that," Jenny said. "You say some very powerful things in here but what keeps striking me over and over again in your writing is the need you have to feel like you belong somewhere."

"Huh?" Without thought Crystal moved forward, taking up Jenny's old position on the blue beanbag next to the couch. "I never said that."

"You didn't?" Jenny held her finger against the page. "Right here and I quote 'sometimes I feel like I'm looking in on the rest of the world' and back here

" The pages were flipped. "You wrote quite a bit this day. Let me find it

oh yes, right here. You wrote 'I feel like I'm all broken and no one can help me get back together again. No one understands'." Crystal could only nod, the truth there in her own messy handwriting. "I want you to take the next step, Crystal," Jenny said softly.

"I'll think about it," Crystal said, resting her elbows on her knees. "I'm studying for the GED at night too so we'll see."

"You are? You didn't tell me about this. When did you start that?"

"Laura found a web site with all this information and stuff on it. She printed out all these tests and has been having me take them so we can see what I need to learn," Crystal said excitedly. "I've been doing better than she thought I would."

"Laura's helping you?"

"Yeah. She's playing teacher, grading my tests and all that." Crystal tried to figure out what the odd look on Jenny's face meant but before she could the therapist stood up and walked over to the vacant beanbag.

"That's very good," Jenny said. "It's a step in the right direction. You should include writing about that in your nightly journals. You haven't mentioned it at all."

"I wrote about it in last night's entry but you haven't had a chance to read that one yet," Crystal said. "I was pissed off because I couldn't remember all these formulas Laura keeps trying to make me learn." She shook her head. "I don't know, Doc. Sometimes I think I can do it and other times I think I'm an idiot and I'll never learn it."

"It's very common to have self doubt, especially with something that seems such a high goal. I've had doubts myself when I was in school."

"You did?"

"Of course. Everyone has doubts, Crystal. The goal is to face your doubts and continue on. If you fail once, that doesn't mean you'll always fail. Remember we talked about learning from your life experiences? Your mistakes as well as your successes?"

"Yeah, I remember," Crystal said grudgingly. "I feel like I'm going in twenty different directions and I'm not sure which one to take."

"And when you feel like that, what do you do?"

"Besides heading for the nearest bar or my pipe?" Crystal said only half jokingly. "I dunno. I guess I talk to you or Laura."

"I suggest you do more of the latter and less of the former."

"I thought you weren't going to nag me about my drinking?" Crystal asked, mentally preparing herself for a lecture on drinking.

"I'm not

yet," Jenny said. "I just made a suggestion, just like you going to that meeting on Tuesday."

"No. I don't need to be around a bunch of women all talking about the bad things that happened to them."

"I'm pretty sure just going won't kill you," Jenny said. "I promise you don't have to say anything if you don't want to but I strongly recommend you attend it, even if it's just one time. Just try it."

Crystal grumbled under her breath, not wanting to keep the topic going but not wanting to admit defeat either.

"Enough of that for now. You feel like talking about your journal?"

"Not really but I don't suppose that matters, does it?" Crystal said, sinking down into a comfortable position against the beanbag.

"That's the spirit," Jenny said sarcastically. "So Thursday you went into great lengths about your tenth birthday. Why don't we start with that?"

When Crystal returned home, she found Laura in the kitchen, mouthwatering smells wafting through the air. "Hey there. It smells great," she said, hanging her keys on the appropriate hook lest they have another talk about the proper uses for a entry table. Hefting the bag in her hand, Crystal made her way into the kitchen.

"About five more minutes and everything will be ready," Laura replied, closing the oven door. "I thought garlic bread would be better than biscuits."

"Fine with me." Setting the bag down on the counter, Crystal reached inside it and pulled out a bottle of beer. "Man, what a day. It took half the day to figure out where the chargers were for the cordless drills and then I had a hell of a session with Jenny a little while ago."

"How did it go?" Laura held her hand out for the bottle cap then motioned at the kitchen table. "Let's sit while we're waiting."

"It was brutal," Crystal sighed, sinking into the padded chair. "She wants me to join some group of women that sit around and talk about what's happened to them."

"Well if she feels it will help

"

"How can that help me? Listening to them will only make me think of my own stuff and what good is that?" Shaking her head, Crystal brought the

bottle to her lips. "I'm trying to forget about what happened to me, not relive it," she said before tipping the bottle and taking several long swallows. "That's not even the worst of it. She got me talking about some of the stuff I put in my journal." Looking up, Crystal saw Laura looking at her patiently. "I forget sometimes when I'm writing in there that she's gonna read it. I put in a bunch of stuff about how I felt when I was a kid and she wanted to talk about it."

"She wanted you to talk about it, you mean," Laura said. Crystal nodded, surprised to feel her roommate's hand cover her own on the table. "She's not kidding when she says talking about it will help make it feel better."

Crystal continued to look at the hand resting atop her own. "Maybe but it's not something I feel all that good about, you know?" She withdrew her hand, curling her fingers around the brown bottle. "She had me almost to tears at one point. I even picked up one of those spongy balls and threw it, can you believe that?" Shaking her head, Crystal took another drink. "Next thing you know she'll have me hitting a punching bag and visiting my 'inner child' or something stupid like that."

Laura stood up and leaned over until her lips were near Crystal's ear. "Nothing is stupid if it helps," she said. "I'll check on the chicken." The writer turned and walked over to the oven, leaving Crystal to her own thoughts.

Nothing is stupid if it helps, huh? Cute Laura, real cute. You know you sound like her sometimes? Crystal looked at the woman whose back was facing her. Sometimes you do but other times you're just like an old friend that I can trust to tell anything to. Crystal was so lost in thought that she missed the phone the first time it rang.

"Can you grab that?" Laura said. "I've got the roasting pan."

"Sure." Not one for using the phone, it took Crystal a second to figure out where the ringing was coming from and pick it up. "Hello?"

"Laur?"

"Um, no

this is her roommate." Crystal could barely hear the male voice over the background noise. "Who's calling?"

"Is she there? It's her brother Bobby. I need to find her right away." It was then Crystal realized the background noise was that of a hospital intercom system.

"Yeah, hang on a second," she yelled into the phone. "Laura, I think it's your brother. You'd better take it."

Laura set the roasting pan down on the cooling rack and wiped her hands on the dishcloth. "It's Bobby?"

"I think so." As she handed over the phone, Crystal felt a sense of dread. She could only watch helplessly as Laura took the call.

"Hello? Bobby? Speak up, I can barely hear you. Where are you?" The loss of color in Laura's face confirmed Crystal's suspicion. "What happened? What? Wait, I can't hear you." There was only a momentary pause. "Bobby, just stay there. I'm on my way. No, don't call the rest of the family. I'll call them if we need to. Yes, just stay right there. I'm on my way." Laura shut the phone off and gripped the side of the counter.

"Is it your mother?" Crystal asked.

Laura nodded, obviously trying to maintain her composure. "I um

she

he's not sure what happened." She shook her head. "I have to get there."

"Do you want me to drive you?" Crystal offered, taking the phone and hanging it up. "I don't think you should be driving yourself."

"They're at the Med Center."

"Near the bypass. I know where it is." Crystal glanced at the stove, making sure everything was shut off. "I'll grab my keys."

"Wait." Laura reached up and took her set of keys off the hook. "Let's take the Jeep."

"Good idea, at least it's legal," Crystal said, taking the keys from Laura's hand. Oh man, her mom is sick. What am I supposed to do? Putting her arm awkwardly around Laura's back, Crystal gave her roommate a quick squeeze. "It'll be all right, Laura." To her surprise, Crystal found herself buried in a firm hug, Laura's arms wrapped tightly around her.

"I don't know what to do," the distraught woman's words were muffled. "When Dad Mom took care of everything."

"Shh. Let's just get there and find out what's going on, okay?" Crystal guided Laura toward the door. I'll call Jenny from the hospital. She'll know what to do. I'm no good at this comforting stuff. But Jenny wasn't there at the moment. It was just her and Laura. I can't let her go through this all alone. Unsure what to say, Crystal remained quiet as they got to the Jeep. Once Laura was in the passenger seat, Crystal made her way around to the driver's side. "Well, this should be interesting," she said as she put the key in the ignition. "I've never driven one of these before."

"Crystal?"

"Yeah?"

"I don't care if you speed this time," Laura said quietly.

"I'll get you there as fast as I can," Crystal promised, turning the key and smiling as the engine came to life. Must be nice not to worry if the damn thing will start up each time, she silently mused as she backed the Jeep out of its parking space and headed for the medical center.

It took only a few minutes for Crystal to maneuver her way through traffic and reach the entrance ramp for the bypass. "If we go this way we'll save about ten minutes with the traffic," she said, hoping for a response from Laura but none came. Well I guess we take the highway then since there's no objections. As she followed the curve of the entrance ramp, Crystal pressed down harder on the gas pedal, curious how fast the late model vehicle could go. "Do you want to listen to the radio?" She looked over just in time to see Laura shake her head. "You feel like talking?"

"About what?"

"Anything." Crystal shrugged. "Doesn't matter. Whatever you feel like talking about."

"I can't think about anything but Mom right now."

"That's okay. Tell me a story about you and your mom." Crystal glanced at the side mirror before pulling into the left lane and passing a package van. "Tell me anything."

"I remember when I fell from my bike and broke my arm. I came in the house and Mom took one look at me and knew something was wrong. I didn't have to say a word." Laura sniffled and reached into her pocket, retrieving a handkerchief. "She always knew when one of us was hurt."

"Yeah?" That's it, Laura. Keep talking. Don't think about what might be at the hospital. Crystal half listened, putting most of her attention on the traffic ahead of her. She was at least twenty miles over the limit but the exit she needed was still several miles away. Silently praying for the cops to be more interested in donuts than speeders, Crystal took the chance and pressed down even harder on the pedal.

Fortunately for all concerned, the police did not take notice of the speeding Jeep. Crystal even managed to find a parking space near the emergency entrance of the hospital. She had barely shut off the engine when Laura bolted from the vehicle and dashed to the entrance. "Hey, wait for me," Crystal called, freeing herself from the seat belt and running after Laura.

Eighteen year old Bobby Taylor sat on one of the orange plastic chairs in the waiting room, looking forlornly at the floor. His blond hair was tousled about his head and when he looked up and saw his sister, Crystal saw the puffy red rimmed eyes. Damn, this isn't going to be a good one, she thought to herself, stepping aside as the siblings ran into each others arms.

"What happened?" Laura said, her hands gripping Bobby's. "Did she have a heart attack?"

"I don't know. The doctors are in with her now. I can't believe this is happening," he said. "We had breakfast together and everything seemed fine. Well, she seemed a little tired but not like really tired or anything." Bobby sat down again. Laura sat down next to him and motioned for Crystal to take the empty seat next to her.

"Did she ask you to bring her here?"

Bobby shook his head. "No. I thought about having them take her to Saint Thomas but the ambulance guy said the Med Center was closer. I'm glad you're here, Sis. I don't know the answers to half of the questions on those forms."

"Don't you worry about it. I'll take care of them," Laura assured. "So go on. What happened?"

"She said she was tired and wanted to lay down before the news came on. I went in to wake up around six and that's when I saw her all puffed up like that. I couldn't understand what she was saying so I called 911."

"You did fine," Laura said, putting her arm around the young man's shoulders. "Has the doctor said anything yet?"

"He asked if I was the only one here for her, had me sign a few forms then went back in there. I told him you were on your way."

Crystal saw the opportunity to help. "Laura, why don't I go let the doctor know you're here?"

"I'd better go find him," the writer replied, rising to her feet. "Can you stay here with Bobby?"

"Sure," Crystal said. "Are you sure you're okay to do this? You want me to call Jenny?"

"Let's not call her until I know what's going on," Laura said. "I'll be back in a few minutes."

Once Laura left the room, Crystal stood up. "I'm going outside for a minute."

"I'll go with you," Bobby said. "I've been stuck in here for two hours now. Fresh air sounds like a good idea." Standing up, he towered a good four inches over her.

"I don't know how fresh the air will be, I'm going to have a cigarette," she said.

"You got an extra one?" he asked. "I left mine at home and I could really use one right about now."

"Does Laura know you smoke?"

"No. Mom doesn't either unless she does and hasn't said anything yet." He pressed the button to open the double doors. "Please tell me you smoke menthol."

"Light menthols." Crystal reached into her pocket and pulled out her battered pack. Laura knows you smoke even if you don't think she does, she thought to herself, remembering the conversation she had with the writer the day of Bobby's graduation party. What the hell. He's eighteen. If he wants to smoke I'm not going to stop him. "Help yourself," she said, holding the pack out.

Bobby took the cigarette and fished his lighter out of his pocket. "Thanks." He held out the lighter and waited until Crystal's cigarette was burning before lighting his own. "Oh, that's much better," he said as he exhaled. "I was going nuts in there all by myself."

"I bet. A couple of years ago a bunch of us were bar hopping and the guy driving got in an accident. We were at the hospital for almost six hours." It was Crystal's only adult experience with hospitals and most of it was a drunken blur. "He only had a broken wrist."

"I should have brought Mom's purse," he said as he walked over to the decorative half wall that lined the e.g. of the hospital's everlasting garden. Crystal followed and sat a foot away from him.

"You can't be expected to remember everything at a time like that."

"I should have, though." Bobby stared off at the parking lot. "When I got here they wanted her insurance card and they wanted to know if she was allergic to anything. I don't know any of that." He took a long drag, making the end of the cigarette burn a bright orange. "I'm the man of the family now and I don't have a clue how to handle this."

"Has this ever happened before?"

Bobby shook his head, his profile barely visible beneath the sodium lamp. "When Dad had his heart attack no one was home. Laura was in college and I was at school. Mom said she came home from shopping and found him in the chair." Bobby continued to gaze out at nothing. "Laura was on her way home by the time I found out what happened. The two of them handled everything."

"You were pretty young then, weren't you?" she asked.

"Eleven. But I was so upset I just spent most of the time crying." He flicked the half finished cigarette into the darkness. "I guess I always figured they'd both be around to take care of everything. Look at me. My mother is dying and I have to call my sister for help."

"You don't know she's dying," Crystal said although from the little she had heard the comment might not be far off the mark. "And you did take care of your mom. You're the one who called the ambulance." She heard the snuffle and instinctively inched closer to Bobby. "What if you hadn't been there?" Crystal received another snuffle as an answer. "I know what it's like to have an older sister."

"You do?"

"Yeah." Dropping her cigarette to the ground, Crystal watched it slowly burn away. "I used to always depend on her to take care of everything but then one day she was gone and I had to take care of myself. I know what it feels like." Why am I telling him all this? Looking over at him, Crystal realized her answer. Because I know how he's feeling right now and he's Laura's brother. When she had been scared and alone, no one was there to help her. "I understand," she said softly. "You want another smoke?"

"Not now, thanks," he said, pushing himself off the half wall. Crystal hopped down and began walking with him back into the hospital. Reaching into her pocket, she pulled out her pack and mentally guessed how many cigarettes she had left. Maybe half a pack. Deciding he probably didn't smoke as much as she did, Crystal pulled four cigarettes out of the pack and nudged his arm. "Here. In case you want one later." She held her hand out and smiled slightly when he took the offering. "Just don't tell your sister I gave them to you," she added.

"No prob," he said, tucking the cigarettes into his shirt pocket. "Thanks."

Crystal nodded and followed him through the brightly lit entrance. As they turned the corner she saw Laura standing in the hallway talking with a man that Crystal assumed was the doctor. When Bobby saw them he ran down the hallway to join them. "I think I'll wait in here," Crystal said to herself, stopping at the entrance to the waiting room. She was about to go in when she saw Laura and Bobby turn and walk toward her. "I hope it's good news. "How is she?"

"They're admitting her," Laura said. "Let's talk in here."

They settled into a corner of the waiting room, moving the chairs so they formed a triangle. As Crystal took her seat, she noticed a change come over Laura. The dark haired woman sat straight up in her seat, her face betraying little emotion. When Laura spoke, it was in a very controlled tone. "They're calling in a cardiologist."

"Did she have a heart attack?" Bobby asked, leaning forward in his seat.

"No," his sister replied. "Doctor Stevens said it was pulmonary edema. She filled up with fluid. They have her on an IV and he said she has to stay here for a few days." Laura looked around quickly, then at Bobby. "You didn't bring Mom's purse?"

"No," he said. "I didn't think about it. The only number I knew by heart was yours."

Laura stood up and walked over to the table covered with magazines. "We have to call Aunt Elaine and Mom's doctor. I'm sure his name and number are in her address book." As she spoke, Laura's hands were busily straightening out the mountain of magazines. "I need her papers. They're in the top drawer of the file cabinet in the den. That's where Mom kept all the insurance and important papers."

"I'll go get them," Bobby said. "Can I take your car? I rode in the ambulance with Mom."

"Are you sure you're up to that?" Crystal spoke up for the first time. "I can drive you over if that would make it easier."

Laura stopped her frenzied stacking for a moment and looked at the two of them. "That's a good idea. Bobby, you can always drive Mom's car back here and Crystal can follow in mine. I'll make a list of the things you need to bring." She looked around again. "I need something to write with

Crystal, there's a daily planner in the glove compartment. Would you get it for me please?"

"Sure." Anything to help. Crystal stood up and felt her pocket to make sure the keys were in there. "I'll be right back."

Walking out to the car gave Crystal some much needed private time to think. While she had only a bare understanding of what was wrong with Laura's mother, she knew it was something serious and things would be crazy for the next few days. She'll probably want to call Jenny to come be with her. She's better at that stuff than I am. When she reached the car, Crystal unlocked it and quickly found the planner. Better make sure there's a pen in there in case she needs to write something down. Undoing the snap and opening the planner, Crystal confirmed there was both a pen and a pencil nestled in their appropriate slots. Should have known with her. As she went to close the glove compartment, Crystal noticed a roll of quarters. She might need those for phone calls or coffee from the machine. Shoving the roll into her pocket, Crystal locked up the car and headed back into the hospital.

When Crystal returned, she found Laura and Bobby in the waiting room. A quick glance around showed all the magazines neatly stacked on the various tables. "I've got it," she said, holding the planner up. "I grabbed a roll of quarters you had in there too in case you needed it."

"That's a good idea," Laura agreed, rising to take the planner and roll of change. The writer immediately opened the planner up and flipped through the pages. "I have to call Mom's sister and let her know. I should stop the newspaper delivery while she's here too." She paused briefly to rub her eyes. "There's so much to do. Someone has to take care of Bobby and the house."

"I can take care of myself," the eighteen year old protested. "I can pick the paper up morning and handle the mail."

"Let him help," Crystal urged softly. "You'll have enough to do."

"No, he shouldn't have to do it. I can take care of everything," Laura said, finding the page she was looking for. "I'd better get started on the phone calls."

"I'll take him home and we'll be back in a little while, okay?" Crystal asked. "Or do you want us to wait until Jenny's here?"

"No, you two go on ahead. I'll be all right."

While Laura sounded confident, Crystal wasn't so sure. She debated about insisting but in the end nodded her head. "Okay, we'll be back in a little while." The trio walked into the hallway, stopping when Laura reached the pay phone. Unsure what prompted her to do so, Crystal reached out and squeezed Laura's shoulder. Moving closer, she leaned over and whispered in the writer's ear. "We won't be long." She felt a hand clasp over hers.

"Thanks," Laura said. "I appreciate it."

"Of course. That's what friends are for, aren't they?" Crystal asked, giving the shoulder one last squeeze before nodding at Bobby. "Ready?"

"Yeah. Oh wait." He patted his pockets and frowned. "I was in such a hurry I didn't grab my keys."

"The one with the green ring on it is the key to the front door," Laura said. "I never gave back my key when I went off to school." The dark haired woman turned and began feeding quarters into the pay phone. "Don't forget the papers from the file cabinet."

"We won't," Crystal said, turning to follow Bobby down the hall.

The walk to the parking lot was a quiet one, broken only by Crystal pointing out where the Jeep was parked. Once inside with the engine running, she pulled out a cigarette and lit it. "I guess Fall is starting early, hmm?"

"Seems like it," Bobby replied. "Guess I'd better dig out my letterman jacket out soon."

"What did you letter in?" she asked, keeping an eye on the traffic as she pulled out of the parking lot. "Which way do I go?"

"Take a left. I lettered in track just like Laura."

Crystal followed his direction and was soon zipping in and out of traffic. "I didn't know she was into sports."

"I don't think Laura really cared if she made varsity or not. I think it was just one of those things she did because her friends did."

"Is that why you did it?"

"Well, I'm not the genius like Laura. She could get the straight A's. I hoped to be good enough to get an athletic scholarship. I just squeaked through. What about you?"

Noticing the drops beginning to appear on the windshield, Crystal fumbled around for the wiper controls. "Um

I didn't finish high school."

"Oh," he said. "I didn't know. Too much of a drag, huh?"

"Something like that," she said before taking a long drag of her cigarette. "I was never one for following the rules."

Bobby snorted. "Funny you hooking up with my sister then."

"Crystal wasn't sure how much he knew about his sister's life. "We're just roommates."

"You know that's what Mom used to call them when I was younger. Like I wouldn't understand my sister is gay." Bobby laughed. "I figured she was with living with Jenny all those years and bringing her every time she came over to the house. I was probably about fifteen when I saw her and Jenny arguing and told them to kiss and make up. Laura looked like she swallowed a hot pepper and Jenny just laughed at her." He sighed and leaned his head against the glass. "Sometimes I think Laura thinks I'm still a little kid." He fished into his pocket and pulled out one of the cigarettes Crystal had given him.

Crystal debated about correcting him again about her relationship with Laura but decided it didn't matter at the moment. "Do I turn up here somewhere?"

"Go up about three more lights and take a right." Turning onto the side street, Crystal followed the twists and turns until Bobby pointed at the house at the top of the hill. "That's it right there. You can pull into the driveway but don't block the garage. My car needs a new clutch but Mom's is working fine."

After handing the keys to Bobby, Crystal followed him inside the old house. She stopped just inside, her eyes following the multitude of framed pictures lining the walls. Guessing they were school pictures, Crystal looked at the image of a young Laura with pigtails and braces smiling at her. Her gaze moved from one picture to another, watching the years go by and Laura transform from a young tomboy to a high school beauty and then a college graduate. Looking at the opposite wall, Crystal noted that equal space was given to Bobby's photos. He opened a set of double doors. "Here's the den," he said. "The file cabinet is unlocked. I'll go get Mom's purse and keys."

"Okay. I'll get the papers for you." Crystal watched him ascend the stairs before she entered the den and walked past the large wooden desk. As she had been instructed, the file cabinet was unlocked. Several thick folders filled the top drawer. Unsure which one was needed, Crystal grabbed them all. Now how to carry all of these, she thought to herself. A quick look around revealed a battered briefcase sitting next to the desk. It took some maneuvering to squeeze all the folders into the case. There. Now I know I've gotten the folder she needed. Hearing Bobby still wandering around upstairs, Crystal took a minute to look around the room. A lighted display case in the corner carried a variety of ribbons and trophies. Looking closer, Crystal realized most belonged to Laura's father but one shelf contained a neatly organized stack of trophies all proclaiming Laura Taylor as the winner of one tournament or another. I wonder if my mother ever kept anything we did in school. On the wall next to the trophy case, Laura's high school and college diplomas sat proudly in ornate frames. Surrounding them were other awards Laura had won growing up. Crystal reached out and touched the wooden frame of the high school diploma. Look how proud they are of you, Laura. Even though you don't live here anymore they have all your things still out. They probably have your finger-paint handprint buried in a box somewhere. Standing alone in the den, Crystal swore she could feel the love the Taylor parents had for their children. You're very lucky, the blonde thought to herself. Hearing Bobby heading down the stairs, Crystal picked up the briefcase and switched off the lamp.

"Did you find them?" he asked as he reached the bottom of the stairs.

"Yes, I think so. I just grabbed all the folders in the top drawer." Crystal held up the briefcase.

"Good idea. I think that was Dad's case."

"Oh, I didn't know," Crystal apologized.

"Don't worry about it. It's not like we can't use it or anything," he said. "I was going to take it with me to college if Mom didn't get me a new one. Bring it. It might make Laura happy to see something of Dad's."

By the time they returned to the hospital, Laura was sitting in the waiting room hunched over her planner. "We're back," Bobby said, announcing their arrival. He walked over to an empty chair and slumped down, emotionally drained from the day's events.

"Good." Laura looked up, surprised by the briefcase in her roommate's hand.

"I didn't know which folder you wanted so I brought all the ones I found," Crystal explained, handing over the case. Laura set the case down on the table and opened it.

"It would have been okay if you looked inside the folders to see what they were," the writer said as she did just that. "This one is all my important papers and I bet that one is Bobby's papers. A quick check confirmed her guess."

Yeah well

I figured you'd be better off doing that," Crystal said as she pulled a chair over. It's not my place to snoop through your family's personal papers. Laura opened one of the bigger folders and began looking through the papers. "Do you want some hot chocolate or coffee from the vending machine?" she asked, looking for something useful to do while they were waiting.

"No, not yet thanks," Laura said without looking up from her task.

"Did you get a chance to see your mother?"

"Briefly. She's resting right now." Laura paused and looked up at Crystal. "I see why Bobby was so worried. She looks fifty pounds bigger than she usually is. The doctor said it was the fluid building up in her system."

"But they can take care of it, right?"

"They think so. He said it depends on how she responds to the IV they're giving her." Laura tried to sound hopeful but there was something in her voice that made Crystal believe her roommate was putting on a front.

"Did you call Jenny yet?"

Laura shook her head. "I called the relatives but told them to stay home until we know more. I figured if things got worse then I'd call Jen. You are going to stay here with me for a while, aren't you?"

Crystal nodded, secretly pleased that Laura wanted her there. "I'll stay as long as you want me to." She was surprised to feel the writer's hand touch her knee.

"Thanks," Laura said. "I'm glad you're here." She looked back at the papers and exhaled loudly. "I'd better get back to this. Fortunately Mom has everything organized. These first papers are about her insurance. The stuff in the back is things from her lawyer and about the house." Several papers were removed from the folder and set aside.

"Hey, why don't you sit back and relax for a few minutes?" Crystal offered.

Laura shook her head. "I can't. I have to take care of everything." She looked over at her brother. "I can't ask him to do this."

"He's not a baby, you know," the younger woman reminded. "He's going to college in a few weeks."

"That's right, he is," Laura said. "What am I going to do with her? Someone has to stay with her now." She began shuffling through the papers. "Does her insurance cover home care?"

Crystal felt woefully out of place. Hospitals were places she visited rarely and dealing with the possible loss of a parent was not something she ever worried about. She briefly let her mind wander, wondering if her parents were still alive. The thought naturally led to wondering about her older sister and Crystal was lost in another time when Laura tried to get her attention. "I'm sorry, what?"

"I asked if you minded getting us something from the machine? I think I could really use something with zip right about now."

"Hot chocolate or coffee?"

"Hmm, caffeine and sugar or chocolate, caffeine and sugar. I'll take the hot chocolate."

"You got it," Crystal said, standing up. "Bobby, do you want something?"

"Coffee with cream and sugar would be nice," he said.

"I'll be right back," she said softly to Laura, taking the offered handful of change. I'd better get a coffee for myself too. Looks like it's gonna be a long night.

Crystal had been correct about it being a long night. It was after two and Laura showed no sign of wanting to leave the hospital. Several times the Taylor siblings went in to check on their mother while she quietly kept watch of their belongings in the waiting room. Bobby was now sound asleep across several chairs while Laura continued to look through the family papers. "Maybe you should go home and get some sleep," Crystal said after noticing yet another yawn from her roommate.

"No. I want to be here in case Mom wakes up."

"They told you she probably wouldn't wake up until tomorrow."

"They've been wrong before. I don't want her to wake up and be alone," Laura said firmly.

"At least give yourself a break from doing all that stuff with the papers." She pushed a steaming cup of hot chocolate toward Laura. "You let your last cup get ice cold before you drank it. Sit back for a minute and have some before this one gets cold too." Deciding that subtle wasn't working, Crystal picked up the cup and held it in front of her roommate. "Drink."

"I don't

"Drink," Crystal repeated firmly. Her persistence worked as Laura finally took the cup and drained half of it before setting it on the table.

"Happy?"

"Yes." And it was true, Crystal was happy Laura was listening to her. It was an odd role reversal for the blonde and she hoped she was capable of being the supportive friend Laura needed. Looking over at the sleeping teenager, Crystal remembered the talk they had in the car. "Laura, you know Bobby can take care of whatever needs to be done with your mother's house while she's here."

"I can handle it," the dark haired woman said without looking up from her stack of papers. "He needs to worry about getting ready for college."

"What does he need to do? He already graduated from high school. He's been accepted wherever it is he wanted to go."

"Union. He got accepted at Union."

"Union. So what else is there for him to do? Pack up the things he needs for his dorm room? No reason why he can't pick up the morning paper and the mail. He probably does that for your mom already. He's not a little boy anymore."

"It's not for him to take care of things." Laura picked up her pen and scribbled a note in her planner. "I have it all under control."

"Whatever." With a sigh, Crystal gave up and leaned back in her chair. You're too stubborn.

Where is

"Laura flipped through the papers. "I can't find it."

"Find what?"

"Mom's other policy. She's supposed to have supplemental insurance to cover what the Army benefits don't. I can't find it but it has to be here somewhere."

"Are you sure she has it?"

"Of course she does. When Dad retired he bought the policies himself. Maybe it's in the folder with his papers." Laura opened the briefcase and pulled out the other large manila folder. "This is why Bobby can't do it. He wouldn't have thought about the supplemental policies."

"I wouldn't have thought of it either," Crystal admitted.

"Well I should have thought of it earlier but

oh, there it is. Right in Dad's folder." Laura shook her head. "I can't believe Mom didn't think to put this in her folder."

I can't believe anyone would even have a 'folder', Crystal thought. She was surprised when Laura put the pen down and sat back, fully expecting her roommate to spend all night looking through the mountain of papers.

"Well that's done. I just have to give the billing office the policy numbers and Mom will be all set as far as that goes."

"Do you want to go check on her again? I'll stay here with him and keep an eye on your stuff."

Laura couldn't suppress a yawn. "Oh, sorry about that. What time is it?"

"Almost two thirty."

"Good thing tomorrow's the weekend. I'd hate to think of you trying to get up early and go work a full day for Michael."

"If I had to, I would," Crystal said. "Go on. If he wakes up I'll tell him where you are."

Laura gave her a grateful smile. "Thanks. I won't be long."

"Take all the time you want." Crystal watched her roommate leave the waiting room and head down the hall before putting her feet up on the small table and settling herself into as comfortable a position as she could on the hard plastic chair. Another reason I hate waiting rooms. The chairs suck. Crystal yawned and rubbed her eyes. I could go to sleep right now. I can't believe how tired I am. I'll just close my eyes for a few minutes while she's gone. She was sound asleep within minutes.

Crystal awoke to the feeling of someone shaking her shoulder. "Crystal? Crystal, wake up."

"Huh?" Sitting up and rubbing her eyes, it took the blonde woman a few seconds to remember where she was. "Oh, sorry Laura. I guess I dozed off."

"I figured you would. I was gone almost an hour."

Crystal moved her legs to let Laura get to her own seat. "How's she doing?" she asked, still trying to come to full wakefulness.

"She was awake for a little while." Laura looked over at her sleeping brother. "She looks so weak and she couldn't stop coughing. The doctor said that's a good sign."

"What? That she's coughing her brains out?"

"Actually yes. He said it meant the medicine they're giving her is working. It's getting the fluid out of her lungs and that's what's causing the coughing."

"So that's good, right?"

"That's what they tell me." Laura sighed and shook her head. "She says she feels too sick to be poked and prodded by the doctors. They're moving her up to CCU in a few minutes."

"CCU?"

"It's the cardiac care unit. They want to keep for a few days until they get the fluid out and they want a cardiologist to look at her." She looked over at her brother. "He was just a kid when Dad died."

"He's not a kid now," Crystal said. "He understands what's going on."

"I know," Laura conceded. A polite cough caused them both to turn and see a tall man dressed in a white lab coat. "I'll be right back." Laura walked out into the hall and spoke with the man, returning a few minutes later. "They said we should go home now and come back tomorrow. I'd better wake him up. He can sleep on the couch."

"You mean you're having him come back to our place?"

"He probably doesn't want to be alone right now," Laura reasoned. "At a time like this, the family should stick together."

I wouldn't know about families sticking together, Crystal thought dourly. But I guess that's what a normal family does. "So we'll go home and you'll come back tomorrow?"

"As soon as I wake up. I don't want Mom to be here all alone too long." Laura sank into her seat and exhaled slowly. "I still can't believe this is happening." Her fingers quickly wiped away an errant tear that began to fall down her cheek. "S-she's only fifty four."

Crystal realized immediately that the control Laura had been showing all evening was slipping. Unsure what else to do, she held her arms out and accepted the distraught woman into an awkward embrace. "It's gonna be all right," she whispered, slowly rubbing her hand up and down Laura's back. She felt the body against her begin to shake as the tears came more freely. Oh no, she's really crying now. "Shh, come on now, Laura. It's all right. Your mom's gonna be okay. Shh." Crystal wasn't sure who initiated the rocking motion but she made no effort to stop it. She used her right hand to hold the dark head close to her chest while her left hand continued to slowly rub Laura's back. "It's gonna be okay." Crystal knew how to deal with angry people but upset people were a different matter. And when the upset person was one of her best friends, Crystal felt even more helpless. "I don't know what else to do," she whispered, pressing her cheek against the top of Laura's head. She felt the wetness of tears soaking through her shirt and the almost painful grip of Laura's hands around her back. What the hell do I say? Long minutes passed as she continued to hold Laura in her arms. Spotting movement out of the corner of her eye, Crystal looked up and noticed Bobby sitting up and rubbing his face. He looked at her sister worriedly. "She's okay," Crystal said, easing the young man's concern. "Laura?" she whispered. "Laura? Bobby's awake now." As she expected, Laura released her hold and sat up, trying hard to regain her composure.

"Sorry," Laura said, reaching into her pocket and pulling out her handkerchief. "I guess I just needed a good crying jag." She wiped her eyes and looked at her brother. "They're moving Mom to CCU and said we should go home and come back tomorrow."

Bobby yawned and stood up, raising his arms high above his head to stretch after being cramped across the hard plastic chairs for so long. "Ahh, I didn't think I would fall asleep."

"Don't worry about it," Crystal said. "I zonked out for a few minutes too." She absently wiped at the wet tear stain on the front of her shirt and looked at Laura. "You ready?"

"Yes," Laura said, putting most of the papers back into the briefcase and closing it. "I just need to stop at the desk and give them Mom's insurance information and then we'll be all set. Bobby, do you want to swing by the house and pick up some clothes or do you want to wait until tomorrow to do that?"

"Pick up some clothes? I can stay at the house while Mom's here," he said firmly, looking to Crystal for support.

"Um, Laura? Can I talk to you for a minute?" Tugging lightly on the writer's elbow, Crystal led them to the far end of the room. "He doesn't want to stay at your place," she said in a low tone. "Why not let him stay home alone?"

"He's too yo

" Laura stopped herself, seeing the sparse blonde stubble that had formed on her bother's chin.

"He's not too young," Crystal reminded her.

Laura sighed and reluctantly nodded. "All right." Turning to Bobby she said "I'll see you tomorrow then. Make sure you lock all the doors and don't let anyone outside the family know you're home alone."

Bobby cocked his head and gave his sister a look. "I'm not twelve, Sis."

"I know you aren't." Walking over to him, Laura put her hands on his shoulders and smiled thoughtfully. "But no matter how old you get, you're always going to be my little brother and I'm going to worry about you, okay?" she asked, reaching out and mussing up his already unkempt blond hair. "But you win. I'll see you tomorrow. Drive carefully."

"I always do."

"That's why you already have one speeding ticket. I managed to avoid one of those until I was twenty."

"What can I say Sis?" he said with a grin. "I guess I just developed faster than you did." He pulled the keys out of his pocket. "I'll bring Mom's afghan tomorrow."

"Good idea. I'm sure she'd be happy to have something familiar here with her." Laura patted his arm and watched her younger brother turn and leave the waiting room. Turning to Crystal, she nodded and they too headed home.

Daylight started to lighten the sky outside, seeping into Crystal's room as if to taunt the young woman with the fact that sleep refused to come to her. With an annoyed groan she rolled over in her bed and reached for the ashtray and cigarettes sitting on the night stand. Might as well give up on that, she thought sourly as she put the cigarette to her mouth and lit it. After coming home from the hospital, Crystal had spent the better part of an hour sitting on the couch while Laura moved about the living room, cleaning things that didn't need to be cleaned and talking nonstop about her mother. Good thing she's into keeping the place clean or it'd never get done. Damned if I'd spend the time polishing the legs of the coffee table. It's not like dust ever has a chance to settle around here with her constant cleaning. Still despite the lack of sleep Crystal felt surprising good. Laura's mother was ill but while serious, it seemed to be something the doctors were confident could be brought under control. Taking a long drag, Crystal stared

at the abstract painting on the wall. I still don't see what Laura sees in that thing. The painting appeared to be nothing more than several brightly colored brush strokes forming a starburst pattern. A five year old could do something like that. Crystal continued to gaze at the painting while her cigarette burned down, reflecting back on the events of the previous evening. She understood the need to drive Laura to the hospital, her roommate being far too upset to have been able to do it herself but was confused Crystal was that Jenny was never called. She had been certain that Laura would have called her ex-lover for support immediately. It's not like I was that much help. I was just

there. Crystal shrugged, not understanding how that could possibly have helped Laura. Still, she was glad that she had been able to give at least some comfort to her roommate.

Stubbing the cigarette out in the ashtray, Crystal left the bed and headed for the bathroom. If I can't sleep I might as well get up. As she made her way to the bathroom, she wondered idly if Laura would remember there was a softball game today. Not that we'll be going. I wonder what time she wants to head up to the hospital. Then the thought came to her that perhaps Laura wouldn't be needing her company today. Quickly taking care of her most urgent need of the morning, namely getting rid of all the coffee and hot chocolate she had drunk the night before that now sat uncomfortably in her bladder, Crystal made sure the door was locked and turned on the shower. Pulling back the clear shower curtain, she noted once again how it never seemed to cloud up with soap scum. I bet she scrubs it down after each shower, she thought as she stepped under the warm spray.

Knowing Laura was sound asleep and likely to stay that way for a while, Crystal indulged herself with an extra long shower, letting the warm drops of water cascade down her body. While enjoying the steady spray, Crystal's curiosity got the best of her and she reached for the multi-head shower nozzle. A quick turn and the water changed from its gentle spray to a hard pulsating burst. "Ooh," she yelped, reaching up to protect her nipples from the stinging water. "I won't do that again." Turning around to let the water massage her back, Crystal enjoyed the luxury for a few minutes more before rinsing off and stepping onto the fuzzy blue mat. The shower had been invigorating but she learned her lesson and vowed not to play with the nozzle again

at least not while it was pointed at sensitive areas of her body. "Shit." There was no need to look around for her to know that in her tired state she had forgotten to bring any clean clothes in with her. The panties she had worn into the bathroom were now draped over the shower rod. At least Laura's still sleeping. Throwing the towel over the shower rod, she ran the brush through her hair and studied her reflection in the mirror, noting with some disappointment that her breasts didn't appear to be quite as perky as they usually were. Great, I'm starting to sag at twenty five, she thought glumly. Makes sense, they're too big to stay up there forever. Leaning forward, she peered into the reflection, looking at her forehead and around her eyes for wrinkles. Finding none and feeling rather foolish for even looking, Crystal quickly finished brushing her hair and teeth. In the process of returning the toothbrush to its holder, Crystal's eyes fell upon the shell shaped soap dish. "Ah hell," she muttered. She had somehow managed to splash some water onto the dish and the three rose shaped scented soaps nestled within it. Jerking her towel off the rod, she quickly dried the soaps and dish, taking care when putting the soaps back that the now rounded side faced down. Why the hell does she have soap in the bathroom if no one is supposed to use it? If she just wanted the scent she could have put an air freshener in here. It was just another tolerable annoyance that the roommates shared. Laura didn't like the clear shower curtain or the way Crystal used the shower rod as a drying rack for her underwear and she didn't like the 'do not use' soaps, the fuzzy seat cover or the hard as sandpaper toilet paper her dark haired roommate insisted on buying. You have your quirks and I have mine, Crystal thought as she placed the last soap in the dish. It's just that mine aren't as annoying as yours. Tossing the towel haphazardly over the shower rod, she opened the door and glanced to the left to make sure Laura's bedroom door was shut before she darted bare assed back to her own room.

Part 11

Exhausted from being up most of the night not to mention being scared out of her mind over her mother, Laura wasn't surprised when she finally opened her eyes and saw it was almost noon. Wiping the sleep from her eyes, she rose and ungracefully made her way to the bathroom. She absently pulled the damp towel and underwear off the shower rod and draped them over the sink, the action now part of her morning routine since Crystal was the first to get up in the morning. Turning the faucets until the shower was just the right temperature, Laura noted the pulsating bursts and looked at it thoughtfully, realizing who had changed the pattern. That's the first time she's ever done that. A horribly prurient thought crossed her mind. And just what were you doing in here? Setting the dial to spray, Laura stepped under the water and reached for the soap, a silly smirk still on her lips.

Half an hour later, Laura made her way down the stairs. Having not bothered to use the hair dryer, her dark hair hung limply around her head, stopping just below the jaw line in the front and the base of her head in the back. A pleasant aroma passed under her nose and she smiled. "Hmm, what smells so good?" she asked, knowing Crystal was in the kitchen. Sure enough, Laura was answered by a bright and chipper voice.

"I found a waffle maker and the instructions was on the side of the box," Crystal said, giving Laura a cheerful smile. "I heard you turn on the shower and figured you might be hungry."

"Thank you very much," Laura answered, eyeing the stack of waffles sitting on the plate and realizing that she was indeed hungry. "I can't remember the last time someone made me breakfast." After giving it some quick thought, she realized none too happily that Jenny had been the last one to spend the night and surprise her with breakfast. That had been over three years ago and Laura briefly wondered where the time had gone. Locked upstairs in front of that computer and writing all the time, a voice inside answered.

"Your sex life's as dull as mine, huh?" Crystal said with a smirk, drawing Laura back from her thoughts. "Dunno why with all those women fawning over you." Crystal turned away to remove the next set of waffles from the hot iron.

Laura looked at her thoughtfully. "Guess I haven't really been looking for a while." Leaning an elbow against the counter, she reached for the coffee pot, pouring the hot liquid into a nearby mug. "I haven't thought about it in a while either." Lost in her thoughts, Laura didn't notice when Crystal went to the refrigerator and returned with the container of milk. "Oh, thanks," she said when finally realized, holding her mug out. "That's enough."

"Sit down and relax." Crystal motioned at the table. "I'll take care of it. The paper's there." Laura nodded and walked over the table, settling down into the chair and bringing the mug to her lips. Watching over the brim of the mug, Laura let her thoughts go in random directions while she gazed upon the woman moving about the kitchen. After their time of living together, Laura understood more and more about her beautiful but troubled roommate. She understood now that Crystal was very much a loner who felt the pain of loneliness profoundly. When the blonde first moved in, Laura saw the hard shell of a woman raised on the streets. Time showed the layers hidden beneath the shell. At times Laura glimpsed the confused teen reaching out for protection from those that should have been doing the protecting and her heart ached for the young girl who never received the love she so desperately needed. But last night and this morning were showing yet another layer to Crystal. Laura felt the caring in the way she had been held during her crying jag, the gentle hugs that seemed to happen just when she needed them, the coffee and waffles waiting for her. When Crystal set the plate and syrup on the table, Laura stood up and wrapped her arms around the younger woman.

"Thank you so much for being there for me last night," Laura whispered into the blonde hair. "It means a great deal to me and I just want you to know I appreciate it." Pulling back slightly but maintaining her hold, Laura looked into blue eyes intently. "Not everyone can spend most of the night sitting around in a hospital just to give a friend moral support."

Crystal's small smile seemed forced and Laura found the young woman couldn't maintain the direct eye contact. "Yeah well," the blonde said as she pulled away, "You've been there for me. It's the least I could do. You'd better eat before they get cold."

Seeing her friend's discomfort, Laura gave Crystal a reassuring smile and resumed her seat. The writer barely got the first bite into her mouth before her eyes closed and she gave a happy moan. "Oh, this is good." Another bite. "I didn't realize how hungry I was."

"Well, you didn't have dinner last night," Crystal pointed out, shaking her head when Laura pointed at the stack of waffles. "No thanks. I've been up for a while and grabbed something earlier. Oh, by the way, you had a phone call."

"Oh yeah?" Laura used her fork to cut another piece of her waffle. "Who was it?"

"Your Aunt Helen."

Laura's fork stopped halfway to her mouth and she looked at her roommate as if the blonde had just said the IRS called to schedule an audit. "Uh what did she say?" she asked with great trepidation. The mention of her mother's eccentric sister was never a good thing. Laura remembered many a family get together that had her mother and father having words behind closed doors because of something Helen said or did.

"She said she'd be at the airport at four twenty. I wrote the flight number down. Why are you looking like that?"

Laura had closed her eyes and pinched the bridge of her nose, certain she would have a migraine before the day was out. "Did she say how long she was staying?"

"No. There was a lot of noise and she had a bit of an accent."

"She's from Boston," Laura said, opening her eyes and staring at the waffle she was pushing around her plate. "This is not good," she moaned softly.

"Not exactly a favorite relative?" Crystal ventured.

"I tolerate her," Laura offered grudgingly. "She's a bit

with her, what you see is what you get. Aunt Helen doesn't hold anything back and she has an opinion on everything." Taking several swallows of coffee, more to collect her thoughts than to quench a thirst, Laura continued. "It wouldn't be so bad if she wasn't against just about everything my parents were for."

"Does she get along with your mother at all?" Crystal asked.

"If they haven't seen each other in a long time, then yes for a little while they'll get along fine. They'll catch up on what's been going on with each other and then share the gossip about the rest of the family."

"That's not so bad."

Laura lifted her head. "No, that part's fine. It's when Mom nags Aunt Helen about her drinking or smoking or her endless stream of boyfriends or her loose life," Laura made quote marks with her fingers. "Then they start going at it. When Dad was alive the three of them would always get into these huge debates about everything under the sun and then some. Last time she visited she told Mom she refused to stay at her house anymore." Her eyes widened at the horrid thought that came to her mind. "Oh God, I hope she's forgotten about that. She's not staying here. I'll go find a hotel."

"Ooh, she's really that bad, huh?" Crystal shook her head. "And I thought I drove you nuts. She must be something if she's worse than the roommate from hell." Startled by the comment, Laura looked over to see the blonde shrugging her shoulders. "I heard you talking to someone on the phone," Crystal revealed.

" Laura looked down at her plate, truly regretful that the young woman had heard those words come from her. "I haven't said that in a while. Not the last few weeks at least."

Crystal shook her head dismissively. "Don't worry about it. You had a right to bitch. It's gotta be hard to live with someone who's

"

"Such a slob?" Laura offered, earning a wry smile from her roommate.

"I was going to say someone who is so different from you," Crystal finished, looking at her pointedly. "It ain't easy living with Miss Prim and Proper but hey, we're getting there." She didn't appear as hurt by the overheard comment as Laura thought she would be and the writer decided Crystal must have forgiven her for it already.

"That's true," Laura agreed, at least to the getting there part. "I've been told there's nothing that with tolerance and patience can't be worked through if people are willing to work hard enough for it. Who knows, we could end up being the best of friends someday."

"Now let's not push it," Crystal warned jokingly, seeming much more relaxed and amiable than usual. "I still think you're a pain in the ass about everything being so spic and span." She rose to her feet and patted her pants pocket. "It's time for me to go catch a butt. Be back in a few minutes and if you want, I'll go with you to the hospital again. Bobby called too and he said he'd meet you there."

"Guess I was the last one out of bed this morning," Laura said. "Sure, you can come along if you feel like it. You'll have to ride with me to the airport to pick her up later though."

"No prob, from what she sounds like, it oughta be fun to meet her. Back in a few." With that Crystal opened the screen door and stepped outside to have a cigarette.

Laura turned her attention back to the plate of waffles in front of her although her appetite lessened with the mention of her troublesome aunt. She hoped Helen would be more concerned about how her own sister was doing than in bringing up any of the six thousand topics that invariably led to a verbal war. Who called her? she wondered. Probably Grandma Betty. Helen was one person who Laura couldn't reach the first time she made her calls, frustrated that her aunt's voice mail was filled up and she unable to leave a message. What's the point of having something take messages for you if you don't check it once in a while? Then again, maybe she does get that many calls a day. Laura mentally renewed her private plea not to have her aunt remember the fight about staying at the house and want to stay here instead. To Laura's dismay, a twinge in her temple signaled a headache on its way and the writer seriously doubted if it would be a good day at all.

Bobby had been waiting for them at the hospital, an amused expression on his youthful face. "'Bout time you got here. Mom thought you weren't showing up."

"She's awake?" Laura asked as they approached. Her brother was standing in the hall outside of her mother's room.

"Yes I am," her mother called out. Laura spared a quick glance at Crystal and entered the room, greeting her mother and apologizing for not being there sooner. She was sorely disappointed to find that her brother and Crystal had not followed her in, forcing her to deal with her alert and from the expression on her face, agitated mother.

"How are you feeling? You gave us all quite a scare."

Gail Taylor waved her hand dismissively, not caring that the intravenous tubes were attached to it. "You can't get rid of me that easily. I plan on being around to aggravate you for quite a while." Despite the bravado being shown, Laura was certain her mother had been shaken up more than was being let on.

"Has the doctor been in to see you yet?"

"Oh yes, that's all they've been doing. The nurses wake me up at all hours to take my blood pressure and I've seen a doctor from just about every department so far." The older woman held her hand out, showing a very distinct indentation around the base of the third finger. "They had to cut my rings off because of all the swelling," Gail said solemnly. "Those rings never left my hand since your father put them on there thirty years ago."

"I'm sure we can get them repaired," Laura offered.

"That's not the point," her mother said sharply. "Doctor Stevens said this could happen again. He wants me to get one of those panic buttons you wear around your neck that alerts the ambulance."

The thought her mother could need such a device scared Laura more than wanted to admit. It was bad enough her mother looked so puffy, cheekbones practically nonexistent in roundness of her face. That such a thing could happen again with little to no warning downright terrified her. "Mom

" Laura took a deep breath.

"Oh no you don't," Gail shook her head vehemently. "This may be serious but I'm not going into some kind of nursing home."

"I wasn't going to say that," Laura replied although if forced to admit it the thought had crossed her mind. "But you should consider maybe having an aide come in to help you. I don't want you to exert yourself."

Nonsense. You are only a phone call away and I know how to dial 911."

"But what if you fall and can't get to the phone?"

"You make me sound like your grandmother. I'm not helpless, Laura." The tiredness was beginning to show on Gail's face. "Now let's just drop it. The doctors say I'll be out of here by the end of the week. We'll see how things are then."

Laura nodded, not wanting to upset her mother and not in the mood to push the point. "I can always come stay with you until you feel better if you want." To anyone else, it would seem the most natural of offers but to the strong willed Taylor women, it was a magnanimous offer to the extreme. Laura loved her mother deeply and the feeling was mutual but there was only so long they could be in other's company. The thought reminded her of the relative currently flying in the skies overhead. "Um, Mom

did Bobby tell you who was coming?"

"Not Helen?" her mother asked hopefully. Laura nodded, wishing silently her brother would stop sneaking off to have a cigarette with her roommate and get back in here. "She's not staying at my house," Gail said firmly. "I'm too tired out to put up with her."

"You won't be getting out of here for at least a week or so, right?"

"When I do I don't want to put up with her," her mother insisted. "There's plenty of hotels here. Let her stay at one of them." Gail huffed and her face showed the effort she was making. Alarmed, Laura reached for the call button only to be waved off. "No, there's no need for that. I'm just getting tired so easily now."

Relieved but still concerned, Laura pulled her hand back, letting it wrap around the bed railing instead. "All right," she said, not wishing to upset her mother any further. "I'll find her somewhere else to stay." Moving up to the head of the bed, she reached over and adjusted the pillow behind her mother's head. "Is that better?"

"Much." Gail favored her daughter with an approving smile that seemed odd on familiar features puffed by the edema. "You always were a good girl."

"I had good parents," Laura countered, patting her mother's shoulder before moving back to a position where they could see each other. "You may not have always agreed with everything I've done but you've supported and loved me." To Laura's surprise, she thought of Crystal and a shot of empathy went through her, wishing her roommate could have grown up with parents as good as her own. "I love you Mom," she said, giving her mother's hand a squeeze.

"All right, enough with the mushy stuff," Bobby said as he entered the room. Behind him Laura could see Crystal standing awkwardly out in the hall and waved her in as well.

"It's about time you came back," his mother admonished before giving Crystal a glance. "How are you?"

"I'm fine," Crystal replied politely. "I hope you're feeling better."

"Much better," Gail answered, pausing to take a few breaths. Laura decided her mother needed to rest

and she needed to deal with the relative who would be arriving soon.

"Mom, we're going to leave and let you get some rest," she said, pulling the blanket up around her mother's shoulders. "You relax and get your rest. I'll be back later."

"I suppose you'll be bringing Helen with you," her mother said grumpily as she settled back against her pillow.

"Mom, do you think I have a choice?" she asked, finishing her tucking of the blanket around her mother and straightening up. "We'll see you later." Laura bent down to give her mother a quick kiss on the forehead before stepping back so Bobby could say his goodbyes.

The airport traffic was thick with minivans and cars all battling for places to park while cabs continually tried to weave through the slow moving vehicles. "I hate coming here," Laura said as yet another cab took advantage of the safety buffer she allowed herself between cars to wedge themselves through.

"I'm surprised he didn't take the paint off," Crystal said, giving the yellow cab in front of them a dirty glare. "What moron designed this place anyway?"

"I'm sure no one moron is responsible." Spotting the sign ahead for short term parking, Laura quickly checked the side view mirror before pulling into the left lane. "No doubt this was caused by a committee."

"A committee on some heavy drugs," Crystal commented. "Look, there's a spot."

"Naw, too close to the door. It has to be a handicapped spot." As they approached, a blue design painted on the ground confirmed the writer's suspicions. It took three more passes of short term parking before Crystal spotted a car just leaving and they were finally able to secure a space.

"This is insane," the blonde grumbled. "I knew there was a reason I never flew anywhere. It's not the plane it's the damn airport."

"This is the easy part," Laura said, turning the key in the lock and activating her seldom used alarm system. "We have to find out which gate she's arriving at. She only told me which flight she was on." They made their way through the parking lot only to be stopped by the steady flow of two lanes

of traffic that refused to stop long enough for the m to cross. Laura suffered from some more colorful phrases from her aggravated roommate before they finally saw a break in the traffic and darted to the main terminal.

Brightly lit signs and the endless stream of people created a dizzying array of colors and noise. Laura paused at the directory long enough to get her bearings, disappointed to see the gate they needed was at the other end of the terminal. Crystal's temper was apparently short flared and if one more person bumped the blonde woman, Laura worried there would be more than just an exchange of gestures and insults. By the time they arrived at the gate, Crystal was clearly agitated and absently reaching for her cigarettes. "That's right," she said in a frustrated tone. "Can't smoke in here." With an aggravated sigh Crystal flopped down in the low backed plastic chair. Laura took the seat next to her, noting the area beginning to fill up with people waiting for the incoming flight.

"Afraid not," Laura said gently. Without thought she reached over and rested her hand on Crystal's shoulder, slightly hurt when she felt the flinch beneath her fingers. Wondering briefly if she should remove it before discarding the notion, the writer let her hand slide down, lightly rubbing Crystal's upper back. When her actions were not rebuked, Laura altered her motion, letting her fingers slide back and forth in a lazy arc, feeling the tension and tightness in the muscles beneath the skin. "It looks like we're about fifteen minutes early," she said, never ceasing in the gentle motion of her hand on Crystal's back. There had been a stiffness when she had first placed her hand but Laura suspected that was more of an automatic reaction on the younger woman's part to being touched.

"I'll let you bring her back to the airport on your own," Crystal said, although her tone was definitely less agitated than it had been. "I'm not going through that mess again."

"How do you think we're going to be getting out here?" Laura queried in a teasing tone. "The car isn't going to come to us." Crystal seemed to think about that problem and frowned even more. Laura tried hard not to smirk but the pout on her roommate's face was too cute for her to keep a straight face.

"Smart ass," Crystal grumbled.

"Just pointing out facts, my friend. Don't forget Helen will probably have three or four suitcases with her."

"What's she doing, moving here?"

Laura smiled at that, her aunt notorious for having more luggage than any one person could ever need no matter how long the trip. "Let's just hope she's planning on staying for a few days. Any more than that and we'll need to use one of those valet carts."

"What we?" the blonde asked dryly. "She's your relative."

"That's fine. You can keep up with her and let her talk your ear off. I don't mind."

"I get the feeling I'm going to regret tagging along with you today, aren't I?" Crystal asked cautiously, fearing that indeed would be the case.

When the plane finally landed and passengers started to stream into the gate, there was no doubt to Crystal who Helen was. Dressed in brightly colored silks with a matching hat, Helen Chick stood out in a crowd. Laura nodded at Crystal's observation and waved to get the flamboyant woman's attention.

"Ooh Laura Elizabeth!" Helen exclaimed, her voice carrying over the throngs of people between them. Waving her hand excitedly, she forced her way through the crowd and wrapped Laura up in what appeared to Crystal to be a very painful bear hug.

"Aunt Helen, how are you?" Laura asked after taking a moment to get the air back into her lungs.

"Oh, I'm the same as always, pumpkin. Busy, busy, busy all the time."

Crystal's eyebrows rose at the pet name her roommate was called, fully planning on teasing the writer at a later time. Realizing that she was now the focus of attention, she held her hand out. "I'm Crystal, Laura's roommate."

"Of course you are," Helen said excitedly, pulling Crystal into a crushing hug. "What a pretty little thing you are." Too shocked to resist, Crystal allowed herself to be held at arms length. Closer now, she could see Laura's aunt clearly. Beneath the brightly colored hat was a mass of platinum hair surrounding a face that Crystal doubted ever saw daylight without makeup. Indeed now she could easily see the layers of base and shadow that created the image Helen Chick presented to the world.

Un

thank you," Crystal stammered, looking over to Laura for help.

"Aunt Helen, she's

" Laura began.

"Now let's get out of here before we spend an hour waiting at the light," Helen said, cutting off her niece. "I absolutely loathe this airport."

Crystal didn't know what loathe meant but from the look of distaste on Helen's face, she got the general idea. Of course there was the other *i.e.* she figured out from the earlier comment. Helen thought there was more than a roommate situation going on. However, since they were now moving toward the luggage claim area and Helen had gone on to list off the many things that were wrong with the local airport, Crystal decided to let the confusion over the living arrangements slide for the time being. Draped over Helen's arm was a carry on bag done in rich leather with gold trim. Crystal was dismayed to see a multitude of matching bags moving in a lazy circle on the baggage claim belt. She was certain it would never all fit in the Jeep and wondered if Laura had thought to bring cords to use for the luggage rack. After pulling one bag, however, Crystal was more concerned about her back surviving the task of getting them onto the baggage cart much less on top of the Jeep. Helen apparently packed everything short of the kitchen sink when she traveled but didn't concern herself with the weight of the bags, Crystal noted sourly as Helen spent her time pointing out which bags were hers and instructing Laura on which order they were to be stacked on the cart.

The instant they stepped into the warm August air, Crystal reached to her pocket for her cigarettes. Before it lit, however, a cloud of smoke blew past her, Helen apparently faster on the draw when it came to lighters. Crystal finished getting her cigarette lit and was stuffing the lighter back into her pocket when Helen yelped loud enough to startle her.

"You're a smoker too?" That earned the blonde a hearty slap on the back.

Damn she's strong. "Yeah," Crystal choked.

"No smoking in my car," Laura said firmly, stopping the cart just behind her Jeep. "Any preference on hotels?"

"Now there's no reason I should put out good money on a hotel

especially in this little city," Helen said. "Your mother has plenty of room in her drafty old house."

Crystal, who by that time was negotiating two suitcases off the rack while holding her cigarette precariously between her teeth, noted the way Laura stiffened.

"Mom wants you to stay in a hotel. I guess she's not over what you said about the house last time."

"Nonsense. I come all this way to see her and she doesn't even have the decency to open her home to me? No pumpkin, the larger valet goes on the bottom."

"I thought this was the largest one," Laura grumbled, pulling it back out of the Jeep, only then noting the larger one Crystal was wheeling over to her. "You can't stay at Mom's house," she repeated.

"Hrmpf, fine." Helen crossed her arms, her cigarette sending little tendrils of smoke skyward. "If she wants to be like that, that's just fine by me. At least you have the manners not to throw a relation out on the street."

Crystal was trying hard not to become part of the conversation but found herself unable to keep her head from snapping up at that. It didn't take a rocket scientist to figure out where Helen was leading. "Uh, Laura?"

"You still have that townhouse near the lake?" Helen went on, oblivious to the looks the younger women were sharing. "I bet that's such a pretty sight now that the leaves are starting to turn."

"Aunt Helen, we don't have the room for company."

"Oh it'll be just like when you used to come for visits in the summer," Helen said with a dismissive wave. "Now let's get these loaded so I can see just what Gail has done to herself this time. Since you don't seem to be that upset I can only assume she's going to be fine."

"With time and medication, yes," Laura began. "But you just can't stay with us."

"Now my little Laura," Helen said as if speaking to a child. "Don't you remember when I came to visit and you and I had that nice long chat about your 'roommate'? There's nothing to be embarrassed about."

"I'm not that kind of roommate," Crystal finally spoke up. "I really do have a room of my own."

"Oh." Helen frowned and Crystal was sure that would be end of that subject but then the flamboyant woman found her own solution. "Well you at least have a couch, don't you?" The older woman laughed heartily. "I promise not to bring any young men home with me."

Crystal looked to Laura only to see her usually self-assured roommate slump her shoulders in defeat. Guess we have company for a few days. Looking at the pile of luggage still waiting to be secured in or on the Jeep, the blonde had to just hope it was only a few days and not a few months.

In the end it was decided by Laura that Helen would take her room and she would use the couch, her manners refusing to allow her to do anything

less for a guest, no matter how grating on the nerves the guest was. Helen took the passenger seat and promptly claimed control over the radio on the way home. Disco tunes spilled out of the speakers while Helen jabbered endlessly to Laura about the various relatives and what they were doing. Doing her best to stay away from either rear speaker, Crystal found herself sitting in the middle of the back seat and unable to miss various snippets of conversation. It certainly wasn't hard since Helen insisted on speaking louder than the music instead of turning the volume down to a more humane level. The image of Laura's family as being squeaky clean and perfect quickly flew from Crystal's mind as Helen went on.

"And the fool probably would have gotten away with it if he didn't sneeze while hiding in that storm drain," Laura's aunt said, finishing a story about one of the cousins. "He's lucky he only received probation."

"Uh huh," Laura said absently, her eyes on apparently most of her attention on the road. Helen turned to Crystal.

"So tell me is my niece still completely anal about keeping her house clean?"

Um

"Realizing she was a trapped audience, Crystal took a deep breath and surrendered. "Yeah."

"She needs to let her hair down and live a little," the older woman continued. "She's far too stuffy. Maybe we can get her to break out of her shell while I'm here. How does that sound?"

Oh please just come and take me now, Crystal silently prayed, visions of being dragged to bingo and museums passing through her mind. "Well, it depends on what Laura wants to do," she finally said. "I work a lot so I might not be able to go with you two." Please make all your plans for the weekdays. I hope Michael has lots of overtime.

"Nonsense," Helen replied. "We'll make sure to find the time."

Crystal frowned, realizing Helen was the type of person who never took no for an answer. "How long are you staying?"

"I suppose a week or so. We'll see. I hate to set dates."

The answer did nothing to make Crystal feel better.

"She's driving me nuts," Crystal growled, flopping atop the beanbag. "Have you ever met this kook?"

Jenny, who had spent the better part of the week listening to Laura rant on the phone about the free spirited aunt who turned their home upside down, was ready for some type of complaint from Crystal but not quite the one she received. There was barely a hello before the younger woman shoved the composition book into her hands and began ranting about Laura's aunt. "What is she doing that is making you so upset?"

"Everything," Crystal huffed, using her fingers to straighten out her disarrayed hair. "I thought Laura was annoying at times but this woman takes the damn cake. You know how Laura always gets the answer to every question on the game shows?"

Jenny nodded, a trait she was familiar with. "And that annoys you?"

"Not as much as when Helen the human encyclopedia does it. The question asked which dam, not when it was built and its life history. So Laura says Hoover and Helen goes off on how it created Boulder City and she just kept going on and on." Crystal's dander was getting up and stopping was out of the question. "It was like no matter what Laura said, she had to add to it until they end up in this long drawn out conversation about something that has nothing to do with the question they asked in the first place. She's driving Laura nuts." Crystal shot a glance at Jenny. "Yeah, I know, we can't talk about Laura."

Jenny nodded and opened the composition book. "So it's been quite a busy week at home."

"Home, work, everything." Slumping down to make the beanbag more of a pillow than a seat, Crystal laced her fingers behind her head and stared off at nothing. "It's not enough Laura has to deal with her mother who keeps getting more bitchy each day she has to stay at the hospital but Helen's driving her up the wall." Apparently the rule forbidding Laura being a topic of conversation was forgotten by Crystal and Jenny hesitated in interrupting what was one of the longest trains of thought her patient had revealed to date. "I bet she's not getting much writing done even with the computer down in the living room now. I don't hear her typing and it's right below my room." The anger and agitation present in Crystal's voice when she first entered the room were gone, replaced by a much softer and reflective tone. "You know I never thought of that?" She smiled. "The bathroom is between our rooms but when we both have the doors to the balcony open, I can hear her typing."

"Why do you think you listen for her typing?" Jenny prodded.

"I dunno." Crystal gave a familiar shrug. "I guess it just reminds me that she's right there."

"Like your sister was right in the next room when you were growing up?"

"Kinda but not quite." The blonde stretched her legs out and crossed her ankles. "It's different than when I would listen for Patty. I can't explain it."

Jenny, skimming through the notebook while Crystal was talking, looked up. "Do you want to talk about this dream?"

Surprise crossed Crystal's face, followed quickly by a frown. "Not really. I don't know why I bothered writing about it. It's no big deal."

"This is the first time you've ever mentioned having an erotic dream," the therapist pointed out. "The fact you woke up during the foreplay aside, I do think it is significant. Have you had these dreams before?"

"I'm not gonna talk about my sex life, or lack of it, with you," Crystal said firmly, setting her jaw and crossing her arms over her chest. "Let's talk about something else."

"You want to move onto a safer topic, hmm? All right. Did you go to the meeting Tuesday night?" Crystal's frown and refusal to respond gave Jenny her answer. "I see. These sessions are a tool designed to help you, Crystal. I wouldn't recommend them if I didn't think they'd be helpful to you."

"I don't need to sit around and listen to someone else's sad story," the blonde grumbled. "Besides, I was busy with Laura and that nut aunt of hers."

Jenny let the comment pass, refusing to take the bait and return to the taboo topic. "You're never too busy to take care of yourself and that's what the women's group meetings are. I can't force you to go but I strongly suggest you do."

"Yes Mother," came the acerbic reply, followed by a snort. "Actually if you were my mother you'd be too drunk to notice if I did something or not." There was a long silence before Crystal continued. "Not that she'd notice anything Patty did more than me or anything but it was like we'd show her something we did at school and she'd just ignore us."

"She didn't find the same things important that you did," Jenny said. "And how did that make you feel?"

"Patty and me hated it of course."

"No. Not how did Patty feel. How did it make you feel when you came home with something you wanted your mother to praise you for and it didn't happen?"

Crystal thought about it for a moment, opening her mouth to say something then closing it without making a sound. A small smile curled the e.g. of her lip. "I was going to say pissed off but I guess I really felt hurt." Her hands returned to their previous position behind her head. "It hurt that everyone else went home to moms who loved them and paid attention to them and mine didn't." Crystal took a deep breath. "I don't know why." Words long kept inside came out with a wavering voice, her eyes refusing to move from their inspection of the ceiling. "I came home with first place in art and she threw it out. I got a ninety five on one of the pretests and Laura hung it up on the refrigerator." Crystal's eyes blinked rapidly, trying hard to stave off the moisture welling up within them. "You know how they say you don't know what you've got until it's gone?"

"Yes?"

Crystal sniffed. "Well, I guess it's true then that you don't know what you're missing until it shows up."

"Meaning?" Jenny pushed.

Meaning

"Sitting up, Crystal brought her knees up and rested her forearms on them. "Since Patty, there hasn't ever been anyone until now that I felt cared about me." Emotions flickered over Crystal's face as she tried to make sense of her jumbled thoughts. "I've had friends but never anyone close, not like Laura has been." The young woman gave a short laugh and looked over at Jenny. "I've forgotten what it's like for someone to actually give a damn about me. To pay attention to what's going on in my life. To

"

"To have someone put your test up on the refrigerator," Jenny finished.

"How stupid is that?" Crystal asked. "I let myself get all mushy over something like Laura putting that test up." She wiped her eyes although no tears managed to fall.

"It's been a long time since someone gave notice to your abilities and accomplishments." Jenny set the notebook aside and leaned forward. "It's been a long time since you've let anyone get close enough to you to care for you. You hide in that turtle shell thinking trying to keep everyone on the outside but you know deep inside that shell it's a lonely place."

"But I don't get hurt in my shell," Crystal countered without much enthusiasm.

"If you don't let yourself open up to being hurt, you can't enjoy the pleasures of being loved. It's a risk you take when you decide to live instead of just existing."

"How the hell did you get me on this topic anyway," Crystal grumbled. "We started out talking about what a pain in the ass Laura's aunt is."

"And you were angry when you came in the door. Now you're calm. Amazing what happens when you open up to someone, isn't it?" Jenny smiled, ignoring the harmless glare being directed at her. "So you want to talk about your temporary houseguest."

"Houseguest from hell," Crystal clarified, reminded of the fact that Laura used to call her the roommate from hell when they first started living together. "You know how Laura's a neat freak. Helen makes me look like Laura. I swear she can't enter a room without making it look like a hurricane came through. At least with Laura I know where something is. You know she used my mug?"

"Who used your mug?"

"Helen." Crystal sat up and looked at Jenny. "No one uses that mug but me."

"Did she know it was your mug?"

"How could she not?" came the reply. Crystal took the use of her mug by someone else as a personal affront and Jenny's calm manner about it was earning the therapist the evil eye. "It was the only mug in there with my name on it."

"I don't remember seeing that there," Jenny remarked.

"Laura bought it for me last week," Crystal said. "Didn't she tell you?"

"I haven't talked to her much since her mother became ill." Thinking about where they were, Jenny straightened and cleared her throat. "Gotta watch that line, Crystal."

"Yeah well it's kinda hard when I can't talk about the person I spend the most time with," the blonde complained. Deciding that her point was made, Crystal returned to the real topic. "So she has no respect for my mug or even for things that Laura likes. She used those rose shaped soaps because she said she didn't like the scent of the bar soap." She shook her head. "She's loud and doesn't give a shit what she says about anything."

"You know." This time the therapist could not contain her smirk. "It seems to me that just two weeks ago you were bitching about those very soaps and how much of a

let me the quote right here

pain in the ass Laura was about them."

Crystal flushed slightly and lowered her head in acknowledgment. "Yeah well that was before Laura told me about where she got them and how it made her feel to go in there and smell the scents."

Now Jenny was smiling in the smug way she always did when she finally had Crystal steered down the path she wanted. "Tolerance and understanding made the difference. You couldn't stand certain things about living with another person but as time goes by not only do you learn to accept the differences but now you even appreciate some of them."

Crystal made no objection to the statement, merely shrugging her shoulders noncommittally. "She's not so bad. Once you get past the neat freak part, that is. You just gotta know her, that's all."

"I suspect many people you meet will fall into the same category," Jenny said. "There are some very good people out there if you care to open your eyes."

Crystal's face took on a faraway look and Jenny let a few moments go by before clearing her throat politely. "Oh, sorry," the blonde said. "I was just

thinking about something."

"Do share," Jenny encouraged, moving from the couch to the unattended beanbag and assuming the same comfortable position Crystal was in, legs and hips on the floor, back supported by the beanbag. "It certainly wasn't a bad thought from the look on your face."

"I was just remembering once about three years ago when I went out for a ride on some back country road. I stopped at a garage sale that looked like every single thing there should have been thrown in the dumpster long ago." Crystal's face grew animated and she sat up while telling her story. "They had windows with broken glass, lamps that didn't work, you name it. If it was junk, they had it. So I'm just looking around. I don't know why, I never go to those kinda things."

"I like garage sales," Jenny said. "You never know what you're going to find."

"Exactly," Crystal said enthusiastically. "Well behind all that junk I found a box and inside that was a watch, a knife and some tools. Well the whole box was marked for five bucks and I just had this feeling so I bought it. I took the stuff one by one to the antique stores around and all totaled I got over a hundred bucks for everything and I still had some wooden knickknacks from that box up until the fire."

"And the lesson to the story is?" Jenny asked in a teasing tone.

"That even if it looks like it's just junk take another look."

"You'll never know where you might find that treasure," the therapist finished. Looking at her watch, Jenny frowned. "Well, we've spent enough time talking about every subject under the sun. I think it's time we do a little more role playing, what do you say?"

"I say what I said last time," Crystal replied, her mood quickly turning defiant. Pushing her way back on top of the beanbag, she crossed her arms over her chest. "I think it's stupid to pretend about something that'll never happen."

"That's what pretend is all about," Jenny said calmly. "There's a safety in being able to yell at the person you're angry with without worrying about any physical repercussions." This was an on going battle with Jenny to get Crystal to feel safe enough to open up and let out some of the rage and hurt that were bottled up inside. Despite the attitude being shown at the moment, Jenny felt it was still the best time to try.

"I still think this is stupid." Grumbling to herself but loudly enough that Jenny could hear her, Crystal walked over to the mat taking up the corner of the room behind the beanbags. "All right, so which parent do you want me to be pissed off with this time."

"Which one do you feel like yelling at?" the therapist countered, standing just a few feet away from her patient.

"I don't feel like yelling at either one of them," Crystal said in a bored tone. "They're not worth my energy."

"Neither of them?"

Crystal nodded. "I don't give a shit about either of them. They can both go to hell."

"Why?"

"You know why. Because of what they did to me." Crystal became more agitated, tapping her foot on the mat and clenching her jaw. "And she was useless."

"Why was your mother useless to you? How did she fail you?" Jenny kept her distance but moved until she was facing the very angry woman. "Tell her, Crystal."

"She didn't care."

"How. Tell her how," Jenny urged, keeping her voice gentle. "I'm your mother, Crystal. Tell me what I did that was so bad to you."

Crystal's respiration increased as did her movements, pacing back and forth in a small line. "She didn't wait for us at the bus stop like the other moms did. She didn't make us lunches and we had to get the free lunch at school which everyone knows is for the poor kids."

"What else?"

A strangled cry broke from Crystal's lips. "What else? You really wanna know?" She pushed right in front of Jenny's face, noting the involuntary flinch. "How about not making sure the rips in my pants were fixed before I wore them to school. How about having dinner that didn't come in a metal tray? I hated those!" she said before turned and storming deliberately to where the punching bag stood, her back to Jenny. "Would it have killed you to make one fucking dinner once in a while?" Crystal's right fist connected solidly with the bag. "Would it have been so difficult for you to show up to just one of the open houses at school?" A sharp thwack reverberated through the room as the angry woman's fist connected again. "Why couldn't you have cared enough about us to leave him?"

Jenny sat cross legged down on the mat, letting Crystal release her frustrations and rants to the punching bag. She winced at one particularly loud punch and knew next time she would have to insist on her patient wearing the boxing gloves. The child whose right to be heard had been so long denied roared with a vengeance, crying out to whoever would listen of the injustices she had suffered. Crystal's raging display lasted for long minutes until the young woman slumped to her knees and hung her head. Jenny grabbed some tissues and crossed the mat quickly, arriving just as Crystal's shoulders began to shake.

"Why?" Crystal sobbed, helplessly clutching herself. "I just don't understand why."

Jenny put her hands on the young woman's shoulders, squeezing gently. "You may never know why your mother did the things she did, Crystal but at some point you have to accept that you can't change what happened."

"No, I can't can I?" Crystal sniffed, taking the offered tissue and wiping her face. "But that doesn't make it hurt any less."

"You're right. It doesn't." Jenny said softly. "But when you learn to accept it and move on, the pain will lessen. You are a strong woman, Crystal. You can get through this."

"It doesn't feel like it." Crystal said with a hitch to her voice. "I

I feel like this pain will never go away." The constant tears were ending as were the chest heaving sobs. Feeling embarrassed by her emotional display, Crystal took the offered tissue and wiped her eyes and face. "So this is how you know it's working, Doc?"

"Therapists have a daily quota of patients they have to get to cry," Jenny deadpanned. "What can I say? I was behind today."

"Bawling like that should keep your quota filled for the week," Crystal replied, giving the smallest of smiles at the joke. Feeling reasonably in control of her feelings, she stood up and headed for the recliner.

Jenny remained on the mat, turning around so she could face her patient. "What are you feeling right now?"

"Fine," Crystal answered automatically.

"I didn't ask how you felt. I asked what you were feeling. Fine isn't going to fit. Try again."

Crystal shot her therapist a glare but it lacked any threat with the red rimmed eyes and downcast expression. Shrugging, she tried to find words to put to the turmoil spinning inside. "I dunno. Kinda empty, I guess."

"And that will happen," Jenny said gently. "I suspect, however, there is more than what you're saying."

Nodding reluctantly, Crystal smiled ruefully. "Guess that's why you're the therapist, eh Doc?" With a sigh, she tried to put the jumbled mess into order. "Sometimes I wonder what she's doing, if she ever left him. When I was a kid, I always thought if she just left him that everything would be all right." She gave a snort. "Dreams of kids."

"You're not a kid anymore."

"It doesn't make sense. How can this be? How can I hate her so much one minute and wonder what she's doing the next?"

"Perhaps what you felt wasn't hate. People are going to disappoint you. That's just a fact of life. When a friend or acquaintance does it, that's one thing but when someone close to us fails us, that's much harder to accept."

Crystal looked at Jenny thoughtfully, then nodded. "This ain't gonna be easy, Doc."

"I told you growth is a great deal of hard work," Jenny said. "And like it or not, you're going to stumble along the way and need guidance. Just don't be afraid to reach out when you do."

"Oh hey," Crystal said, noticing the time. "We went over."

"That happens at times," Jenny said, rising to her feet. "Life doesn't always fit neatly within an hour." Crystal rose as well but sat down when the therapist shook her head. "Not yet. We need to put some closure on this session before you leave."

"Oh yippee," the blonde said unenthusiastically. "I love the closure part of our time."

"I know you do," Jenny said as she took a seat on the couch. "It's your favorite part next to the hug, isn't it?"

"Yeah, a real tossup between the two," Crystal said wryly. "And after this I have to stop at the store and pick up some half and half because Helen doesn't like milk in her coffee."

"Considering how you were when you first walked through the door I'm sure she's very happy you stopped here first."

"Yeah, well

" Crystal shrugged. "I'll deal with her."

"Tolerance and patience, Crystal. Remember that." Jenny settled back and picked up her clipboard. "Now let's finish up here so we can both go home."

Crystal didn't have to open the door to easily identify the music blaring through the walls. The Jeep was absent which meant only one thing, Helen was home alone and Crystal would have to entertain her until Laura returned. With a heavy sigh she turned the knob and entered.

Laura had apparently been gone for some time if the hurricane that swept through the living room was any indication. Helen was lounged across the couch, remote in one hand and the phone in the other. Gum wrappers littered the coffee table and loose papers were scattered about. Crystal went straight into the kitchen, not wanting to listen to Helen's phone call. Probably another long distance call, she thought while putting the creamer into

the refrigerator. An almost empty six pack of beer caught Crystal's attention. Wait a minute. I had four of those left when I went to work this morning. Now fuming, she took the remaining bottle for herself and forcefully shut the refrigerator door.

"Oh there you are," Helen called from the doorway. "I saw you come in but I was on the phone. Did you remember to get my half and half?"

"It's in the fridge," Crystal replied, leaning against the counter and bringing the bottle to her lips. "By the way, the beer you drank was mine."

"Oh it was? Well I am sorry I didn't check. I just assumed it was there for the taking." Without the benefit of a hat, Helen's platinum hair stood out almost shock straight from her head and Crystal could only wonder if Phyllis Diller had been the inspiration for the hairdo.

"I guess you wouldn't know if no one said anything to you," Crystal acquiesced reluctantly. "Most everything in the fridge is shared but the beer and those health nut things that Laura likes."

"So how was your day today?" Helen asked, crossing the room and settling down at the kitchen table.

"It was fine. We finished hanging the drywall on the fourth floor."

"You have to excuse me but you're far too pretty to be playing Rosie the riveter. You could be a model."

Crystal took another long pull on her beer, making no effort to leave her comfortable space leaning on the counter. "Looks only last for so long. And I don't rivet anything. I screw drywall to the framing studs. That's a marketable skill in the construction industry."

"Just a little butch if you ask me."

I wasn't asking you, Crystal thought to herself. "Whatever. Where did Laura go?"

"She went to see her mother. I was there this morning but Gail was too busy being her usual post menopausal self to have any worthwhile conversation."

"At least she's doing better and you had a chance to see her again."

"Pshaw." Helen waved her hand dismissively. "That battle ax is going to be around for a long time to come, just like me. I should have just called to check up on her but I was due for a stateside vacation anyway."

"Well I'm sure your sister appreciates you coming so far to see her." Raising the bottle to her lips, Crystal was surprised to find it empty. I knew I should have bought more when I was at the store.

"Appreciate? Please." Helen made a disgusted look. "That woman hasn't appreciated one thing I've done for her in all my life."

"Well, I don't know Mrs. Taylor that well so I can't say anything but I know I'd give my right arm to know where my sister is right now." Realizing she said more than she wanted to, Crystal set the bottle down on the counter and opened the refrigerator. "I'd better get dinner started."

"You don't know where your sister is?" Helen asked. "Did you two have a fight?"

Crystal shook her head. "No. Patty ran away when she was a teenager. I haven't seen her since." Pulling the leftover chicken out and setting it on the counter, Crystal debated with herself for a moment before turning to face Helen. "You know, it's none of my business but Mrs. Taylor is your sister. Don't you care anything about her?"

"Of course I do," Helen said, bristling. "That's not the point."

"Then what is the point?" Crystal sighed. "Does it really matter that her house has a few drafts or her taste in politics is different than yours? You chose a life of parties and people, jetsetting all over the world. She chose a family and that is her world. Can't you just accept that you two are different and get over it?" Pulling a pan out from under the counter, she set it down with a bang. "Don't you think it's scary for her to be stuck in that hospital knowing if her son wasn't home she could have died?" The pan of chicken was put into the oven none too quietly. "Don't you think Laura is worried and upset over her mother? The last thing she needs is to come home and listen to you bring up the same old fights over and over again. Does it really matter who is right and who is wrong?"

"I didn't realize you felt so strongly about it," Helen said, her tone more subdued. "Usually you talk to Laura and then disappear upstairs."

"Yeah well I'm not family so I try to stay out of it unless Laura needs to talk."

"Not to mention a certain herb I smell coming out of your room."

Crystal colored slightly. "Yeah well

"

"I've been meaning to ask you about that. It seems I didn't pack any when I left."

"Oh." Understanding the hint, Crystal nodded. "I'm only allowed to smoke pot in my room. I can smoke cigarettes there and of course out on the decks. Laura's afraid if I light up a joint on the deck that one of the neighbors will see it."

"That's one way to make friends with your neighbors," the older woman said. "I find mine are always appreciative of sharing the herb now and again."

"I never would have pegged you for a pot smoker," Crystal said, the anger of their previous conversation leaving her. She leaned against the counter, fighting the urge to join Laura's aunt at the table.

"Compared to my niece I'm sure I seem like quite the rebel. I was very much into the disco scene of the seventies but I'm certain Laura isn't aware of that. Her mother tended to shelter her from the more 'seamy' side of life, as she called it." Helen waved her over. "Come sit down with me. I hate talking across the room." Crystal hesitated, then did as requested, taking a seat directly across from the older woman. "There, that's better. I'll have to admit you aren't like Laura's other girlfriends."

"We're not girlfriends," the blonde reminded.

"I meant as friends who happen to be women, not as lesbian lovers," Helen said. "Although I will admit it must have taken a lot of courage for Laura to come out to her mother."

"Laura has a lot of courage," Crystal agreed.

"I never told her this but I am proud that she stuck to her guns about it and didn't let her mother talk her into seeing a psychiatrist." A smirk came to the older woman's lips. "I dare say I've been known to jump over the fence once or twice. You remember the old Wagon Wheel series? The actress that played Carol, I could tell you stories about her."

The reference went over Crystal's head, knowing the show only as something that was in reruns when she was a young child but she understood the meaning clearly. "So you're bi?"

"I suppose I am. I haven't been with a woman in quite a few years but I suppose anything is still possible. What about you?"

"I'm straight," Crystal replied.

"Oh, any men in your life right now? I know this absolutely devilishly handsome young man who would just die for a pretty blonde like you."

Crystal gave a short laugh and shook her head. "I don't think so. I'm not looking."

"What a shame. Bad breakup?"

"No." As was her habit, Crystal looked down at the table when talking about herself. "I haven't ever been in any serious relationship."

"Now that's a real shame. You're a young thing but isn't it about time you start looking for a love to share your life with?" Helen reached out and slapped her hand atop Crystal's. "Take it from this old broad, deary. There is nothing lonelier than not having someone to love you at the end of the day. Personally I think you're limiting yourself by not looking at the other side of the fence. My niece is really quite the catch, you know. Accomplished author, college graduate and she certainly isn't hard to look at, is she?"

Crystal saw the mischievous glint in Helen's eye and smiled. "No, she isn't. Laura's a very nice person but it's just not like that between us. Besides, I'm far from her type."

"I don't know about that, deary. My little pumpkin seems to think very highly of you."

"What did she say about me?"

"Ah, curious aren't you?" Helen said knowingly. "I'll tell you what. We have at least twenty minutes for dinner, right?"

"Yeah. At least."

"If you would be kind enough to share a hit or two I might be persuaded to reveal certain things Laura has said about you."

Crystal didn't need to be asked twice. "Let's go."

Part 12

Laura was bone tired when she finally pulled into her parking space but pleased to see the familiar Omni parked next to her. That meant Crystal was home and hopefully had driven Aunt Helen to retire early for the evening. Remembering the bag of cleaners in the back seat, Laura retrieved them and headed inside.

Setting the bag on the side table, she was surprised not to find either woman downstairs. What did not surprise Laura, however, was the mess in the living room. The kitchen was better, clean dishes drying on the rack but clearly done by her right handed roommate, the strainer on the opposite side of the sink than usual. Laura took a few minutes to rearrange the kitchen back to the way she wanted before heading upstairs.

"Hello?" Laura called when she was halfway up the stairs, hearing voices.

"We're in here," Crystal called, letting the writer know which room they were in.

Laura couldn't resist raising an eyebrow at this new development. Her Aunt Helen and Crystal were in the same room and from the sounds of it, getting along quite nicely. The pungent smell wafting under the door gave Laura her answer as to why they were in Crystal's room. Opening the door, the first thing the fastidious woman noticed was the pile of laundry strewn about, jeans flung carelessly over the back of the orange chair and Crystal's work boots laying where they were apparently kicked off earlier. Crystal was propped comfortably on her bed while Helen was sitting in the orange chair, using the bed as a footrest.

"Hi there," Crystal said. "How's your mom doing?"

"Hi pumpkin," Helen waved. "Come have a seat and tell us all about it."

"Don't worry about stepping on anything," Crystal said. "Just kick it out of your way."

"Or rent a bulldozer," Laura replied dryly. She carefully stepped over dirty clothes until she reached the bed, sitting cross legged on the lower corner near the door leading to the balcony. It allowed her to look at her aunt directly with only minimal eye movement to see Crystal. "So I see you two found something in common," her tone making it clear what she thought of that.

"You take after your mother too much." Helen frowned and took the little blue pipe from Crystal. "So tell us, how is she?"

"She looks a hundred times better than when she went in," Laura said. "If everything goes well tonight they might even let her out tomorrow morning."

"What time are you going to see her tomorrow?" Helen asked.

"I'll most likely head up there around nine or ten."

"I'll go with you." Helen said, holding her hand out for the lighter which Crystal finally handed over.

Laura watched her fifty year old aunt take a small hit off the pipe, thinking eerily that she had fallen into something from the Twilight Zone. Laura was still uncomfortable watching Crystal light up but to see her own aunt doing it was something else altogether. "Um, Aunt Helen?"

"Yes pumpkin?" Helen looked at her but all Laura saw were slits for eyes. Clearly her aunt and roommate had been in this room for some time.

"Could you not smoke that in front of me? It just seems so

odd to me to see you doing that."

"I got an idea," Crystal said, taking the pipe and setting it in her ashtray. "I could go for a cigarette. Why don't we go out on the deck and that way we don't asphyxiate poor Laura here."

"Splendid idea, deary." Helen got her feet, wobbled a little, then straightened out and headed for the screen door.

"So what have you two been talking about?" Laura asked Crystal, hanging back so they weren't overheard.

"All sorts of stuff," the younger woman replied. "Sisters and families and freedom and of course you."

"Me?"

"Well," Crystal's eye took on a wicked glint. "You are the main thing we have in common. By the way, not too bright trying to jump those barrels with your bicycle."

"She told you about that?" Laura was shocked, remembering that as one of her most embarrassing moments, especially when the base commander called her father down to explain why she was playing in an unauthorized area.

"She told me a lot of things," Crystal said smugly. Helen had a bit of a wicked streak herself and had conveyed with painstaking detail about some of Laura's most embarrassing tales of childhood. "Or there's the time you went to visit her and got lost on the subways."

"She said to stay on the red line and I'd be fine," Laura grumbled as they stepped out onto the deck. "So you spent your free time telling stories about me, did you?"

"You're just lucky I didn't remember to bring the scrapbooks," Helen said. "You remember summer at my campsite? When your cousins were up?"

Laura was truly appreciative of the darkness which kept her blush from being seen. "I remember. Can we change the topic now?"

"But it's much more fun to tease you," Crystal said, leaning back in her chair and putting her feet up on the railing. "So Helen, you were telling me about the first time Laura got drunk."

"Oh no," the subject in question groaned. "And you wonder why I don't drink very often? Let your aunt get you drunk for the first time."

"Hugged that porcelain goddess a few times, did you?" Crystal teased.

"It was her best friend that night," Helen said cheerfully. "The next morning too."

"But I'm sure you're more familiar with that particular goddess than I am," Laura teased back.

"Oh, you got me, pardner." The single bulb lighting the back deck gave little illumination but it was enough for Laura to see Crystal pantomime being shot in the chest. "But I never tried to crawl down the stairs."

"You don't forget anything, do you Aunt Helen?"

"Not much, pumpkin," Helen replied, clearly enjoying the banter. Both her and Crystal had cigarettes going and the older woman took a long drag on hers before continuing to embarrass her niece. "You should have seen her, Crystal. She was talking to the banister."

The friendly chat continued for the better part of an hour but Laura was spared any more embarrassment after her experience with the banister was told. Finally one too many yawns indicated the need to wind down for the night and Helen made her exit through the screen door to Laura's bedroom where she was staying. Laura followed Crystal in through her entrance, stepping on a pair of shorts laying on the floor near the sliding door. "How do you manage to get around in this mess?" Laura asked.

"I know where everything is. It's an organized mess," Crystal said, flopping down on her bed and quickly pushing herself up against the headboard. "So are you really beat or do you feel up to visiting for a while?"

Usually evenings while Helen had been spent downstairs, not allowing the opportunity for the two friends to just sit and talk to each other and Laura found she was missing those chats very much. "Sure but keep your smoking limited to cigarettes, okay?"

"Deal," Crystal cheerfully agreed, reaching out to pat the arm of the overstuffed orange chair. "Have a seat, take a load off."

"You certainly seem to be in a good mood tonight," the writer noted as she took her seat. "I still can't believe you and my Aunt Helen were getting along, much less smoking pot with each other."

"I was kinda shocked when she asked me if I had any," Crystal said, fluffing a pillow before sticking behind her back for support. "But once I stopped being annoyed with her, she turned out to be a okay person. A bit out there, but okay."

"She hasn't given you her dissertation about aliens and secret labs hidden in the desert yet."

"Ah, something to look forward to. She already told me about your cousin, the one that does the drag shows in New York."

"You realize of course that not everyone she calls a cousin really is," Laura explained. "I think most of them are her friends children and she truly loves playing the rich maiden aunt."

"Hmpf. I wouldn't have minded having a rich aunt when I was growing up."

"Well, it was nice for what it was but I never wanted her money. Visiting Aunt Helen was like taking a trip to an amusement park. I never what I was going to do but it was always fun for just so long." Without thought Laura kicked her sneakers off and put her feet up on Crystal's bed. "Trust me, there's only so much of a good thing one person can have, hence the crawling trip down the stairs." She reached out and gently slapped Crystal's outstretched leg. "Hey, I got a royalty check today. How about tomorrow night after everything settles down with Mom and you get home from work we go out for dinner?"

"What about Helen?"

"I'll dump her off on Bobby for the evening. She hasn't had a chance to spoil him yet." The writer's creative mind worked for only a minute before she came upon the perfect scenario for her little plot. "I'll plant a bug in her ear about how he would love an evening with her before he leaves for school."

"I'm sure he'll appreciate that," Crystal said.

"You know she bought me my first car when I went to school? It wasn't new but it was rust free and the mileage was low. A nice little hatchback to scoot around campus with."

"You're looking at my first car," Crystal said, nodding with her chin toward the parking lot. "I used my tax return and made payments for three months to get that rust bucket. Had it almost a year now."

"And you probably appreciate yours far more than I ever appreciated my Ford. No snow tires in the middle of a storm plus inexperience led to totaling it less than four months after Aunt Helen bought it for me."

"Ooh, that sucks."

Laura smirked at her friend's terminology but nodded in agreement. "That's one way to look at it, I suppose. The insurance gave me money I needed in time for books so I didn't have to ask Mom and Dad for it so close to Christmas. I put what was left over away and did private tutoring to get another car."

"Bet you were more careful with that one," Crystal guessed.

"I was," Laura admitted. "I made that one last until my graduate year." Her brow furrowed as she tried to remember how they got off on this tangent. Of course when it came to carrying on a conversation with Crystal, subject changes were often and frequent. "Oh yes, dinner."

"Yeah, where are you thinking of going anyway? There's a great diner about a mile from the hospital. You know the one, they have the liberty bell shaped windows."

Laura made a face. "How about a place where half your meal isn't made of grease?"

"Are you kidding? That place is the best. They've got a prime rib there

" Crystal seemed to think about that for a second. "Oh yeah, you don't eat red meat. But they've got seafood there too."

"No doubt it's all breaded and swims in oil too," Laura replied. "There's an Italian place not too far from the mall."

"What about Chinese?" Crystal countered, ignoring her roommate's comment.

"I always eat too much when I have Chinese. What about that new restaurant on Fifth?"

"Too expensive. Michael only had a few hours of overtime this week." Crystal sighed and reached for her cigarettes. "Just like when first started living together. We can't agree on anything."

Laura refused to keep the smile from her lips. "Oh I think we've come a long way from when you first moved in here. I haven't had to pick up a towel off the bathroom floor in weeks. Speaking of the bathroom

"

"I didn't do it," Crystal blurted quickly.

"Guilty conscience?" Laura teased. "I know Aunt Helen used my rose soaps but she said she didn't buy the new ones. So where did those come from?"

"Soap fairy?"

"I think I'm a little old to be believing in the soap fairy, Crystal. I do, however, believe that I have a roommate who was being very thoughtful and nice."

Crystal squirmed under the kind words and gave a totally useless frown. "I got used to the scent."

"An air freshener would have taken care of that," Laura pointed out. "You can't get away with that with me. I thank you very much. I think they're even prettier than the ones I had."

The blonde squirmed some more and lit a cigarette. "How did we get on this subject anyway? We were talking about dinner."

"I suggested the new restaurant on Fifth," Laura reminded.

"And I said it was too expensive."

"Most of the dinners are less than twenty dollars, Crystal. Besides, it's my treat because I got more in my royalty check than I thought I would. You think I'd ask you out to dinner and expect you to pay?" Laura shook her head. "I'm not that bad a date."

"Yeah well the last time someone wanted to pick up the tab for my dinner it was because they were expecting a benefit later." Crystal smiled. "Since you don't have a chance with me I figured it was Dutch treat."

"Oh please. It's worth dinner to me just to see you and Aunt Helen getting along so well. What were you two talking about?" Seeing a stray ash sitting on the night stand, Laura reached over and wiped it away. Seeing the multitude of crumpled up empty packs, she tried to collect those as well without being noticed.

Crystal smirked. "You mean besides which is better, paper or pipe?" The smirk faded when she saw what Laura was trying to do. "Hey, leave my junk alone." Laura opened her hands to allow her roommate to take the trash.

"I was just trying to help," the dark haired woman said, opening her hands to allow the empty packs to be taken from her.

"Yeah, help clean," Crystal said, taking the trash and stuffing it into the already overstuffed wastebasket. "This is my room. It can be as messy as I want it."

"There's a difference between being cluttered and having the room declared a disaster area."

"But it's my disaster area," the blonde pointed out proudly. "I don't make a mess in your room and you aren't allowed to come in and clean mine. I behave everywhere else in this house."

Laura wiped her hands on her pants before lacing her fingers together, resisting the urge to reach down and pick up the pack that missed the basket. "You're right."

"It's not like I'm damaging the walls or carpet or anything. I'm just

"

"Cluttered," the writer offered.

"Cluttered, yeah that sounds good." Crystal smiled. "Of course saying I'm a little cluttered it like saying Maine only gets a little snow in the winter."

Both women laughed at the joke, sharing more similes and poking fun at both Crystal's messiness and Laura's fastidiousness. "So other than which is better, paper or pipe and no, I don't want to know the answer," Laura said. "What else did you two talk about?"

"Sisters." Crystal shrugged. "I told her she should be worried more about how her sister was doing than whether the house had drafts in it or not."

"Did you tell her about Patty?"

"A little. I told her we were separated a long time ago and I wouldn't care if she was living in a box, I'd still want to see and spend time with her."

"So that's why she said she wanted to go see Mom tomorrow," Laura said. "I wondered why she had a sudden change of heart." She looked at Crystal thoughtfully. "I guess sometimes we all need to be reminded of what's really important."

"I dunno. I guess so." Crystal shrugged her shoulders and pulled her legs up, resting her wrists on her knees, her back and rest still pressing a pillow against the headboard. A sad, faraway look came over her face.

"How did your session with Jenny go today?" Laura asked after a moment, remembering which day it was. Crystal often tended to be in a more solemn mood after her sessions. Laura wondered if this would be another night her roommate needed to stay up and talk.

"Okay, I guess." Crystal shook her head as if realizing how she must look and stubbed her cigarette out in the ashtray. "It's nothing."

"You sure? It doesn't look like nothing."

"We talked about my mother a bit." Crystal looked down at her hands. "It wasn't one of my better times in her office, I can tell you that." Laura remained quiet, knowing that being there to listen was what was needed now, not comments. "Doc made me do that stupid role playing thing where you pretend you're yelling at your parents." Laura nodded, understanding what was meant even she had never actually participated in a session. Crystal continued, her eyes taking on a faraway look. "You know what's really weird? As much as I thought I hated her, there's still a part of me that still cares." She picked at an imaginary piece of lint on her blanket. "You know how upset you were when you got the call that your mom was sick? I wished I cared enough about my mom to do the same but you know what?" Crystal gave a small snort and shook her head. "If I got a call like that today

I'd go."

"Sounds like a late night tea chat for us," Laura said, knowing the conversation was too serious to be ending any time soon. "We'll go down on the couch, put the TV on in the background and talk."

"Laura? Do you think it's possible to love and hate someone?"

Taking a deep breath, Laura thought about her answer before speaking. "I think we can hate things that a person has done and still love that person. And I think there are those people for whom loving them will never be an option," she said, thinking of Crystal's father. "The best we can hope for is indifference. I don't like to waste energy hating someone. If they've wronged me to the point where I can't forgive or trust them again, I just write them out of my life and move on." Laura got to her feet and held her hand out. "Come on, I thought we were going downstairs. Talk to me nice and I think I might know where some mini marshmallows are hiding for hot chocolate," she offered, knowing Crystal's preference for hot chocolate over tea.

As the hours ticked by and the two women talked, neither was aware of the door to Laura's bedroom being slightly ajar or of how the acoustics of the townhouse caused their voices to carry upstairs. If either had taken the time to look up they would have seen Helen sitting just inside the door, the sliver of light showing her platinum hair a face covered with night cream.

"Where does she keep the serving tray now?" Laura asked, opening and shutting yet another cupboard. Apparently her mother had rearranged the kitchen since the writer last lived there.

"I think it's in the one above the fridge," Bobby said, leaning against the low bar separating the kitchen and living room. He took a cube of cheese off the nearby platter and popped it in his mouth.

"Leave those alone," Laura admonished. "I didn't realize what a mouse you were."

"What can I say? I like cheese," he said, taking another piece.

"So does everyone else and I'd like to see some left on the plate by the time it gets out there." Opening the cupboard over the refrigerator, Laura found the silver serving tray and carefully arranged the cups and carafe on it. "Can I trust you to take that platter out there without eating any more?"

"No," he said cheerfully, taking another piece before picking up the platter and heading into the other room. Laura shook her head and double checked the balance of the tray. Her mother's fine china, which never ever left the china closet, sat gingerly on the silver tray and the last thing Laura wanted to do was chip or break any of them. Certain that the fine cups were safe, she picked up the tray gingerly and pushed her way through the swinging door. "Here's the tea," she announced.

"Excellent, dear," Laura's mother said. "Set it down over here." Gail Taylor was seated in a red velvet chair while her sister sat in the matching chair, the burning hearth just behind them. Bobby stood several feet away next to the side table, happily whittling away at the supply of cheese cubes and crackers. Laura set the tray down and began filling the delicate white and gold cups.

"So what did the doctor say?" Gail asked Helen, resuming the conversation that had been going on prior to Laura bringing out the tea.

"He said Mother should stay inside and avoid anyone who has the flu. I don't know how she's supposed to do that in a nursing home."

"But if she has a bad reaction to the flu shot then what else can they do?" Helen asked, taking the tea cup and saucer Laura handed to her.

"We could always bring Mother home," Helen said. Laura, who had been half listening to the conversation, raised her eyebrows and shook her head.

"Where would you put her? Grandma can't stay here. There's no one to take care of her." Laura realized the error of her words when she was regarded with a frosty look from her mother.

"I handled both you and your brother from diapers to dating and then some. With a visiting nurse there's no reason why Mother couldn't come for a least an extended visit if not a permanent situation." Gail looked at her sister. "Honestly Helen. Listen to my children."

Laura, who now felt like a reprimanded child, handed her aunt a cup of tea and sat back, casting a sidelong glance at her brother. Bobby returned a sympathetic look, knowing his sister was in for it now.

"Now you can't blame the younger generation for not understanding what's important," Helen said, taking a sip of her tea and leaving a glaring red lipstick mark on the fine bone china.

"Helen, do you remember the time we took Daddy's Edsel?" Gail asked. Her sister smiled immediately.

"Oh dear. I haven't thought about that car in years. We certainly got quite the switching when he saw that dent."

"And that was the last time we ever did that. Sometimes I wonder if Robert and I were too soft on our own," Gail said, giving her daughter a significant look. "Just don't you be getting any ideas in your head about putting me in any nursing homes, young lady."

Laura looked appropriately chastised. "I wouldn't dream of it, Mother," she said dutifully. "Bobby, stop eating all the cheese."

"Now don't you go trying to get your brother into trouble," Gail admonished before turning her attention back to her sister. "So how much longer are you going to stay?"

"I don't have any pressing plans until the fifteenth." Helen took another sip of tea. "There's a show opening at the Met that I absolutely have to make an appearance at. You know how much I support the arts."

"That still leaves us with five days," Gail said. "There's no need to have Laura drive you over here each day. Laura, bring your aunt's things over here tonight. She can stay in your old room."

The writer fought hard not to choke on the tea she had been drinking. "Uh, sure Mom. I have to go home and pick up Crystal in an hour or so. I'll drop her things off before we head for dinner." Laura caught the knowing smirk on her aunt's face but didn't want to pursue the cause of it in front of her mother.

"And I suppose paying outlandish prices for dinner is your *i.e.* of the proper way to spend your money? It would certainly make more sense if you two just stayed here for dinner. Bobby, did you take out that roast like I told you to?"

"Yes Mom."

"Then it's settled," Gail said happily, smoothing her wrinkled skirt with her hand. "The two of you can just stay here for dinner. You don't spend enough time with your family as it is and who knows when your aunt will come for another visit."

Un

"Normally a quick thinker, Laura found herself at a loss to come up with an excuse not to stay without offending her mother. "I don't eat red meat."

"Did I say it was a pot roast?" Gail shook her head and looked at her sister. "Honestly, Helen. I don't know about these children. Perhaps Daddy's *i.e.* of going out to the shed with a switch from the hickory tree was a good idea. Laura, you haven't eaten red meat since you were a teenager. Did you think I forgot that? I may not be one hundred percent but I'm not senile."

Laura, wishing the earth would open up and swallow her whole, could only nod.

"I do believe you still enjoy a nice homemade roasted chicken with baked potatoes and perhaps even some of your Aunt Helen's parfait."

Bobby and Laura shared looks. Helen's parfait was treated in their family the same way fruitcakes were treated in others. It was a necessary evil they suffered with year after year while growing up. Perhaps there was a benefit to the two sisters not talking after all. "I'll mention it to Crystal."

"Well call her and ask her," Gail urged.

"She's at work, Mom. I just can't call her up unless it's important."

"And knowing if I'm cooking for four or five isn't important?"

Bobby handed the cordless phone to Laura, knowing who the winner of the battle was.

"All right, Sheridan. Let's get this room finished and then we'll start the cleanup," Josh Thompson, Crystal's supervisor said. "It's after five already."

"Yup, I'm on it," Crystal called back without looking. She had just started securing the drywall to the studs in this section and there were easily four more squares waiting for more than the nails the drywall hangers used to keep them in place temporarily. Time and practice had made the blonde very proficient with the power driver, sinking the drywall screws into the board without breaking the paper and doing it as fast or faster than the men who did the same job in other sections of the building. Still it had been a long day and Crystal's arm was aching from the constant physical labor. Cleanup, the most unpleasant job of the day, was still to come and judging from the mess of drywall pieces scattered throughout the room, it was a job that would take the better part of an hour to finish. Wiping her sweaty brow on the sleeve of her shirt, Crystal picked up the drywall screw gun and loaded her pouch with screws.

"Hey blondie, phone for you," one of the other workers yelled.

"Okay," she yelled back, setting the driver on the workbench and pulling the plug from the outlet before leaving the office in search of the phone. As the work progressed up the floors, Michael had extensions for the phone line installed on each floor to minimize the time his workers were away from their stations. Entering the first room near the stairs, Crystal saw the phone sitting on one chair while another chair sat empty next to it. A blinking light next to one of the buttons showed someone waiting. Wondering who would call her at work and not on her pager, Crystal picked up the phone and pressed the button. "This is Crystal."

"Crystal, it's Laura. Sorry to bother you at work but my mother wants to make a home cooked meal tonight."

"Oh, that's no problem. We can make it some other night," Crystal said, misunderstanding Laura's words to mean she was being uninvited for dinner. "I'll just volunteer to work late tonight. There's certainly enough work to do around here."

"You mean you don't want to go?"

"Huh? I thought you just said your mother wants you to have dinner at her place tonight?"

"She does. But the invite is for both of us, not just me. Come on, you can't make me go through this alone. You have to come."

"Oh, I'm sorry. I thought you were canceling with me to go over there." Crystal sat down in the empty chair. "I have to stop at the house and shower and change. It's hot as hell today and I've been working my ass off."

"That's no problem," Laura said. "I have to come home and pack up Aunt Helen's things anyway so there'll be plenty of time for you to get ready. Helen's going to stay with Mom for the rest of her trip."

"Great. It'll be nice to walk into the bathroom and not smell her perfume all over the place." All around her, Crystal could hear the sounds of power tools. "Hey Laura, I have to get going here. I should be home around six thirty or so."

"All right. I'll meet you at our place and then we can go in my car. Oh, and Crystal?"

"Yeah?"

"I would never cancel a date with you, no matter what else was going on," Laura said firmly. "I'll see you in about an hour and a half."

Crystal said a quick goodbye and hung up the phone, staring at it for a moment. Dinner with her family? Suddenly cleanup didn't seem so bad after all.

Crystal's thought that it would be a casual dinner were quickly dashed when she saw the table in the dining room decked out with a tablecloth and centerpiece. "Oh good, you're here," Gail said, coming out from the kitchen.

"Mom, Bobby and I can get the dinner cooking. You should be sitting down and resting," Laura protested, silently nudging Crystal toward the couch.

"Nonsense. I may be tired but I'm fully capable of cutting a few potatoes," her mother argued, wiping her hands on her apron. "It's good to see you again, Crystal. Welcome to my home."

"Thank you, Mrs. Taylor," Crystal answered. "Is there anything I can do help?"

"As a matter of fact there is. If you open the cabinet there you'll find all the place settings. Be a dear and set the table. I'll have Bobby bring out the silverware and napkins." Gail removed her apron as she turned to her daughter. "Since you think I'm an invalid now, you can just march yourself out to the kitchen and help your brother with the gravy." She handed the apron to Laura. "Helen," she called. "The children are going to finish up dinner. Let's go sit on the veranda and enjoy the sunset."

"Right behind you," Helen said as she came through the swinging door from the kitchen. "Laura, check under the bar and see if there are any daiquiri mixes, will you dear?"

"I'm sure there's some," Gail agreed. "Laura, you'll find the blender down next to the stove and of course you know where to find the *i.e.* None for me, the doctor said I shouldn't touch alcohol with my medication. I'll have an *i.e.* tea and make sure you get something for your guest."

Laura, still wondering how she changed from twenty eight to fifteen all of the sudden, nodded and shared a look with Crystal before disappearing into the kitchen.

Terrified of chipping the fine china, Crystal took the plates, cups and saucers out one at a time, setting them gingerly on the table. Bobby came into the dining room with a large wooden box. "Hey Crystal."

"Hi Bobby, how ya doing?"

"I think I've been sold into slavery but I'm not sure yet," he joked. "Mom and Aunt Helen have been on me all afternoon." He set the box on the table. "Don't know why we're going to all this trouble just for dinner. It's just you, Aunt Helen and Laura. Mom hasn't broken out the good plates since the last time Grandma came to visit." He opened the box, which easily was half as wide as it was long, to reveal a red velvet interior displaying a full set of silver eating utensils. "Good," he said. "At least I don't have to polish them."

There were a multitude of forks, spoons and knives in the set, along with several larger serving utensils. Bobby quickly distributed the silverware around the table, each place setting receiving two forks, three spoons and one butter knife. The box was stored away on the floor beneath the china cabinet and steak knives were taken from the drawer of the buffet. "Hey, you forgot the soup bowls."

"Oh." Crystal reached into the cabinet, her fingers barely touching the small bowls on the upper shelf.

"Not those. They're for desserts." He reached around her and pointed at the cluster of bowls tucked neatly away in the back. "Trust me, you'll love Mom's chicken and rice soup. I've got to see if Laura needs anything." As he walked past the table, Bobby stopped and frowned at the place settings. Crystal knew immediately she had done something incorrectly but to her relief all Laura's brother did was reverse the position of two spoons without comment and left the room.

Guess it's a good thing I don't throw dinner parties, eh? As she made her way around the table and correcting the order of the spoons, Crystal smiled at Bobby's thoughtfulness and tact. Just like his sister, she thought. Finishing up the setting of the table, Crystal decided to see how things were going in the kitchen.

"I know how to do this," Laura was saying as Crystal pushed her way through the swinging door and entered the kitchen.

"But you're not doing it right. Mom uses a baster, not a brush," Bobby objected, holding the baster in his hand.

"I prefer the brush," Laura said calmly, dipping the brush in the juices and moving it over the top of the browning chicken.

"But it's Mom's chicken."

"Bobby, do you really think Mom's going to be able to tell if I used a brush or a baster?" She noticed Crystal standing there. "Hi there. Is the table all set?"

"Yeah." Crystal looked at Bobby and smiled her silent thanks.

"Good," Laura said. "Probably about fifteen minutes more for the chicken and by then everything else will be ready."

"Good, just enough time for a cigarette."

"Hey, let me go get mine. I'll be right back. Don't go without me," Bobby said, moving past them and running upstairs to return a few minutes later with a blue pack in his hands. "All set."

"Okay," Crystal said.

"Wait, let's go out front. Aunt Helen doesn't know I smoke and Mom has a fit when I do it in front of her," he said, holding the swinging door open. Crystal nodded and followed him out the front door.

The concrete and slate steps framed in red brick were cool, the sun having moved over to the other side of the house hours before. Still the pair sat down, Crystal passing her lighter to Bobby after getting her own cigarette going. "Thanks for earlier," she said, taking the lighter back.

"No prob," he said, exhaling a long plume of smoke. "I only know it because Mom drilled it into me and Laura years ago."

"My mother preferred TV dinners," Crystal said, looking past the large elm to the quiet street. "Nice neighborhood."

Bobby snorted. "It's full of snobs. I'd rather kick it with the guys down on Second Street."

Knowing what part of the city Second Street was in, Crystal looked at Bobby. "Does your mother know you hang there?" She was answered with a hearty laugh.

"Are you kidding? She'd have a stroke thinking I was doing drugs or something," he said. "I tell her I'm going to the mall and she's happy with that."

"Are you?" Crystal asked. When he didn't answer right away, she nodded and looked back at the street. "Uh huh. Be careful."

"I didn't say

."

"You didn't have to," she interrupted. "I wasn't raised in suburbia, Bobby. I know the score. You're not hanging out on Second Street unless you're using or dealing." Debating how far she should go, Crystal softened her tone and looked at him seriously. "You know the condemned building near the Ladyslipper?"

"Yeah?"

Crystal took a deep breath. "About five years ago I was hanging out around there. In fact, I used to crash on the second floor of that building."

"That place has been boarded up for as long as I can remember," he said.

"Yup," she agreed. "But a few nails aren't going to keep people out of an abandoned building when they want to get in." She shrugged. "It was close to the dive I worked at and my dealer." Crystal wondered briefly how much of her past Laura had shared with Bobby but decided that the risk was worth it. "I wasn't the only one hanging there. There was probably about twenty or twenty five of us that regularly stayed there."

"Wow," he gasped in surprise, clearly having trouble reconciling the woman before him with the person he was being told about. "Weren't you scared?"

Crystal thought about it for a few seconds. "I don't think so. By that point I don't think I cared about anything. All I wanted to do was sit back and get high then go work to earn some more money to buy more coke."

"Did you ever shoot up?" he asked. Crystal thought it an odd question but shook her head.

"No. I knew about AIDS and I didn't trust anyone. Have you?"

Bobby shook his head. "No but I've been told it gets you high fast."

"Jumping out an airplane without a parachute will get you to the ground faster but it's still not a good idea." Crystal looked deeply into his blue eyes. "It's like playing Russian Roulette with your life, Bobby. All the hard stuff. It'll happily kill you if it gets a chance. I've seen it."

"You've seen someone die?"

"Two," she admitted. "One was this crack head named Melissa who OD'd. I think she got a bad batch because it hit her really quick. She was gone before the ambulance ever got there. The other was a guy I didn't know. I was woken up by the sound of a gunshot but I wasn't stupid enough to go check it out. They found the guy's body in the alley the next morning."

"Oh God, that's horrible," he said.

"That's what the hard stuff will do to you. That guy probably died because of a deal gone bad. It happens all the time out there. Bobby, you have everything going for you. You're young, good looking, smart, have a scholarship to a good school. You can be anything you want. Don't waste it by getting mixed up in coke." By the way he flinched Crystal knew she was right about the drug he was experimenting with.

Bobby tore the burning end off of his cigarette and put the filter in his pocket. "I've only done it a few times. Usually I just share a joint with a few friends."

"Are they the same friends who shared their coke with you?"

"Yeah, Tyrone brought it with him one day."

Crystal nodded knowingly. "Bet he didn't even charge you since it was your first time, right? Just a gift from a friend?"

"Yeah, his treat."

"For now. When he has you hooked there won't be any freebies." Crystal knew she was pushing but it was too important for her not to. "Look

Bobby, I'm not a prude." She gave a short laugh. "In fact I've done many things I'm ashamed of, things I'd rather not have people know about me but do know what I'm talking about. It's one thing to have a joint or two once in a while to relax but it's another to get messed up with the drugs you're looking at." She lowered her head. "If I could go back to when I was your age, I'd change so many things about what I did with my life, starting with giving two of those years up to living like a junkie on the e.g. of death." Crystal mimicked Bobby's actions with her cigarette, getting the hint that Mrs. Taylor would not appreciate butts on her front walk. "Just remember that the only person who's looking out for you is you."

Bobby swallowed and looked down at his hands. "You won't tell Mom or Laura what we talked about, will you?"

"Of course not. It's your life and your decision to make." Crystal stood up and put her hand on the door handle.

"My friend Mike played center last year on our team," Bobby began, rising to his feet as well. "He failed a random drug test. Lost his scholarship. He was really counting on it too. Now if he gets enough with grants and loans he might be able to afford city college."

"Aren't you glad you're number didn't come up that day?" she asked.

"Actually yeah," he admitted. "I was sweating it out there when Coach was reading off the names of the guys who had to go piss in the cups." He shuddered at the memory. "I could have ended up with like Mike."

"I don't think anyone would have wanted that, least of all you," Crystal said softly. "Come on, we gotta get in there before they start looking for us."

"Yeah," he agreed. "Crystal?"

"Yeah?"

"Thanks for talking to me," he said, surprising her with a brief hug. "Even if you're not Laura's girlfriend, I'm still glad to know you."

" Crystal hesitated, unsure how to respond. Finally for lack of anything better she mumbled her thanks and led the way inside.

The rectangular table sat six without the leaf, Helen and Gail on opposite ends. Laura and Bobby sat on either side of their mother while Crystal took the seat next to her roommate. When the Taylor family reached their hands out to the persons on either side of them, it took Crystal by surprise. Bobby shifted his seat to reach past the empty place and grasp his aunt's hand. Saying grace was not something Crystal had ever seen Laura do at home. She hesitantly took the hands being offered to her, Laura's on her left and Helen's on her right. There was a definite difference between the two, she noted. Laura's touch was warm, their fingers intertwining with the writer's thumb moving slowly back and forth atop her own. Helen's grip was firmer, the skin not nearly as soft as Laura's. Noting everyone had lowered their heads, she followed suit, pleased when Gail spoke alone, ending her fear that they would recite some prayer that she didn't know.

"We thank God for the gifts we are about to receive and for bringing my family together tonight," Gail began. "Thank you for bringing my sister to me and giving me my health back. Bless our family that could not be here with us tonight and watch over them as you watch over us. We are happy to have Crystal here with us and we ask that you watch over her as well." Surprised, Crystal raised her head up and felt a reassuring squeeze in her left hand. Gail finished the grace and everyone separated their hands. While she was happy to be freed from Helen's grip, finding the bony fingers holding hers to be uncomfortable but felt only coolness and loss when Laura released her grip. For someone who hated to be touched and avoided it whenever possible, Crystal found it disconcerting to realize that she didn't mind Laura touching her. Indeed, as she mimicked the actions of those around her, passing platters and bowls around the table, taking portions from each, Crystal found herself glancing to the left frequently, catching glimpses of Laura out of the corner of her eye. The writer was questioning Bobby about what courses he planned on taking in his first semester, allowing the blonde to watch her unobserved

or so she thought. A glance to the right would have shown Helen's eyes watching her like a hawk, noting each movement and look. Laura's hair had grown beyond the point where it should have been trimmed, if only to straighten out the ends which were beginning to curl along the *e.g.* of the writer's collar. From the shampoo bottles in the shower, Crystal knew Laura's hair tended to get split ends, the evidence visible in the way the dark hair seemed almost frizzy at the ends. It occurred to her that Laura wasn't the only one due for a haircut, her own blonde locks getting close to the longest point Crystal had ever let them grow and she wondered if perhaps a shorter style might not be such a bad *i.e.* after all. It certainly would make it easier to work if she didn't have to keep putting it in a ponytail to keep it off the back of her neck while she labored. Moving her attention away from hair, she took in other sights

the eyebrows that seemed to always threaten to blend together into one solid bar above Laura's eyebrows, no doubt the reason for the tweezers that always sat on the shelf next to the toothbrushes. A slight bump at the bridge of the nose, caused according to Laura by forgetting the laws of physics and applying the front brake of her ten speed without also engaging the rear one. Crystal also knew her roommate had a different accident on her bicycle resulting in a broken wrist when she was twelve but there was no permanent evidence of that one. Realizing she was no longer sneaking glances but actually staring, Crystal blushed slightly and turned her attention back to the plate in front of her. She offered her compliments on the meal without singling out any particular person, pleased when Gail, Bobby and Laura smiled, obviously all three believing they were responsible for the way dinner turned out.

"So Crystal," Helen said. "Any *i.e.* who you're going to vote for?"

"Uh no, not yet," she lied, knowing the older woman was referring to the upcoming presidential election. She planned on voting democratic but know Laura's mother was a republican and didn't want to get into a discussion about politics.

"Aunt Helen, you know politics and religion are two subjects that don't make for good conversation," Laura said admonishingly. Crystal suspected the writer was trying to steer her aunt away from any subject that might start a disagreement.

"My friends and I often have lively discussions about politics," Helen protested, then sighed. "But I suppose we can find another avenue to talk about. Do you think the Yankees have a chance this year?"

Bobby jumped at that one. "Are you kidding? With their shortstop there's no way they're going to miss the playoffs. He doesn't let anything get past him."

"He can't catch the ones that go over the fence and I think the Mets are going to be the only New York team we'll see in the postseason," Laura said. "Seven people in their starting lineup are still batting over three hundred and it's almost September."

"That's because they're in the National League where there aren't any good pitchers," he argued, stabbing at his chicken with his fork. "The Bronx Bombers will come back, you wait and see."

"How my two children could grow up in a home that loves the Red Sox and be fans of New York teams, I'll never know," Gail said in a much put upon voice. She looked at Crystal. "You should have seen how she was in eighty six," she said, referring to Laura. "Her father was still alive at that time and we were all watching game six in the living room." Her eyes grew distant as she relayed the memory. "You should have seen her. The Mets were on the verge of losing it all, down to their last out and her father was ecstatic. Laura just sat there pouting and pulling that stupid Mets hat down over her eyes."

"But the Mets won that year, didn't they?" Crystal asked.

"Yeah but only because the Red Sucks first baseman let the ball bobble through his legs," Bobby said. Looking to the left, Crystal noticed the smile on Laura's face.

"All's fair in love war and the world series," Laura said. "Dad was pretty upset. I never heard him swear so much but all I could do was jump around the room for joy."

"And your father was most appreciative of the way you tore through the newspaper the next morning, making sure to point out the headline of the sports section to him," Gail said with a touch of reproach in her voice.

"I was just a teenager then, Mom," Laura defended, the smile leaving her face.

"Of course you were, pumpkin," Helen said. "So what about you, Crystal? What team do you like?"

Crystal suspected no one really cared which team she did or did not like but sensed that Helen was trying to bring her into the conversation. Putting her fork down, she took a moment to dab at her lips with the napkin. "I don't really care about baseball."

"I suggest being a Mets fan if you want any peace," Bobby said. "Especially since they're in first place and there's only ten games left to the regular season. If they make the playoffs, I'm sure Sis will be watching every game on TV." A wicked smirk came to his face and he looked at his sister although he continued to speak to Crystal. "Then again, if you rooted whatever teams were playing against the Mets, it'd certainly make Laura flip her lid."

"Now don't you go giving her ideas," Laura warned.

"Aw why not?" he teased. "You need someone to give you a hard time since I can't be there to do it." He gave an impish smile which his sister returned with a smile that was anything but friendly.

"Keep it up and I'll email you a virus," Laura threatened.

"And I'll put your phone number all over the bathroom walls at school," he playfully threatened back.

"All right, enough of that, you two," their mother admonished. "Honestly, it's just like when they were younger," she said to Helen who nodded in agreement.

"Why do you think I never took the two of them for visits at the same time?" Helen asked. "I knew better."

Crystal listened to the conversation going on around her. She could never remember a peaceful dinner with her own family, most being made up of TV dinners eaten off trays in the living room with Patty while her mother slept off her day's drinking. The big holidays like Thanksgiving or Christmas usually were marked by her father making loud and disparaging remarks about whatever member of the family was hosting the event and usually ending with loud arguments between her parents once they were home. Crystal doubted Laura had ever experienced anything like that and wondered if she would be invited back for another dinner once the holidays came around. Crystal was surprised to find she was hoping for just that.

After dinner Bobby offered to clear the table while Laura made coffee and Helen and Gail went to the living room. Unsure what to do with herself, Crystal excused herself and stepped outside for a cigarette. Assuming that the sisters were chatting away happily, she was surprised when the back door opened and Helen stepped out, her silver cigarette case in hand. "Mind if I join you?"

"Not at all," Crystal said, motioning at an empty chair. The veranda was framed in red brick, contrasting nicely with the cream colored furniture and the deep green grass surrounding it. "It's very nice out here," she commented.

"Gail paid a fortune to have someone do the landscaping," Helen explained. "I remember she used to have this god awful oak tree right in the middle of the yard. It was fine for the kids to climb or put a swing on but it ruined the whole effect of the yard." The older woman took a puff of her cigarette, the filtered end ringed with her lipstick. "So what did you think of dinner?"

"It was very good. I enjoyed it," Crystal offered, her expression turning to one of confusion when she saw Helen shake her head and smile.

"I didn't mean the food," she explained. "I get the feeling that you're not one for being around a lot of people. You tried very hard to avoid joining in any of the discussions unless you were asked a direct question."

Crystal blinked and took a drag of her cigarette, surprised that her quietness had been picked up on. "I guess I'm not much for social things. I never know what to say."

Helen laughed. "Honey this wasn't a social occasion, this was just family getting together for dinner."

"I'm not family," the blonde pointed out.

"So it was family plus one," Helen corrected. "You looked so uncomfortable I thought you were going to bolt out the door when I took your hand for grace."

"I'm just not used to it," Crystal said. "It's not something my family ever did."

Helen nodded and was quiet for a minute. "You know if there was something going on between you and my niece that I wouldn't mind." Crystal looked up quickly and opened her mouth to protest but was stopped by the older woman's upraised hand. "Now I know what both of you have said and judging from the way both of your bedrooms look it seems to be the case but don't think I didn't notice the way you two act around each other either. I may be over fifty but I'm not blind to the signs." She stubbed the half finished cigarette into the pie tin being used as a makeshift ashtray. "Personally I think the two of you are just not looking at what's right in front of your faces."

"I'm not gay," Crystal said, wondering just what 'signs' Helen had seen. Was it the way Laura caressed her hand during grace? The gentle touches on the shoulder?

"So you say," Helen said, not sounding at all convinced of that fact. "You told me the other day that you haven't been in any serious relationships so

how do you know?"

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"Stymied, Crystal tried to think of an answer. Of course she was straight, right? After all, she had never been with a woman and never looked as a woman as a sexual partner. The fact she felt closer to Laura than anyone else in her current life didn't mean that she wanted to pursue a lesbian relationship with her. No, Laura was just a good friend who held her when she cried, who made dinner every night and took the time to listen whenever she needed to talk. They were just close because they lived together, right? "

"Crystal swallowed and tried again. "It's just not anything I've ever thought about." She took a final drag of her cigarette and put it out in the ashtray.

"Perhaps you should," Helen said gently, reaching up with her fingers to straighten out the wild mess of platinum hair being blown by the gentle breeze. "I may be a hopeless romantic but I know that love sometimes shows up in the most unexpected places. You shouldn't shut the doors without at least taking a look at what's inside." Just then the door opened and Laura stuck her head out.

"Hey, I found the old home movies and Bobby just went to the attic to get the screen. Crystal, do you want to watch some boring home movies?"

"Oh," Helen said excitedly, pushing herself up from her chair. "I haven't seen those in years. You were such a cute little girl."

"Sure, sounds like fun," Crystal said, rising from her chair as well. From the portraits and photos lining the walls of the house, she had a good *i.e.* of how Laura looked as a child but to actually see a home movie would give a life to those images. It also helped that the movies would serve as a way to end the conversation between her and Helen. The older woman entered the house first and Crystal was very aware of Laura holding the door open for her and the way the writer's hand seemed to brush her shoulder as she walked past.

"What?" Laura asked, causing Crystal to realize she had been staring.

"Oh nothing, just got lost in thought, I guess," the blonde woman replied lamely, hoping her answer did not sound as stupid to Laura as it did to her. The living room boasted two chairs and a low couch. Bobby rearranged the furniture so they were all facing the portable movie screen and took his seat on the right side of the couch while Gail and Helen took possession of the chairs. Feeling that it would look silly to sit on the floor when there was space available on the couch, Crystal took a seat at the left end, leaving the center for Laura, who was busy threading the film through the projector. When Laura did sit down, Crystal decided the couch wasn't as wide as she had originally thought. Her body was pressed against Laura from hip to shoulder. The film was starting, showing a gangly girl of ten and a baby dressed in blue sitting on the grass in front of a house.

"Forgot the lights," Bobby said, rising to his feet. Crystal looked over at Helen, surprised to see the older woman looking back with a knowing smile on her face. Crystal wanted to scowl but thought it inappropriate since she was a guest and turned her attention to the screen where the scene had changed to show Laura's mother and a big burly man with short white hair that she could only assume was Laura's father. Crystal started when she felt warm breath near her ear.

"There really are some funny parts in here," Laura whispered. "Like when Bobby climbed into the fish tank trying to catch Dad's prized angel fish. Mom caught it and filmed it before Dad got home."

"Uh huh," Crystal murmured, hoping Laura would turn her attention back to the screen, certain that Helen could somehow see in the dark and was smiling at them.

"That wasn't so bad," Laura said as she backed the Jeep out of the driveway.

"It was fine. Your family is very nice," Crystal said, looking out the passenger window as the Taylor house slowly slipped out of sight.

"I don't think Mom had to break out the photo albums, especially the baby pictures."

"Oh I thought those were cute, especially the tub pictures." Crystal said but the teasing tone that should have been there was conspicuously absent.

"Is something bothering you?" Laura ventured.

"Naw, just have a lot on my mind," came the dismissive answer. It didn't satisfy the writer at all, especially when she looked over and saw the faraway look on Crystal's face.

"It helps to share."

"Naw, I just need to think some things out." Clearly it wasn't a subject that Crystal wanted to share. Laura tried twice more on the ride home to initiate a conversation only to give up when she could not get anything more than one or two word answers. When they arrived home, Crystal said her good nights and immediately disappeared into her bedroom, leaving Laura to wonder what had happened at her mother's house to have such an effect on the younger woman's mood.

Part 13

R-r-r-rrrr, click. R-r-r-r-rrrr, click. "Dammit, why won't you start?" Slamming her hand against the steering wheel, Crystal turned the ignition back to the off position and tried again. This time the Omni started but not without a great deal of fuss and a misfire. It had been a good day at work but to come out and spend ten minutes trying to get her car started had soured Crystal's mood considerably. When she was finally certain that the hatchback would stay running, she put the car in gear and pulled out of her parking space. The blocks passed as the blonde let her mind wander over the day's events. After six weeks of sweat and labor, the renovations and restoration of the building was almost complete. When Michael had called her into the office shortly before the end of her shift, Crystal feared it was to tell her that there was no more work for her to do. To her surprise, he actually called her in to make certain she wanted to work on the next project he had lined up, renovating an old school into a set of low income apartments. To top it off, he gave her a dollar an hour raise, citing her flexibility and willingness to learn new jobs, minimizing down time. To some people an extra forty dollars a week before taxes wasn't much but to Crystal it meant she could afford to pay for her therapy sessions without having to juggle the other bills or work too many hours of overtime.

And those sessions with Jenny Foster became more important as each week passed. Crystal still refused to attend the Tuesday night women's support group but she found herself more willing to talk about her feelings with her therapist. The role playing and talking about her father were still difficult, often ending up with Crystal needing to take time to get her anger, or on rare occasion her tears, under control. Even then it always meant a long night for her and Laura as Crystal would stay up late talking to her best friend about what had happened in her therapy session and how she was feeling. Laura never seemed to mind the heavy conversations, even making the point of asking about them whenever she knew Crystal had a session scheduled for that day. The two women had gotten into a habit when it came to talk, sitting on opposite ends of the couch with their feet sharing the middle cushion. It made it easier for Crystal to talk, giving her the space she needed but still close enough to get a hug when the pain was too great.

Turning onto the highway, Crystal let her thoughts drift to the relationship she and Laura shared. Since Helen's observation opened her eyes, Crystal found herself very aware of her roommate's presence and actions. There was never anything sexual or even romantic about the way Laura treated her but Crystal was aware of the affection and closeness building between them. It was the little things, she decided. A casual brush against her shoulder whenever the writer passed by, the dinner waiting for her each night, the evenings spent together on the couch watching television or sitting at the table working on the modules for the GED exam. Crystal could swear once she even felt Laura's lips brush against the top of her head during an intensely emotional chat session where she had sought the safety of the writer's embrace to release tears that otherwise refused to fall.

Rather than being disturbed by the growing closeness, Crystal found herself most agreeable to it. She willingly tagged along to the softball games and inevitable trips to the lesbian bar afterward. When Bobby left for college, Crystal went with Laura to wish him good luck, even accepting a hug from the young man and tousling his blond hair as if he were her own little brother. Since her early working hours meant that she was usually the first one up in the mornings, Crystal had taken it upon herself to make sure there was always fresh coffee waiting for when Laura awakened. Then of course there was the way the two of them had come to an unspoken compromise with each other in terms of their vastly different attitudes toward neatness and order. Crystal made sure she put the newspaper back into some semblance of order and Laura had not made a comment in quite a while about the panties that dried on the shower rod each day.

Tonight was a special night and Crystal could only smile to herself and glance over at the brightly wrapped package sitting on the passenger seat. It was Laura's birthday and despite how tight her funds were, Crystal was bound and determined to get her best friend a special present. It had taken several trips to various stores before she passed a kiosk in the middle of the mall and spotted the perfect present sitting on an upper shelf. With little thought to the cost, she ordered it, paying extra for the special items she wanted on it and waiting over two weeks for it to come in. Crystal wanted to pick up a birthday card but after checking dozens of them could not find one to properly express how she felt about Laura. In the end she gave up, deciding that the present was always appreciated more than the card. Now the time had come to finally take it out of the car and give it to her friend and Crystal found herself oddly nervous as she approached their townhouse complex. Would Laura really like it? Would a gift certificate have been better? Shaking the thoughts out of her mind, Crystal guided the Omni into the parking space and shut the ignition off, listening unhappily as the car continued to sputter and run for a few seconds before finally going silent.

When she entered the house, Crystal was surprised not to see Laura waiting downstairs for her as had been the case for every evening for the last few weeks. The faint sound of the shower clued her as to where Laura was and Crystal quickly hid the present between the couch and the bookshelf, planning on giving it after dinner. Walking into the kitchen, she was surprised to find that dinner was not in the oven nor were there any signs that Laura was planning on making anything. Confused, Crystal returned to the living room and sat down on the couch. Laura had not said anything to her about going out for dinner. Hearing the shower stop, Crystal shifted sideways so she could see the stairs. "I'm home," she called when Laura stepped out of the bathroom.

"I'll be down in a few minutes," came the reply before the door to Laura's bedroom shut.

When Laura came downstairs a few minutes later, Crystal was surprised to see her wearing sweat pants and a lavender t-shirt displaying a double women's symbol. Certainly not an outfit to wear if going out to dinner. "How was work?" Laura asked.

"Busy. We're trying to finish up everything by the first week in October and I think it's going to be close. You have plans for dinner?"

"Yes, veggie pizza from Coloso's," Laura said as she took her usual seat on the couch, propping her bare feet on the center cushion and smiling at the face Crystal made at the suggestion. "I ordered you a supreme, no anchovies and there's a pepperoni, mushroom and a cheese one coming as well. They should be here by seven."

Now Crystal was really confused. "Why so many pizzas?"

"The boys are coming over, so is Jenny. Didn't I tell you?"

"No."

"We always have a pizza party for my birthday. I'm sorry, I must have forgotten to mention it."

"Oh, that's fine. I just thought

well, never mind what I thought," Crystal said. "Happy birthday, by the way."

"Thanks. Jenny should be here in a few minutes and Peter called. They're running late but they should be here by seven thirty. We'll just reheat the pizza if we need to."

"Sounds like fun." Crystal tried to keep her voice cheerful but inside she was even more nervous than before. It was one thing to give Laura her present alone, it was quite another to have it opened in front of everyone else. Why didn't I get a gift certificate instead? "Um, if they're all coming over, I'd better go change." She went to stand up but found herself stopped by Laura's hand on her wrist.

"Wait a minute. Are you okay? Seems like something is bothering you."

"No," she lied. "I'm probably just tired from work. I'll take a shower and change. Be down in a little bit."

"Hey Crystal?"

"Yeah?"

"Going for a new style with your hair?" Laura grinned. "I don't think white on blonde is a good combination."

"What?" Crystal reached up and sure enough felt more than one spot where white paint had taken residence on her head. "Must have been when I was doing the cutting in near the ceiling. I had the brush above my head most of the time." Aware of the time, she stood up and scooted past Laura on her way to the stairs. "Did you save me any hot water?"

"Better make it a quick shower, I'm afraid," Laura said apologetically. "I had to wait for the dishwasher to finish before I went in to take mine."

Crystal nodded, knowing her hair would have to be washed first lest the hot water ran out and she was unable to get the paint out. The last thing she wanted was to face their mutual friends with streaks or spots of white in her hair. As she made her way up the stairs, Crystal lifted her arm and sniffed delicately, deciding there was something far more offensive she did not want to face her friends with. She only hoped the hot water would last long enough.

Crystal finished her shower and was just coming down the stairs when the doorbell rang. "I'll get it," Laura called.

"Well happy twenty-ninth birthday!" Jenny said when the door opened, giving her ex-lover a kiss on the cheek along with a one armed hug, the other hand holding Laura's present.

"Thank you, hon." Laura set the present on the side table and motioned at the couch. "Do you want something to drink? The pizza won't be here for at least fifteen minutes or so."

"You know what I like," Jenny said. "Hi Crystal."

"Hi Doc."

"Have a seat," Laura said. "Crystal, can I get you anything?"

"I'm all set," she replied, resuming her seat at the end of the couch. A quick glance over the side showed her present was still hidden from view. Jenny sat down at the other end and kicked her shoes under the table.

"Are the boys coming?" Jenny asked.

"They're running late but they said they'd be here. Jen, orange or root beer?"

"Orange sounds good. Goes well with pepperoni pizza." Jenny leaned over and lowered her voice so it would not carry to the kitchen. "So what'd you get her?"

Crystal fidgeted. "Well um

just a little something. What did you get her?"

"Un uh, you don't tell, I don't tell." Jenny smiled and straightened up just as Laura came out of the kitchen with two tall glasses of soda in her hands. Frowning, Crystal looked over at the side table where a flat rectangular shirt box wrapped with red paper sat and tried to figure out what could be hidden inside.

"Here you go," the writer said, handing one glass to Jenny and keeping the other for herself, settling down into the chair. "Guess who I heard from today."

"Who?"

"Use a coaster please."

Jenny rolled her eyes and reached for a coaster. "Better? Now who called?"

"Shelly," Laura said with a smile.

"Shelly? Jet setting Shelly? What's she been up to?"

"She's getting married

to an Alaskan fisherman."

Jenny let out a whoop and clapped her hands. "I can't believe it. Miss I always have a tan is going to live up in the frozen north?"

"That's what she says." Laura took a sip. "I give it a year before she starts longing for the friendly skies and warmer climates."

"You never know. It could be true love. Stranger things have happened."

Crystal, who had no *i.e.* who they were talking about, quietly watched the exchange and continued to fret over her choice of present. Lost in her insecurities, she missed Jenny addressing her the first time. "I'm sorry, what?"

"Which time?" Jenny patted her on the shoulder. "What planet did you go to anyway?"

"It's nothing," Crystal said, abruptly standing up. "Does anyone need anything from the kitchen?" The answer was obvious in the nearly full glasses Jenny and Laura were holding. "Guess not. Be right back."

The kitchen provided little relief other than the bottle of beer Crystal quickly acquired from the refrigerator. The doorbell chimed, announcing the arrival of Peter and Michael. Crystal hesitantly made her way out from the kitchen, more than a little worried that her present wouldn't hold up to the large box being cradled in Michael's arms.

The pizza arrived shortly after, providing Crystal with some reprieve before the moment arrived and Laura took her place on the couch. Michael sat in the chair while the wiry Peter perched himself on the arm. Crystal sat where she usually did at the far end of the couch, her present still hidden between the side and the bookshelf. Jenny sat on the couch arm to Laura's left, leaving the center cushion open to place the presents.

Laura opened Jenny's present first, eyes widening in surprise as she pulled the thick terrycloth robe out of the box. It was a rich cream color, a shade that Crystal felt complimented Laura's dark hair nicely. Laura thanked her ex-lover profusely for the gift, agreeing that a nice warm robe was most welcome with the coming winter.

"Our turn," Peter said, taking the large box from its resting place on the floor and setting it on the coffee table. "Now before you get excited about the box, that's not what's inside," he warned, wringing his hands excitedly. "Well go on, open it up."

"I'll have you know Mister Prim and Proper over here ruined his manicure looking for these," Michael said, reaching up with his hand to brush his wayward blond hair into place.

Crystal watched as Laura ignored the promise of a rather nice looking crock pot on the box label and tore back the tape keeping it sealed. It took some seconds for the writer to find the actual presents hidden with the crumpled newspaper. When she did, Crystal was surprised to see her holding a set of antique wall lights.

"Oh, they're perfect," Laura said, setting one down to examine its mate in more detail. Personally Crystal thought they were hideous, the brass wall plate sporting a collection of swirls and the base where the bulb went was designed in the form of some medieval creature with a diabolical grin on its rounded features holding up the hardware. Crystal decided her roommate had an odd sense of what perfect was. "Where on earth did you find them?"

"Well when I put those simple lights in on the balcony and deck I knew you didn't like their style," Michael began.

"And the griffins are a nice touch, don't you think?" Peter asked, obviously proud of his choice. "I saw a set of wrought iron coach lamp style lights but I thought they were just too common. Imagine my surprise to find these in the bottom of a box in the back of the dealer's showroom."

"Of course I'll get them installed before the cold sets in," Michael promised.

Laura looked appropriately pleased with her present and reluctantly put it back in the box before all eyes turned to Crystal expectantly.

"Oh." Realizing it was her turn, the blonde reached over the arm of the couch and retrieved her present, shyly handing it to Laura and wishing more than anything that she had gotten the gift certificate instead. "I didn't know what to get," she offered in her defense as Laura carefully tugged along the seams and removed the paper. Then there was nowhere to hide, the wooden and brass gift coming out of the box to be held between Laura's hands.

Cut from fine cherry, the solid base supported the curved letters of Laura's name resting atop it. Affixed on either side of the name was a quill on the left and a magnifying glass on the right. A discrete brass holder provided a place for the matching pen and pencil to reside. "It's beautiful," Laura said honestly, visibly moved by the sentiment.

Crystal shrugged, certain her roommate was just being gracious. "Well, you're a mystery writer and

well, I just saw it and thought you'd like it."

"I love it," Laura said, reaching over and pulling Crystal into a one handed hug. "It's really a very thoughtful gift. Thank you very much."

"You're welcome," the blonde mumbled, still unsure of the sincerity of the words.

"It is very nice," Jenny said, the boys nodding and adding their words. One by one they took the ornate pen and pencil holder to look at and all agreed that it was perfect for their favorite mystery writer.

"What a night," Laura said after seeing the boys to the door. She looked at the time and sighed, seriously considering letting the vacuuming wait until morning. The box the robe came in was carefully folded and put with the other boxes stored in the closet. One never knew when one needed a box. Michael and Peter's present was left in its box, moved to a corner away from the traffic flow until the contractor had time to install the lights. With the robe draped over her arm and the personalized desk accessory in her hands, Laura favored her roommate with another smile. "This really is beautiful," she said, indicating Crystal's present. "What made you think of it?"

Crystal shrugged. "I actually didn't know what I was going to get you. I saw one of these at the mall and I just thought you would like it."

"I've never seen one with a quill and magnifying glass before. It's really unique. I'm putting this right on my desk so I can see it whenever I'm writing." Before Crystal could react, Laura used her free hand to pull the younger woman in for another hug. "It really is special and I love it. Thank you."

Crystal was feeling better about the gift and smiled when Laura released her. "I'm really happy you like it."

"I do, very much," the writer agreed. Giving a small smile at the noisy yawn from her companion, Laura patted Crystal on the shoulder. "Come on, it's late."

"Sounds like a plan," the blonde agreed.

"So tell me why again we're doing this?" Crystal asked as she hefted another load of dried branches into the wheelbarrow.

"Bonfires need wood," Laura said, dropping her load. "Besides, it's a great way for Carmen to get all of her friends out to her place to help clear up the deadfall."

"That's what I figured," the blonde said with a smile. "At least she's got plenty of beer."

"I'd say so. You know there's two more kegs besides the one on the porch?"

"Ah, a reward for all of our hard work," Crystal grinned. "At least with you helping me I'm not having to fight off the Cuban Don Juan's advances."

"That's right, just stick with me," the writer said. "I'll protect your virtue."

There was a raucous snort and they turned to see Alex stepping through the brush. "That's a line if I ever heard one, Taylor," she said, dropping the branches she was holding into their wheelbarrow. "Don't worry about this one, Crystal," she said, patting the young woman on the shoulder. "I'm a cop, you can trust me."

Crystal smiled. "I don't know if I can trust any woman who carries handcuffs with her at all times," she said.

"Ah, no sense of adventure," Alex said, pantomiming an arrow piercing her heart. "All right, all right, I'll leave you two lovebirds all alone. You'd better hurry up, though. The food's almost ready and Carmen's already opened up the second keg." The cop disappeared back through the bushes, leaving them alone once again.

Laura shook her head. "I've told her before we're not lovers."

"I've given up trying," Crystal said. "Besides, if she thinks I'm with you she doesn't hit on me as much."

"Actually with some of my friends being attached is an attraction. Wendy just loves going after someone in a relationship. I think it's the challenge."

"I must not be her type," the blonde said, stooping over to free a fair sized branch imbedded in the leaf and needle covered earth. "She's one of the few who hasn't made a pass at me."

"She prefers redheads and brunettes, I think, so you're safe. Need some help with that?"

Crystal tried again to free the stubborn log, exhaling loudly when she failed. "If you don't mind." Together they freed the log, disappointed to find the lower half decayed by insects. "So much for that," she said, letting go of her end.

"Well it's not like there's any shortage of limbs and branches around," Laura said, pulling her handkerchief out and wiping her hands. "Actually," she said, looking at the nearly full wheelbarrow, "I think we should have enough."

"I vote we head back before all the beer is gone," Crystal said, using her jeans as a towel for her muddy hands before grabbing the handles of the wheelbarrow.

"I can do that," Laura offered.

"Naw, it's light enough," she said. Where once the full cart would have been too heavy for her, two months of hauling drywall and plywood had built up her muscles enough for Crystal to hardly notice the strain of the weight. "Tell you what, why don't you go get us some beers while I bring this over to the rest of the burn pile?"

"Sounds like a plan to me," Laura said. "I'll meet you over there." She turned and headed toward the house while Crystal followed the furrow in the grass made by the other wheelbarrows until she reached the bonfire site. They'll be able to see this fire in space, she thought, looking at the large hill of wood.

"We were about to send a search party out for you," Jenny said as she approached, a clear beer bottle in hand. "Where's Laura?"

"She went into the house to get me a beer and who knows what for herself," Crystal said. "Help me unload this, will ya?"

Setting her beer on the ground, the brown haired woman started helping Crystal move the wood from the wheelbarrow to the pile. "So are you staying tonight or is Laura driving you home?"

"She plans on going home later but she packed her tent in the Jeep just in case," Crystal said. "I guess we'll see how things go."

"I'd offer you a ride but I plan on not being able to drive by nightfall," the therapist said. "I rarely make it home from Carmen's fall bashes before the next day."

"What are they doing over there?" Crystal asked, pointing to where several women were huddled together in the middle of a large flat grassy patch.

"They're trying to set up the volleyball net," Laura answered, removing the last of the branches from the cart and retrieving her beer. "We still have a couple of hours before Carmen lights up the bonfire and twenty women need something to keep them occupied."

Crystal grinned. "I'm sure Carmen could come up with something else to keep her busy for the next few hours if she could find a willing partner."

"You volunteering?"

The blonde snorted and shook her head. "Not my type, you know that," she said, her eyes spotting Laura approaching with two plastic cups full of beer in her hands. "Oh yes." Meeting her roommate halfway, Crystal took one of the cups and took several appreciative swallows. "My hero," she joked.

"I see you managed to find some help getting the wheelbarrow unloaded," Laura said, taking a sip from her beer. "You feel like watching the girls play volleyball?"

"Do you?"

"Sure," the writer said as Jenny reached them. "I might even join in for a game or two."

"You'd better watch her," Jenny said. "She's brutal when it comes to spiking the ball."

"Sounds like someone I'd want on my team," Crystal said as they headed for the volleyball area, unaware of the odd look her therapist gave her.

Within minutes the teams were formed, Laura and Crystal on Carmen's side while Jenny joined Alex's group. The white ball flew over the net and the game was on. If the women played hard on the softball field, they were merciless when it came to volleyball. Every point was hard earned with grunts and curses and not just a few disparaging remarks tossed back and forth. A novice at the game, Crystal found herself at a decided disadvantage when the rotation forced her to the front row. Unable to defend against Alex's hard spikes, she allowed two points before the rotation changed again, putting Laura on her left side.

"Don't be afraid of the ball," the writer said, bouncing her weight back and forth on her feet as she readied for the next serve. "I'll be right here if you need me."

Crystal nodded, praying the ball would not come to her again. To her dismay, the volley back from Carmen sent the volleyball right into Alex's reach. Preparing herself for another spike, Crystal was aware of a presence moving behind her. As the ball came down she reached up, sending the ball softly into the air. It was all Laura needed as she treated Alex to an authoritative spike off the cop's shoulder and to the grass.

"Lucky shot," Alex said, retrieving the ball and lightly tossing it to Carmen.

Laura moved close to her roommate and whispered into her ear. "Next time the ball comes near you, try to send it straight up and I'll take care of it, okay?" She patted Crystal's shoulder before moving back to her own position.

The game improved after that point. Crystal stopped trying to return the volleys, concentrating on setting up the ball for Laura's devastating shots. The strategy worked, allowing their team to decisively win the game. Although they did not fare as well with the rematch, Crystal still enjoyed the game very much and readily participated in a pickup basketball game played in the driveway with a portable hoop while Laura joined Carmen and Jenny with getting the grills heated up for the barbecue.

Crystal faked to the left before going to the right and around a determined Alex to sink the ball neatly into the basket.

"Lucky shot," the cop said.

"Damn right it was," Crystal replied, wiping her hand against her sweaty forehead. "Hang on a sec. I've gotta get something." The cars were parked on the grass on either side of the driveway and it only took a few seconds for her to reach Laura's car. After a check of the front and back seats proved futile, she opened the back and looked around. Squashed between the sleeping bag and the back of the rear seat was Laura's softball gear bag. Crystal opened it and spotted the blue headband. Deciding that Laura would not mind, she grabbed it and put it on, hoping it would keep both the sweat out of her eyes as well as her hair off her face.

"Aw damn," Alex joked when Crystal approached. "We were wondering if you going to take off your shirt again."

Crystal laughed along with the others, remembering the time she had done so at one of the softball games. "Sorry, nothing under this but a bra."

"That's okay," the cop said, drawing a chorus of cackles from the women.

"Sure, as soon as you do," Crystal retorted, fully expecting the other woman to back down. To her surprise Alex began freeing her shirt from her shorts. "No no, wait. I was just joking."

Alex grinned smugly. "Psyche."

"Bitch," she countered with a grin as everyone settled into position. The ball was in motion and Crystal smiled with glee as she circled behind Alex to take the pass and send it up to rebound from the backboard into the basket. Relaxed and comfortable with Laura's, and now her own, friends, Crystal took the friendly pats on the back as they waited for Wendy to retrieve the ball which had rolled beneath a nearby car. Some kind person thought to drag a cooler full of beer over and she gratefully took one being offered to her by Alex. The ball was found and the game resumed, the friendly rivalry rising as the lead continued to shift back and forth. By the time it ended with Alex's team just edging the win by three points, everyone was more than ready for the sizzling meat and cool drinks waiting for them near the grills.

Music was blaring from a boom box sitting on one of the makeshift picnic tables. There were six tables, all made by tossing a piece of plywood over two sawhorses while folding chairs mixed with white plastic lawn chairs to provide places for the women to sit. Crystal was pleased to see that Laura had already made up two plates and claimed the end of one of the tables. "Smells great," she said as she approached.

"I figured you'd be hungry after all that running around," Laura said, pulling out the adjoining chair. Crystal picked up a spare rib and bit into it, smearing sauce all over her mouth. "Kinda messy."

Laura laughed. "Hold still," she said, using a napkin to wipe the sauce off. "There, now you don't look like a little kid."

"Is that all you're going to have? Corn on the cob and some potato salad?"

"You know I don't eat red meat," the writer said, picking up the corn and frowning when several drops of butter dripped off to hit her pants. "The chicken is still cooking."

"I'll hop up and get it for you when it's ready," Crystal said, her mouth once again coated by the tangy sauce.

"I can get it."

"That's all right, I'll probably be ready for more by that time. Hey, how is that potato salad anyway?"

"Here, try it." Scooping some onto her fork, Laura held it out for her to taste. Crystal hesitated for only a second before opening her mouth.

"Oh look, now they're feeding each other," Alex, seated at the same table, teased. The other women within earshot laughed, causing Crystal to blush.

"You're just jealous," Laura said, sticking her fork into Crystal's macaroni salad and taking a bite for herself.

"Damn right," Alex replied, causing more laughter. Someone announced the chicken was ready and Crystal jumped up from her seat.

"Give me your plate," she said. "How many pieces do you want?"

"One breast would be good," Laura said, holding out her plate. "Some more macaroni and potato salads if there's any left too please."

"Sure, no prob." Crystal disappeared over the grills and returned minutes later with Laura's plate as well as two beers. "Thought you might be thirsty," she said by explanation as she set everything down on the table.

"I never drink this much," Laura said, picking up the can of beer and taking a sip. "I've had three already."

"I've had a few more than that," Crystal admitted, taking a long pull on her drink before sending her fork into the macaroni salad on Laura's plate. "So what do we do once we're done eating? It's too light out still to start the bonfire."

"Probably another volleyball game."

"You up for that?"

Laura shook her head. "Probably not. Why, are you?"

"Not if you're not going to play," Crystal said, earning a snicker from Alex. Feeling the need to explain herself, she added "I'm not very good at it."

"I'll tell you what. If you really want to play, I'll do it too," Laura said, shooting a look at Alex before the cop had a chance to comment on their private conversation again.

As expected, once everyone was replete someone suggested volleyball. Crystal shook her head, citing wanting to let her stomach settle before playing again. Laura took their empty plates to the garbage while she finished her beer. Noticing several women slipping into one of the storage sheds, the blonde smiled and excused herself from the table to join them, knowing full well what they were up to.

When Crystal returned several minutes later, her eyes were definitely slitted. Laura took one look at her and shook her head. "Should have known you'd find the pot smokers," she said. "So are you completely stoned now?"

"No, just got a good buzz going," Crystal said. "Does it bother you?"

Laura hesitated before answering. "It bothers me when you use it to hide from reality but just to relax with some friends, no, that doesn't bother me." Despite everyone else being out of earshot, she lowered her voice before adding "I care about you, you know. I don't like seeing you hurt yourself."

"I know," Crystal said, putting her hand on Laura's shoulder. "I don't like it when you kill yourself staying up all night writing just to meet that deadline either so we're even. Come on, you feel up to kicking some ass in volleyball now?"

"Are you sure you can play? I mean, being buzzed and all."

"Sure, maybe it'll make the ball seem to be moving slow enough so I can catch up with it," Crystal said, giving Laura's shoulder a quick squeeze before releasing it.

"We won't be playing much longer anyway," Laura said as they headed for the volleyball area. "The sun's going down. It won't be much longer before Carmen starts the bonfire."

Laura's prediction proved to be true as less than hour later the bonfire was started and everyone claimed their space around the fire. Crystal took a seat on one side of the writer while Jenny sat on the other side. Alex plopped down on the blonde's right, passing out beers from the cooler she had dragged over while others refilled their plastic cups from the keg on the porch.

"What's that, number five?" Crystal asked as Laura brought the plastic cup to her lips.

"I think so," the writer replied. "I don't think we're going anywhere tonight."

"Well you have the tent in the Jeep just in case," Crystal said. "Is it big enough for both of us?"

"It's a two man tent and the sleeping bag is double sized so there should be enough room," Laura said. "You're not one of those that tosses and turns all night, are you? Because if you are, you're sleeping on the grass instead."

"I'll be good, I promise," Crystal said, pulling her cigarettes out of her pocket and lighting one. "Besides, I'll probably be so toasted from the beer and pot that I'll just close my eyes and pass right out."

"Just make sure you wait until you help me get that tent up," Laura warned, her nose wrinkling as the wind blew the smoke at her. "Jenny can tell you from experience that tent is a bear to get set up."

"It'll be easier for you to put the back seat down and sleep in the Jeep," Jenny piped in, having heard her name mentioned. "It takes the better part of an hour to get that monster put together. I haven't had that much to drink if you want me give you two a ride," she offered.

"In that death trap you drive?" Laura asked. "Not a chance. It's one thing to get bounced around all over the place sober but it's something else entirely to do it with a belly full of beer."

"That's true," Jenny said. "I certainly wouldn't want you to ruin the seats by throwing up or anything."

"It'd probably be an improvement, Doc," Crystal joked. "When are you going to break down and buy a decent car?"

"The day our dear Laura can walk past a mess without stopping to clean it up."

"I guess that means you'll have that Thing until it falls apart then."

"Hey," Laura said, doing her best to look wounded. "How did I get in the middle of this?"

"You're in the middle, that's why," Crystal said, nudging the writer with her elbow.

"So Laura," Alex said. "Tell us about the story you're working on. Is it another one with Bobbie the detective?"

Laura finished taking a sip of her beer before nodding. "Yes, it'll be the third in the Bobbie series."

"Are you going to finally let her have a girlfriend this time?"

"I think so. At least I have her having a strong attraction. Whether it turns into love or not I haven't decided yet."

"Oh you have to," Crystal piped in. "With lots of romance and passion."

"Yeah, especially the passion," Alex said. "I want at least three good sex scenes."

"Love scenes," Laura corrected. "And I haven't decided about that either. I'll see how it develops. I heard you were involved in that high speed chase last week."

"Oh yeah," the cop said. "It was the weirdest thing. I pulled the twit over for a broken taillight but when I ran the plate it came back to a different car. Turned out the guy worked for a chop shop and was in the middle of transporting the car there when I came up behind him." Alex carried the discussion for a while before the subject changed yet again and someone else picked up the conversational ball.

Crystal was not sure how it happened but at some point during the evening she had moved closer to Laura, their knees now touching. She debated about moving but decided against it, not wanting to draw attention to the contact. Instead she tried to concentrate on the discussion going on around them. Laura was talking to Jenny, allowing Crystal the opportunity to study her friend's features in the firelight. Orange light flickered over Laura's face, casting a warm soft glow on the writer's face. Crystal took a swallow of beer and looked around, noting that Carmen had apparently found herself a companion for the night if the way the two women were kissing was any indication. Crystal noted that Carmen's newest apparent conquest was Wendy, who at the moment was trying to see how far her tongue could get down the hostess' throat. Unable to take her eyes off the spectacle before her, Crystal watched the two women continue their intense kiss. How the hell are they breathing? Unbidden, an image of being kissed with all the passion and desire so evident only a few feet away came to her but what shocked Crystal more than anything else was the face of her imaginary partner.

As if sensing Crystal's thoughts, Laura turned and looked at her, giving the blonde a gentle smile. "Are you all right?"

"Hmm? Oh, yes," she said, certain all the heat suffusing her face was not coming from the bonfire. "I guess I just wandered off for a minute there."

"Looks like Wendy's not sleeping in a tent tonight," Laura said, jerking her chin in the direction of the kissing women.

"If they make it inside," Crystal replied, reaching behind Alex for the cooler and acquiring another beer. "They certainly don't need the fire for heat."

"So I see," Laura said, resting her hand on Crystal's knee. "Does it bother you?" she asked in a low voice that would not carry to those around them.

Shaking her head, Crystal tried to put the image of being kissed passionately by the woman sitting next to her out of her mind. "No. I've seen your friends kissing before. They do it all the time at the ball field." Of course, I've never thought about being kissed by you before, she thought, giving Laura a quick glance before looking at the fire. It's got to be because I'm around them all the time. I just thought about being kissed by Laura because she's my friend and I'm closest to her, that's all. Yet even as she thought it, Crystal found herself looking at the hand resting so familiarly on her knee and fought the urge to cover it with her own to keep it there.

The volleyball area served as a makeshift campsite for the dozen or so women pitching tents for the night. Unfortunately it was far enough from the bonfire that seeing what they were doing was a problem and Crystal ended up having to hold a flashlight while Laura struggled with the domed tent. Others had the same problem so once Laura was done setting up the tent, Crystal used the flashlight to help others see in order to get their tents set up. In the end there were seven tents arranged in a haphazard circle. She helped Laura get the sleeping bag laid out on the floor of the tent before going into the house to use the facilities. It took longer than she had expected since apparently everyone else had the same idea. Of course the vast amount of beer consumed by the group was guaranteed to keep Carmen's bathroom busy for most of the night if the women sleeping in the tents did not decide to visit the bushes instead.

After taking off her sneakers, Crystal crawled into the tent. It was dark inside but Crystal was able to feel her way around, locating the zipper and opening the sleeping bag. She quickly removed her jeans, then reached under her shirt to unhook her bra, pulling it free and rolling it up with her pants to make a pillow. She debated about going topless but decided against it, not feeling the safety that she did at home not to mention she was sharing a sleeping bag with Laura. Rubbing her hands on her bare thighs, Crystal wondered if she should put her jeans back on but the sound of the tent flap being unzipped ended that idea. "Laura?"

"Yes. Which side are you on?"

The right

unless you want it."

"No, the left side is fine with me. It's probably better if you're on the side with the zipper anyway just in case you need to get up to go to the bathroom. You've had more to drink than I have."

"Yeah, I'm sure I'll have to get up at least once during the night." Crystal felt the sleeping bag being opened and goosebumps formed on her legs before Laura climbed in and the comforting warmth of the flannel lining covered her body again.

"Do you have enough room?" Laura asked.

Crystal, who was so close to the e.g. of the sleeping bag that she could feel the cool steel of the zipper, nodded before remembering that she could not be seen in the dark. "Yeah, you?"

"Plenty. You can move back if you want, there's room."

"I don't want to crowd you," Crystal said.

"You won't be and even if you did, it wouldn't be a problem." Laura gave a long yawn. "Come on, settle down so you're comfortable so we can both get some sleep."

Reluctantly Crystal moved away from the zipper, assuming a fetal position facing away from Laura but well aware of the heat of a body resting just inches from her own. It was an odd feeling, having not slept next to anyone since she was a child but at the same time she took a sense of comfort in having Laura next to her since there was no way to lock the entrance to the tent. Not that Crystal feared any of the women settling into their own tents but the ingrained fear was still there.

"Better?" Laura asked in a low voice.

"Yes. You sure I'm not crowding you?"

"Not at all. There's still some more room if you need it."

"No, I'm all set," Crystal said, adjusting her makeshift pillow. "Good night, Laura."

"Night hon," the writer replied, reaching out in the dark to gently squeeze Crystal's shoulder.

Their attempt at sleep would be interrupted minutes later when a clear, unmistakable moan cut through the air followed by giggles from the other tents. "Sounds like someone is having fun," Crystal said, smiling in the darkness.

"Mmm," the sleepy Laura replied. "I just hope they quiet down."

"Doesn't sound like it," Crystal said after louder moan cut through the night. "Who do you think it is?"

"I don't know. I wasn't paying attention to whose tents were around us." This time the moaning woman gave a mix between a gasp and a cry and another, lower voice groaned. "Sounds like Alex."

"You think?" Crystal rolled over until she was facing Laura, then propped herself up on one elbow. She listened again. "Maybe. Sounds too deep to be her."

"Oh Alex, yesss,"

"Guess you're right," she said. "Who do you think she's with? I didn't see anyone hanging on her tonight."

"Probably Donna. I've heard she's rather

vocal when it comes to that," Laura said.

"Hey Duncan," a voice from another tent yelled. "Keep it down. Some of us are trying to get some sleep."

"Yeah, I don't want to have to take matters into my own hands here," someone else yelled, causing more muffled giggles from some of the tents.

"I thought you took matters into your own hands every night." This time they recognized Jenny's voice.

"Fuck you and the horse you rode in on, Foster," the voice responded playfully.

"Is that an offer or an insult?"

"Whichever way you want to take it, Jen. My tent is big enough."

"We're never going to get any sleep," Laura complained.

"Well at least someone is having fun," Crystal said before rolling back over and settling down.

"I just wish they were quieter about it."

"Or pitched their tent further away."

"I think they could be on the other side of the house and we'd still hear them," Laura said before giving a long yawn. "I should have packed ear plugs."

"Well they have to settle down eventually, don't they?"

The writer chuckled. "Hon, you're talking about lesbians. They're like that commercial. They can keep going and going and going."

"Oh wonderful," Crystal said sarcastically, punching her makeshift pillow. "I suppose I should be grateful you don't have a girlfriend or I'd never get any sleep at home."

Laura laughed. "Actually I'm very quiet." She paused as another series of moans cut through the night. "Definitely Donna."

Crystal shook her head and closed her eyes, trying hard not to think of the mental images the sounds were creating.

Crystal woke immediately at the touch. It took a few seconds in the pitch darkness to remember where she was and who was sleeping next to her or rather, who was sleeping against her, Laura's arm wrapped protectively around her belly. It was that touch which had woken her up. It was the middle of the night, the only sounds were snoring from the nearby tents and the occasional crackle of the dying bonfire. Realizing Laura was sound asleep, Crystal debated about removing the warm arm pressing against her, not wanting to wake her roommate. She laid there for several minutes, listening to the deep breathing next to her, close enough for her to feel the warm breath against the back of her neck. Just as she took comfort from the occasional hugs Laura gave her, Crystal found herself feeling that same comfort in the unconscious embrace. Relaxing into the gentle hold, she fell back to sleep.

Laura blinked and looked around, the morning sun lighting the interior of the yellow dome tent. To her surprise she found herself curled up around Crystal. I should have known better, she thought. I've always been a cuddler. But it felt too good for her to move right away. She inhaled the scent of Crystal's shampoo and had to resist the urge to nuzzle the soft blonde hair. Who am I kidding? Propping herself up to look upon the sleeping features, Laura privately admitted to herself that she had deliberately refrained from mentioning her habit of cuddling to Crystal for just this reason. It felt so good to hold the younger woman in her arms, to feel the soft warmth against her. Laura laid there for several minutes, just enjoying the feeling. When she heard the sound of others awakening in the nearby tents, she reluctantly moved over to her own side of the sleeping bag. As much as she took pleasure in the embrace, she knew better than to be in the same position when Crystal woke up. She'd probably think I was trying to take advantage of her. There was a soft scratching on the tent flap. "Laura, you awake?"

"Morning Jen," she said in a low voice. "Crystal's still asleep."

"Carmen has coffee made."

"All right, I'll be out in a minute." Now faced with the problem of trying to get out of the sleeping bag without waking Crystal, who was sleeping on the side with the zipper, Laura tried to slowly crawl out the top.

"Hmm?"

"Shh, it's just me," she said, moving the rest of the way out of the sleeping bag. "Go back to sleep, it's early."

"What time is it?" Crystal mumbled, rolling onto her back and rubbing her eyes.

"Probably around seven or so." She found her watch stuffed into her sneaker. "It's seven twenty. I'm going inside for some coffee. Do you want me to bring you a cup?"

"No, I'll get up. Besides, I have to use the bathroom." Crystal sat up herself, revealing to Laura something she had not known the night before as the tops of bare legs were revealed. It was only then that the writer noticed the pants being used as a pillow.

Oh thank God I didn't know that last night, Laura thought, noticing also the twin points pressing against Crystal's shirt. "I'll get out so you can get dressed," she said, crawling to the tent flap and pulling the zipper up.

"I'll be there in a minute," she heard as she stepped out onto the dew covered grass and blinked against the bright morning sun.

"Okay." Laura pulled her sneakers on and headed for the house.

Carmen, Wendy, Jenny and several others were in the kitchen when Laura arrived. "Good morning," she said, taking two empty mugs from the dish strainer and walking over to the coffee pot. She just finished making the cups up when Crystal walked in, her hair mussed from sleep.

"Oh thanks," Crystal said as she handed her the mug.

"I thought maybe we could stop for breakfast on the way home," she said, leaning against the counter and ignoring the box of donuts sitting there. "There's a nice clean diner just a few minutes from here."

"Sounds good," the blonde said, setting her coffee down and making a beeline for the bathroom as Alex exited it.

"There's donuts right there," Jenny said.

"I'm not in the mood for something sweet," she said. "Besides, *e.g.* benedict sounds really good right now."

"What's this?" Carmen said. "You're taking off this early? I thought everyone would stay for a while longer."

"I have things to do today," Laura said apologetically, fully aware it was a bold faced lie. Other than writing, there was nothing else that had to be done today. "Besides, Crystal's never had breakfast at Ruby's. I'm sure she'll enjoy it."

"Oh yes, just you and her tucked away in the a booth, eh?" Alex teased.

"Behave," Laura warned. "Besides, we deserve a good breakfast after being kept up half the night thanks to you and Donna."

"Hey, it's not my fault you didn't get any last night," the cop said with a smug grin as she refilled her mug and exchanged a knowing smile with Donna. "So how's the book coming along?"

"The end is in sight but it's just getting the last fifty pages written," Laura said. "You know how hard it is for me to wrap things up."

"Yeah, that's why your books are all three hundred pages or better," Carmen said. "Oh but those love scenes are enough to make me sit on a block of *i.e.* You will have at least one in there, won't you?"

"Don't I always?" Laura replied, bringing the mug to her lips and tasting the strong brew. "It's just a matter of getting the main characters together." She noticed Crystal coming out of the bathroom and privately wondered why life was not as easy as a fictional story. Why she found herself falling for what she could not have but unable to walk away or stopping her heart from becoming more attached to the beautiful young woman who shared her home. "I have to get the tent broken down. I'll be back in a few minutes." Setting her mug on the counter, Laura brushed past Jenny and stepped out into the morning air.

She was neatly folding the nylon tent when Crystal approached. "You want some help?"

"No," she said. "I'm almost done."

Crystal knelt down and put her hand on the storage bag, forestalling Laura's attempt to put the tent away. "Hey." The softly spoken word forced her to look up into concerned blue eyes. "You all right?"

Taking a deep breath, she nodded. "I'm fine. I guess I'm just tired or something."

"You sure? It seems like something's bothering you."

Laura dimly wondered when Crystal had become so good at reading her and hoped her face did not reveal her secret. "I'm fine, really. I'll tell you what, why don't you take the sleeping bag to the Jeep and I'll be there in a minute then we'll go get some breakfast."

"If you're not up to it, we can just go home and have something there," Crystal offered.

"No. I really think you'll enjoy Ruby's and we don't get out this way often." A thought occurred to her. "Unless you don't want to go."

"Oh, I want to go. If it's a place that serves real food and you like it, then I want to go. They do serve real food, don't they? Not those bean sprouts and grass that you like to pretend you're a rabbit with."

"Real food, I promise," she said with a smile. "I'm sure you can even get an extra side of grease if you need it."

"Funny. Come on, I'm starving and I've already said goodbye to everyone." Crystal took the tent from her and shoved it into the nylon bag, ruining all the folding Laura had just done. Suppressing the urge to pull it out and put it back correctly, she stood up and followed Crystal to the car, grateful to be leaving the eyes of her friends. Laura understood why her friends teased her so much about Crystal because if forced to admit it, their playful comments and jabs hit too close to home. How hard it had been last night to lie there and try to go to sleep with Crystal by her side, especially with the vocal sounds coming from Alex's tent. Laura was grateful it had only been an overnight and not a full weekend getaway. Two nights in a row would be a temptation she was not sure she could handle.

Crystal sighed and rolled onto her back, reaching out in the dark for the lamp. This is ridiculous. She had gone to bed two hours ago but sleep refused to come. Sitting up, she took the composition book and pen from the top of her night stand and began writing.

It's almost two and I can't sleep. Why? Why do I feel this? Is what I'm feeling real or just my imagination making more out of a friendship than there really is? She hugs me a lot but she's never come on to me or anything so why do I keep thinking like this? I've never kissed a woman but sometimes it's so hard when she's holding me close. I want to. Would she kiss me back? I doubt it. She'd probably just sit there and tell me in that tone of hers why she'd never be interested in trailer park trash like me. I'm just a friend, a roommate. She cares about me, I know that but could there ever be more? What if she decides she wants to live alone again? What if she finds herself another lover?

I'm cold. The furnace is on, I can hear it but what I want to keep me warm is across the hall. I want her to hold me like she did last night. I wonder if she even realizes that she did that. It felt so good to be in her arms, just like when I'm upset and she holds me. I wish I knew all the answers. I've never thought about being with a woman before and I don't think I could be unless it was Laura. I don't want just any woman, I want her.

Why can't my life be like one of her books where the heroine gets her girl in the end and they ride off into the sunset?

Why can't I be the girl for her?

"I wasn't thinking you'd be reading that when I wrote it," Crystal said glumly, picking absently at a loose thread along the seam of the bean bag.

"I believe that," Jenny said, closing the notebook and setting it down on the floor next to her. "We need to talk about this."

"There's nothing to talk about," she shrugged. "She's not interested in me that way."

"That doesn't make your feelings any less real," Jenny said. "Have you ever been in love before?"

"With the people I used to hang out with, Doc?" Crystal shook her head. "I've gone to bed with a couple of guys here and there but I've never really dated much less had a romantic relationship."

"Have you considered the possibility that this is just a reaction to spending so much time with Laura? From what you've told me, you haven't allowed anyone to come close to you since your sister."

"So you think because Laura's my friend and a lesbian that I'm thinking I might be too?"

"You're the one that wrote that you weren't interested in any other women," the therapist said. "And what I think doesn't matter. How do you feel?"

Crystal snorted. "You read that for yourself, Doc." She paused. "You think I'm confusing friendship with love?"

"I think that's a question you have to answer for yourself," Jenny said gently. "As far as any romantic relationship is concerned, I don't believe you're ready for that at this point. You're just starting to deal with your father's abuse. Adding a fledgling romance to that is a recipe for emotional disaster."

"In other words I'm too fucked up to be anyone's girlfriend," she said in a self-deprecating tone.

"In other words you need to take time to love yourself before you can learn to love someone else, whoever that may be," Jenny corrected. "You still use alcohol and drugs to numb your feelings no matter how much progress you're making in here. And you have made progress," she reassured. "No matter how hard it may feel sometimes, know that you are getting better each time you face the pain and move past it." She looked at her watch. "Unfortunately we're out of time today."

"I'm not saying anything to Laura about this," Crystal warned. "I don't need to be looking for another place to live on top of everything else."

"Do you really think if you told her how you felt that she would throw you out?" Jenny asked. "I don't."

"No, she probably would let me stay," she admitted. "But I wouldn't be able to." She gave the therapist a wry smile. "You know how good I am at running away."

"The only problem is you can't run away from yourself," Jenny said, rising to her feet. Crystal picked up her notebook and rose as well.

"What am I going to do about her?"

"It's not Laura you need to worry about, Crystal. It's yourself. My suggestion is to keep writing about how you're feeling and above all, be honest with yourself." She held her arms out. "I'll see you next week."

"I'll be here," Crystal said as she accepted the obligatory hug. "And Doc?"

"Yes?"

"You've been absolutely no help with this, you know. I'm more confused about how I feel about her now than when I walked in here."

Jenny smiled knowingly. "I know. That's my job."

Crystal stepped into the outer office, waiting for the secretary to finish with a phone call so she could schedule her next appointment. On the wall near the door was a rack full of pamphlets. Looking at them absently to pass the time, Crystal's eyes fell on a blue booklet with the words "Need Help?" written in bold black lettering on the front. Taking one from the rack, she opened it to find it was a schedule of AA meetings.

"Miss Sheridan? Next Tuesday at five thirty?"

"What? Oh yeah, that's fine," she said, shoving the booklet into her back pocket and taking the offered card from the middle aged woman. "See you next week."

Minutes later, sitting in her car waiting for it to warm up, Crystal found herself looking through the booklet. A meeting for women only was starting in an hour at the old church near the townhouse complex. Checking the legend, she found that it was an open meeting, meaning anyone was welcome whether they considered themselves an alcoholic or not. I could go just to see what it's like, she thought to herself. It's not like I have to stop drinking or admit I'm an alky or anything.

The parking lot was filling with cars, some old rust buckets like hers, some looking as if they just left the showroom floor. Sitting in her car, Crystal watched as the women smiled and chatted with each other before heading inside. What the hell am I doing here? Certain she was making a mistake, Crystal stepped out of her car and went inside.

"There you are," Laura said when Crystal returned home later. "I was beginning to get worried." Wiping her hands on the dish towel, the writer walked over to her. "Everything go okay with your session with Jenny?"

"Yeah," she said, not wanting to go into detail. "I just had to stop and do something on the way home. What's for dinner?"

"I thought a chicken stir-fry would be nice. The playoffs are tonight. Do you feel like watching the Mets clobber the Braves?"

"Sounds good," she said. "I was just going to work a little on the GED stuff tonight anyway. I can study and watch the ball game at the same time."

"Oh!" Laura headed for the stairs. "I almost forgot. I made up a batch of flash cards to help you with those formulas you're having trouble with. I'll be right back. Stir the vegetables for me."

"I still don't understand why anyone needs to know geometry or algebra in the real world," Crystal said as she entered the kitchen. She poked at the food with the wooden spoon for a minute before opening the refrigerator and automatically reaching for a beer. The door open and the cool aluminum in her hand, she paused. One day at a time. They make it sound so easy. With a resigned sigh she set the beer back and took a diet soda instead.

Laura returned with a stack of cards cut from manila folders. "I put the object on one side and the formula on the other so you can study both," she said, setting the cards on the counter. "We can even do them between innings."

"Are we eating in here or out there tonight?" Crystal asked as she opened the cabinet and took down two plates.

"Whichever you prefer. The pre-game is starting in about five minutes."

"The living room is fine," she said, retrieving the utensils and napkins. "I feel like kicking my boots off and relaxing tonight anyway."

"Long day?"

"Too long." Crystal smiled at the comforting squeeze on her shoulder. "Ah, you know how I am after a session with Jenny."

"I knew something was bothering you," Laura said gently. "Do you want to talk about it?"

Crystal looked at the can sitting on the counter. "Not yet," she said softly. "Let me see how things go first."

The more Crystal tried not to think about drinking, the stronger the urge to have a drink. Her trips to the deck for a cigarette were more frequent and she silently cursed her timing in having run out of pot the day before. The Mets were losing, which only added to her aggravation. When the best hitter swung at a ball clearly outside the strike zone, striking out and ending a bases loaded rally, she had enough. "I'm going out for a smoke," she announced.

"You were just out there not fifteen minutes ago," Laura pointed out. "Why are you so wound up? They're only down by two. They can make that up."

"It's not that," Crystal said from the doorway between the living room and kitchen. "I just have a lot of stuff on my mind. I need some air." She opened the sliding glass door and stepped outside, angrily pulling the rumpled pack from her pocket and lighting a cigarette. This shouldn't be so damn hard. I can't be as hooked on booze as the old man was. I just can't. Looking out at the silhouette of the trees, she did not see Laura come up behind her, only the soft touch of gentle hands on her shoulders.

"Tell me what's wrong," the writer urged.

Crystal gripped the iron rail, crumpling her cigarette in the process. "I hate feeling this helpless."

"Helpless about what?"

"Things that shouldn't have control over me," she said cryptically, shaking her head. "I should be strong enough to beat this and I'm worried that I can't."

"Does this have anything to do with why you haven't had any beer tonight?" Laura asked.

"I didn't think you paid that close attention to what I did and didn't drink," Crystal countered, turning around to face her roommate.

"It's unusual for you not to have a beer with dinner. To go three hours without one when there's a full six pack in the refrigerator is almost unheard of." Laura gave her a smile and squeezed her arm. "Are you going to quit drinking?"

Crystal turned away again. "I don't know." Gentle arms wrapped around her middle, Laura's chin resting on her left shoulder.

"You know what your problem is? You don't give yourself enough credit."

"Credit for what?" she asked. "For screwing my life up completely? Laura, I'm twenty five years old and I'm going to end up a drunk just like my folks." The gentle hoot of an owl cut through the night, causing Crystal to lose her thought.

"You're wrong," Laura said after a minute of silence.

"About?" she asked, not turning around.

"Ending up just like your folks." Laura released the gentle embrace, leaving her right hand to rest on the small of Crystal's back. "You won't."

"And how do you know that?"

Laura leaned forward against the rail as well, their elbows brushing against each other. "Because you're willing to change. They weren't. You admitted you had a problem with what happened when you were a kid and you sought help for it. You realize you have a problem with alcohol and you're making an effort to change that as well."

Crystal snorted. "Don't go praising me or nothing. It's not like I've done anything amazing. I went to one meeting and tried not to drink for one evening. I can't believe how hard this is," she said quietly.

"You know why I'm most sure you're not going to end up like your parents?" Laura asked softly.

"Why?" Crystal found herself being pulled into a brief hug.

"Because you've got me and I'm not giving up on you," Laura said firmly. "Now are you going to torture your lungs some more or can we get back in there and see if the Mets can pull themselves out of the fire again?"

"Sorry I'm late," Crystal said as she flopped down on the bean bag, not at all pleased with the scrutiny Jenny was giving her. "What?"

"No notebook this week?" the therapist asked, lowering herself to the opposite beanbag.

"I forgot it this morning. I've been running late all day." Crystal wiped her dirty hands on her equally dirty jeans. "It's been a hell of a week."

"How so?"

"Tonight's the first night I haven't had to work until at least six and by the time I get home it's so late that Laura's already eaten not to mention this Saturday is the GED exam over at the high school. If I miss this one I have to wait two more months."

"Do you think you're ready for the test?" Jenny asked.

"With some parts, yeah." The blonde shrugged. "But the math is still driving me nuts. Laura's been helping me with the formulas but there's just so damn many that I can't keep them straight in my head. I just know I'm going to walk in there and forget everything."

"Try this. Treat this test as if it were just a practice test. It doesn't matter if you pass or fail. If you pass, great. If not, you can use it to study from and take it again in two months."

"Actually if you fail it you have to wait six months," Crystal said. "And I don't want to miss it this time. We've been working too hard." If Jenny noticed the use of 'we', she did not say anything. "I really want to be able to show Laura that certificate."

"You should be doing this for yourself, not for anyone else," the therapist said. "It's your GED."

"But I wouldn't even be trying to get it if it wasn't for all of Laura's help. She's the one that made it so I understood that damn algebra and there's no way I'd be able to diagram a sentence without her." Crystal shook her head. "I wouldn't have made it through this past week without her. No way."

"What was so difficult about this past week?" Jenny asked.

I haven't had a drink in three days." Crystal's eyes fell to the carpet. "I went two days first but then

I dunno. It just got too hard."

"You mean you were dry for two days, then drank, and now you haven't had a drink in three days?" the other woman asked for clarification.

"Yeah." She looked up at Jenny. "I can't remember the last time I went three days without a drink."

"What about the marijuana?"

"Don't tempt me," Crystal said dryly. "I'm still smoking cigarettes and don't you even think of trying to take those away from me."

"There's no sense setting yourself up for failure by trying to reach your goals in one giant leap," Jenny said.

"I didn't say I was giving up the pot either, Doc," Crystal warned. "I've just been too busy to make a phone call, that's all. Besides, I haven't had any time to smoke since Laura and I are up half the night getting ready for the damn exam."

"Whatever it takes to get you through the day," the therapist said in all seriousness. "Have you been to any meetings?"

Crystal nodded. "There's a different women's meeting each night at six. I've been late 'cause of work but I've gotten there before half-time. There's one on Saturdays too but we were busy so I didn't go." Crossing her arms, she looked at Jenny defiantly. "I know they say you should go each day and there's some there that I think do nothing but go from meeting to meeting but if I'm doing something with Laura, I'm not going to drop everything just because there's a meeting going on." She frowned at the growing smirk on Jenny's face. "What?"

"I never said you had to go each day," the therapist answered. "I'm surprised you're going as often as you are. Pleased, but surprised. If you're comfortable skipping a day here and there because you're doing something healthy, then do it. Just don't let it become an excuse not to go at all or you'll find yourself staring at an empty bottle quicker than you can say relapse." Jenny pulled her knees up to her chest and wrapped her arms around her legs. "How are you feeling physically?"

"I dunno." Crystal's position mimicked the therapist. "My stomach is off once in a while and I'm sick of diet soda but other than that I'm okay, I guess."

"Are you eating regularly?"

"I live with Laura," Crystal said dryly. "She's up for breakfast, has a brown bag waiting for me to take and dinner's ready almost every night by the time I get home." Poking at her side, she frowned. "I'm about ten pounds heavier than when I was working at the Tom Cat. If she keeps this up I won't be able to fit through the door."

"I'm sure a good portion of that is muscle from your construction work," the therapist said as she got to her feet. She went to her desk and retrieved two videotapes from the bottom drawer. "Here. You can take these home with you to watch. One is about the effects of alcohol on the body and the other is for people beginning recovery and what obstacles they can expect and how to handle them. They're kinda old but if you can get past the eighties clothes you'll be fine."

"Gee thanks, Doc," Crystal said. Noticing the time, she stood as well and took the tapes from Jenny. "Just what I needed, more homework."

"Well since you didn't bring your journal I had to come up with something, right?" the therapist joked.

"True," the blonde agreed. "I should look on the bright side. We could have spent the whole hour talking about how I feel for Laura."

"You managed to bring her in enough," Jenny said. "I take it you didn't tell her about your feelings?"

"No," Crystal said. "I'm

still not sure."

"Then I suggest you keep writing in your journal about your feelings until you are sure," Jenny said. "In the meantime, get to the AA meetings as often as you can and good luck on your GED test. I'm sure you'll pass with flying colors."

"I'm gonna fail," Crystal said miserably as she stared at the large stone building.

"You're not going to fail," Laura insisted, reaching out to gently rub her roommate's back. They were standing in the parking lot of the high school, other adults milling about smoking cigarettes and talking.

"Easy for you to say," the blond grumbled.

"It should be easy for you too," Laura said. "You aced both practice tests and you know your formulas inside and out. You can do this, Crystal. I know you can." She shoved the pencils into the younger woman's hand. "Come on, they're opening the doors."

Crystal took a deep breath and stared at the building, all her doubts and fears coming to the forefront. "Maybe I should wait and study more."

"No. You've studied enough. You're just nervous."

Unable to stop herself, Crystal wrapped her arms around Laura and hugged her tightly. "Wish me luck."

"Good luck, hon," Laura whispered into her ear as she returned the embrace. "You'll do just fine and after this is over I'm treating you to the biggest bowl of popcorn you want and the matinee of your choice."

"I'd settle for microwave popcorn and a rental." Crystal reluctantly pulled back and double checked the points of her pencils. "You really think I can do this?"

"I don't think," Laura corrected. "I know. I've already picked out the spot on the wall where we're going to hang your diploma. Now get in there and knock them dead."

Crystal was too excited to appreciate the falling leaves as she raced up the walk. It was finally here, an envelope from the State Education Commission. When she had called home on her afternoon break and had been told by Laura that there was a large white envelope waiting for her, Crystal almost asked Michael if she could leave early. As it was she drove past the church where her nightly AA meetings were held and headed straight home. Now in a few seconds she would know if she passed the test she took nearly three weeks earlier.

Just as she reached for the handle, the door opened to reveal Laura standing there, envelope in hand. "Looking for this?" the writer said with a smile.

"I can't believe it," Crystal said excitedly, taking the envelope and stepping inside the townhouse. "It's gotta be my diploma. They wouldn't send a big envelope like this just to tell me I've failed, would they?"

"Open it and find out," Laura said.

Nervously, Crystal tore at the sealed flap and pulled the two pieces of paper out. One was a letter which she quickly ignored in favor of the official looking diploma with her name in bold print. "I did it," she whispered.

"Yes you did," the writer agreed.

Crystal continued to stare at the diploma. "I can't believe I did it." Comforting hands rested on her shoulders. "I passed. I got my GED. I don't have to admit I never finished high school anymore. I can say I have a GED. I did it."

"I knew you could," Laura said gently.

"I never would have been able to do it without you." Setting the paper down on the side table, Crystal turned to face Laura. All the weeks of studying, of struggling to remember names and dates, of trying more time just to make Laura happy when all she really wanted to do was throw it all in the garbage and give up, all that was over. Crisp white paper declared that the mistake Crystal made as a teenager no longer had to haunt her. Looking at Laura, Crystal knew where the strength had come from to make what once was just a dream now a reality and not all of it was inside. "Thank you," she whispered softly, blinking at the stinging feeling in her eyes.

"I only helped you study. You're the one

"

Crystal cut off her roommate's protest by pulling the older woman into a fierce hug. "No. I never would have even tried if it wasn't for you, Laura." Her voice sounded muffled against the writer's neck. "You're the one who kept encouraging me, who taught me the tricks to remember the order of how things happened and those damn flash cards." She smiled and held Laura tighter. "Thank you," she whispered again.

"You're welcome." They stayed like that for a moment longer before Laura finally disengaged from the embrace. "Now I think this calls for a celebration."

"Like what?" Crystal asked as she turned away to wipe her eyes, though she knew Laura had seen the tears.

"Dinner and a movie?" Laura offered. "Anything you want, my treat."

"Everyone's playing those psycho killers chopping up teenagers movies," Crystal said.

"It's the season," the writer said. "After all, Halloween is just around the corner. We could always swing by the rental place and pick out a comedy if you want."

"Naw, I'm not in the mood for a movie."

"We could call Jenny and the boys and see if they want to have dinner with us at the Chinese place," Laura said.

"You feel like pizza?" the blonde countered. "That marathon is on tonight."

"It's fine with me," Laura said. "But are you sure you want to stay in tonight?"

"Absolutely," Crystal said. "I don't feel like celebrating with everyone. Lemme change out of these clothes and call Jenny to tell her the good news,

then we'll decide where to get the pizza and relax at home tonight."

Part 14

"Grab pickles while you're down there, will ya?" Crystal asked, looking over the neatly written shopping list.

"Spears or slices?" Laura asked.

"Spears and make sure they're dill," the blonde replied without looking up from the list. "Last time you got me that other kind. I don't like them."

"Is that why you haven't touched that jar? You could have told me." Laura picked up the correct jar and put it carefully into the shopping cart.

"You went to the trouble to buy them for me," Crystal said. "I figured they'd get eaten up eventually."

"We could have brought them over to Mom's with us tonight," Laura said. "I'm sure she'd find a use for them."

"Don't forget we have to stop someplace and pick up a new frame for your picture since you put my GED in that one." Crystal threw a bag of chocolate chip cookies into the basket. "Hey, let's not forget to pick up a tin of those butter cookies."

"Just one? I can eat that myself," Laura joked. "We'll pick up a couple of them. Oh, pick up two bags of marshmallows, would you? I want to make a batch of those treats to send to Bobby."

"Sure, I saw them down this way." Crystal moved to the far end of the aisle, spotting the bags on the bottom shelf. An older woman, debating on which bag of hard candy to buy, stood in her way. "Excuse me."

The older woman turned, their eyes meeting. Shock still, Crystal swallowed hard against a dry throat. "It can't be," she said, her voice barely above a whisper. Years had taken their toll, Crystal noticed. Lines and wrinkles marred what once was a beautiful face, blonde hair was now silvery gray and the glasses were thicker but there was no mistake in the eyes which looked back at her with at first confusion, then recognition.

"C-Crystal?" the woman asked carefully.

"Crystal? Did you find the marshmallows?" Laura asked as she came upon them.

I um

yeah." She pointed at the bags on the bottom shelf, never taking her eyes off the woman before her. Unsure what to say after so many years, Crystal stood there dumbly staring.

"I can't believe it's really you," the woman said in awe, reaching her hand toward Crystal's face.

Um

yeah," Crystal mumbled, taking a step back out of reach and closer to Laura.

"You're really alive," the woman continued, putting a shaky hand into her purse and retrieving a handkerchief.

"Crystal?" Laura asked, no doubt concerned by the pale pallor of the blonde's face.

"Laura, this is

" Crystal paused over the words. "Margaret Sheridan. She's

my mother."

At the word, Margaret Sheridan gave a half sob and moved around her shopping cart to pull Crystal into an embrace. "I can't believe it," she sobbed. "My little girl is alive. My Crystal is safe."

Crystal pulled free and moved next to Laura, taking the writer's hand in hers and feeling reassured at the gentle squeeze. "Did you ever hear from Patty?"

"There's so much to tell you," Margaret said, tears still rolling down her cheeks. "You turned out so beautiful. I always knew you would."

Crystal did not protest when Laura wrapped a protective arm around her. "What about Patty?" the young woman insisted.

Margaret gave a sad smile. "She came back home less than six months after you left. We tried so hard to find you."

"Where can I find her? Does she have a phone number? Where's she living?" The questions came quickly out of Crystal's mouth and she tightened her grip on the back of Laura's shirt.

"Patricia lives with me," her mother said. "So do Jessica and Thomas, your niece and nephew." She reached into her purse and fumbled around. "I have pictures."

Crystal felt light headed and very closed in. "I need to get out of here," she said in a low voice. Laura pressed the keys into her hand.

"I'll meet you at the car," the writer promised. She cast a quick look at Crystal's mother before releasing her hold on the younger woman. "I'll find out for you."

Crystal took a long look at her mother, seeing only love and concern in eyes so much like her own. Unsure what to say or even if her voice would allow her to speak, Crystal turned and headed for the nearest exit, not stopping until she had reached the Jeep and was safely locked inside. Rolling the window down halfway, she lit a cigarette, surprised at how much her hands were shaking. Patty's alive, she thought as she watched the tip of the cigarette burn. She's alive and I have a niece and nephew. I wonder how old they are. Patty lives with Mom? How can that be? She'd never live in the same house as Dad again, I know she wouldn't. Did Mom throw him out? Did the bastard finally die? Those and dozens of other questions raced through her mind as the minutes passed. She was surprised at the gentle tap on the passenger window signaling Laura's arrival. Crystal unlocked the door, holding the keys out presumably so her roommate could open the back of the Jeep to put the groceries in but once the door was opened, Laura reached in and pulled her into a hug.

"I know this has got to be hard for you," the writer said softly.

Crystal could only nod her head, grateful for the comforting arms around her. Trembling, she tightened her hold around Laura's neck and closed her eyes. Her breaths were coming in irregular gulps, the lump in her throat feeling larger with each second. She parted her lips to speak but no words would come out, only unintelligible croaks. She was not sure how Laura understood what she needed but for long minutes they stayed that way, Crystal stretched across the front seat while the writer stood with the driver's door open, her upper body leaning inside.

"Let's get you home," Laura said in a soft voice. Crystal took several haggard breaths before nodding and pulling back from the much needed embrace. She reached up to wipe her eyes but Laura was quicker, the writer's thumbs gently brushing the moisture away. "Of all days to come shopping with me, hmm?" Laura said.

"Fate's a bitch," Crystal muttered, surprised when she felt the writer's fingertip brush her lower lip before pulling away.

"Sometimes it is," Laura agreed. Crystal took the offered handkerchief and wiped her eyes while the groceries were loaded, feeling far more composed by the time Laura climbed into the driver's seat and put the keys in the ignition.

"I still can't believe it," Crystal said, crumpling the damp handkerchief in her fist. "My mother

I saw my mother." Belatedly she realized they were out of the parking lot and heading for the highway. "And at the supermarket. Does she live near here?"

Laura glanced at the torn scrap of paper with the all important phone number on it. "She's got a five two seven exchange. That doesn't start until after the railroad tracks on the other side of town so she doesn't live around here. Maybe something brought her out this way and she decided to do her shopping at the same time. Wild coincidence, hmm?"

"Yeah," Crystal answered absently while lighting a cigarette. "There's a big trailer park over there. She might be living there." Taking a long drag, she raised her eyes and stared at the passing traffic. "She's smaller than I remember."

"Probably because you're taller," Laura said.

"And Patty lives with her. She came home." Crystal took a deep breath to keep the tears at bay. "I miss her so much."

"I know you do, hon," Laura said with a gentle pat on Crystal's leg. "And in just a couple of hours you'll be able to talk to her."

Crystal looked at her watch, frowning at how slow the time was passing. "I need a cigarette," she announced, heading for the sliding glass door.

Laura rose from her chair and intercepted the nervous woman. "You just had a cigarette ten minutes ago," she reminded. "Maybe you should give Jenny a call."

"Naw," Crystal said, taking comfort in the gentle hand resting on her shoulder. "She's probably either with someone or on her way home right now. I wouldn't be able to catch her."

"Then sit down and try to relax," the writer insisted.

Reluctantly, Crystal allowed herself to be led to the table. "Maybe I should call now. Patty might be home early."

"You have almost half an hour yet," Laura said, standing behind Crystal and resting her hands on the younger woman's shoulders. "I know what will make you relax."

Crystal's eyes fluttered shut as she felt strong fingers begin kneading her neck and shoulder muscles. The kitchen was silent except for the occasional moans when Laura's fingers hit tight muscles. Eleven years of questions raced around in Crystal's mind, all vying to be the first one asked when the time came to make the call. Laura was right, Crystal thought to herself when the gentle beep of her watch alerted her to the time. The gentle massage did relax her, helping to make the minutes pass far quicker than if she had continued to pace about the kitchen.

"You ready?" Laura asked, taking a step back and removing her hands having.

"I think so," Crystal said nervously. "Damn, I wish I had a drink."

"I'm sure you do," Laura replied, handing over the cordless phone. "But you can handle this without it. I know you can. I have faith in you."

Crystal snorted and toyed with the phone. "I'm glad someone does." Taking a deep breath, she tapped in the number written on the torn scrap of paper. "It's ringing." Laura said nothing but the comforting hand she resting on Crystal's shoulder spoke volumes.

"Hello?"

"Patty?"

"Crystal? My god, is it really you?"

"I never thought I'd ever see you again," Crystal said, gripping the phone tighter. "I can't believe I'm really talking to you." She turned her mouth from the phone to address Laura. "It's really her."

"There's so much to talk about," Patty said, drawing Crystal back to the miraculous meeting on the phone. "Where did you go when you ran away? I tried to find you for years."

"I tried to find you too," Crystal replied, smiling at Laura when a tissue box was set before her on the table. "There's so much for us to talk about."

"Well now that we've found each other we have all the time in the world. I have so much to tell you."

"Let's start at the beginning," Crystal said, leaning her elbows on the table and visibly relaxing. "All right, so you got out on the bus

"Despite her attention being given to her long lost sister, Crystal was nonetheless fully aware of Laura leaving the room. A quick glance into the living room showed channels rapidly flicking before the writer settled on a football game. The next two hours were more emotionally draining than her most intense therapy sessions, an emotional roller coaster as the two sisters learned of each other's life since their tragic separation.

Laura looked up as she heard the phone being set on its base. Crystal's red rimmed eyes were puffy, a crumpled up tissue wiping the fresh tears that had fallen from them.

"Come here," the writer said softly, shutting off the television and shifting sideways on the couch. When Crystal sat down, Laura moved closer, putting her left arm around the younger woman's shoulders and pulling her close. "How are you feeling?" She felt Crystal shrug before answering.

"I dunno," Crystal said. "So much happened just after I left. If I had stuck around, things would have been so different."

"You can't go back and change things," Laura said, her fingers gently stroking Crystal's upper arm.

"My father had a heart attack about two months after I left," Crystal said, leaning her head against Laura's upper chest. "And Patty came home four months after that. If I had just stuck around for six more months I wouldn't have had to run away at all."

Laura took a deep breath, thinking of what she knew of Crystal's life as a runaway.

"She came home pregnant," the woman in her arms continued. "Patty could have really used me then and I wasn't there. Mom stopped drinking and found a job. Patty says Mom's so different from when we were kids. She watches Jessica and Thomas when Patty's at work." Crystal shook her head. "I can't believe it. Mom stopped drinking, Patty came home, I have a niece and nephew and I've missed it all!"

"Hon, you couldn't have known what was going on," Laura said. "You said your folks didn't have a telephone back then."

"I just never thought Patty would come home much less that the bastard would die so soon," Crystal said. "I should have toughed it out. I should have been stronger."

"Hey." Cupping Crystal's chin with her fingers, Laura looked into sad eyes. "You can't beat yourself up for what you should or shouldn't have done a lifetime ago. You had no way of knowing what would happen. You did what you had to do to get away from that monster. When the people that are supposed to protect you are the ones hurting you, what else could you have done?"

But

"

"No buts," Laura said firmly, relaxing her hold on Crystal's chin and letting her fingertips trace the throat before withdrawing. "You had to get away from your father." She waited for the reluctant nod before continuing. "The important thing now is that you have Patty back. When are you going to visit her?"

"Saturday," Crystal said, resting her head against Laura's willing shoulder. "It's easier for me to go see her than it is for her to pack the kids up in the car and make the trip out here." She paused for a moment before asking "Are you going to come with me to meet her?"

Laura, who had been momentarily distracted by the scent of golden hair beneath her nose, tilted her head to look at her companion. "Do you want me to?"

Crystal nodded. "Yeah."

"If you want me there," Laura said quietly, "I'll be there." Without thought, she let her fingers gently brush back and forth over the younger woman's shoulder, a gentle smile crossing her lips. "It should be interesting introducing me."

Crystal smiled back. "I'll just tell them you're a lesbian mystery writer and we live together. I'm sure that'll go over well."

"You have a wicked streak in you, hon," Laura said. "You'll make them think we're lovers."

To her surprise, Crystal merely shrugged nonchalantly. "So what?" the blonde said. "Patty wouldn't care, I'm sure of it." She sat up and looked at Laura. "Would it bother you?" she asked in all seriousness. "If people thought we were lovers?"

Laura took a deep breath, hoping the feelings she usually kept so guarded weren't evident on her face. "No, it wouldn't bother me at all. You're a beautiful woman and beneath that tough act you like to show everyone else, I know inside you're a loving and caring person. Any woman would be lucky to have that chance with you. Beside, half our friends think we're lovers anyway."

"More than half, I bet," Crystal said, relaxing against Laura's body again. "Of course I suppose the fact we do things like this

" she gestured at their intimate position. "

doesn't help."

"Yes but we don't hold each other like this in front of other people," the writer pointed out. "They don't see this side of our relationship."

"I dunno," Crystal said quietly, her eyes focused on the dark television. "I guess it's just because we live together."

"Must be," Laura said, knowing in her heart that it was not the truth.

"Then again maybe they see something we don't."

Laura's first thought was to deny it, to fight the reality within Crystal's words but her heart refused to let her. Nodding reluctantly, the writer dared to dive into the dangerous waters. "Maybe," she said in a voice so low that at first she was not sure Crystal had even heard her but when the young woman shifted, sitting up to look deep into Laura's eyes, the writer knew her words had carried.

"Laura?"

Laura heard the unspoken questions, the fear and perhaps even anticipation in Crystal's voice. Feeling her own heart pounding within her chest, she brought her right hand up to rest against Crystal's cheek. "Sometimes I see you hurting and all I want to do is hold you in my arms and never let go." Leaning forward slightly, she kept her eyes locked with Crystal's. "Other times you're so self-destructive that I want to just shake some sense into you but I have to hold back and just hope that you'll come to me when you're ready." Laura drew her hand back, the fingertips barely grazing Crystal's lower lip. "But most of all I'm just happy to be part of your life as long as you let me because behind those thorns I'm certain there's a rose just waiting to bloom and be loved." Feeling somewhat confident that she would not be rebuked, Laura closed the remaining distance and felt the softness of Crystal's lips against hers. It was a brief, fleeting kiss but to Laura, it was perfect. "You affect me," she whispered as she pulled back, her lips tingling from the abbreviated contact.

Crystal lowered her head, looking down at her hands. "When I first moved in here, I was sure it wouldn't work out. What the hell does a drunk stripper who didn't even graduate high school have in common with a lesbian writer with a degree?" She looked up at Laura. "Not to mention you're the ultimate neat freak."

"And you're the proverbial Oscar Madison," Laura said softly, answering Crystal's smile with one of her own.

"And I'm a slob," Crystal agreed. "But somehow we managed to work it out." She lowered her head again. "I don't know when it happened. It sure as hell isn't something I'd ever think about with anyone else. At first I thought it was because I hung around with just you and your friends but it doesn't rub off like a contagious disease." She shrugged her shoulders. "I guess I stopped thinking of you as a lesbian and started thinking of you as a friend

then as something more than a friend." Tilting her head up, she looked at Laura's mouth, seemingly unable to make eye contact. "You

you affect me too."

"So where do we go from here?" Laura asked, using her fingers to lift Crystal's head up.

"I don't know," Crystal admitted wearily. "I feel like I'm on overload with everything that's happened today."

"I bet you are," Laura said, using her arms to pull the younger woman against her. "Relax. It's not something you have to decide right this minute." Unable to resist, she bent her head and placed a soft kiss on the top of the blonde hair. "Nothing has to change. When the time is right, you'll know it."

"Until when?" Crystal asked, her voice muffled against Laura's chest. "What if you get tired of waiting or someone better comes along? What if I can't get over the stuff in my past enough to be able to

" She let the sentence go unfinished.

"You worry too much, you know that?" Laura said in mock exasperation as she hugged the woman in her arms. She understood the unspoken implication and deep inside, the writer's heart burned with renewed anger at the man who had caused so much pain to the younger woman. "I told you, when the time is right, you'll know it. And for the record," she added in a lower voice. "I'm not looking." She felt Crystal's arms tighten around her. "And I'm not going anywhere."

"Anyone tell you you're a sweet talker?" Crystal asked, awkwardly sitting up.

"I spend a great deal of time trying to paint a picture with words," Laura said, reluctantly releasing the embrace as Crystal put some space between them. "I'm just trying to make sure you understand how I feel." Deciding not to push it, Laura changed the subject. "Now, tell me more about Patty and your niece and nephew. I'm sure you know everything about them right down to their hair color." Laura settled back to listen to Crystal talk, though the words failed to sink in as the writer's mind traveled back to replay the evening's revelations

and what they meant to the future.

The air was cool, enough to make Crystal forego her usual t-shirt and don a sweatshirt to go with her sweatpants before stepping onto the balcony for a late night cigarette. Her thoughts were racing far too much to think of sleep, despite being tired. Wisps of smoke rose in the air while she quietly listened to the faraway hooting of the owl and even more distant sounds of the traffic on the highway. For a brief moment, part of her wanted to be on that highway, driving as far away from the whirlwind of her life as she could. She knew for a certainty now that Laura wanted to be her lover and while it relieved Crystal on one level to know her own interest was returned, it scared her as well. Writing in her journal for two hours after retiring to her room had been of some help, allowing her to organize her thoughts and express some of her fears but it wasn't enough. Flicking ash into the night wind, Crystal sighed and thought about what tomorrow would bring.

"Can't sleep?" Laura asked before opening the sliding door and stepping onto the balcony.

"Just a lot on my mind," Crystal answered. "You know, with seeing Patty Saturday and all." Her lips curled into a small smile. "Not to mention what happened downstairs earlier."

"Do you want to talk about it?" the writer asked, pulling out a chair and sitting down.

Crystal took another drag of her cigarette before answering the question with one of her own. "Do you?"

"I think we should since neither of us is getting any sleep," Laura said.

"You know I really wish I had a drink right now," Crystal said. "Everything is just swirling around in my head and part of me wants to just run from it all." She gave a short, self-deprecating laugh. "Figures when things are going good I'd be looking for a way to screw it all up." She tamped the cigarette out in the ashtray while trying to organize her thoughts. Realizing it was a futile effort, she turned her chair to face Laura and leaned forward, resting her elbows on her knees. "I don't know what the hell you see in me," she said, looking down at nothing.

"That's because you're not looking through my eyes," Laura said softly, her fingers reaching out to touch Crystal's arm.

"I wish I did," she admitted. "I wish I saw whatever it is you see. Laura? Earlier, when we were on the couch?" Goosebumps rose on her arm and Crystal knew it had nothing to do with the night wind. "When you

when we

kissed?" Taking a deep breath, she forced herself to look up and ask the question that had worried her all night. "Did you like it?"

"I did like it," Laura said earnestly. "You couldn't tell?"

"I thought so but, I mean

it's not like I'm the first woman you've kissed." She lowered her head again. "I guess I just wasn't sure." She paused. "You didn't say." She felt Laura's hand leave hers and gentle but insistent fingers pushing her chin up.

Crystal

" Laura took a deep breath. "I liked it. Very much so."

Reaching between her legs and gripping the e.g. of the chair, Crystal scooted closer, the material of her sweatpants brushing against Laura's knee. "Can I tell you something?" she asked shyly.

"Anything."

|
" She stopped, her insecurities taking over for the moment. The words she wanted to say just would not come. Reaching out, she took Laura's hand in hers and was pleased to feel a reassuring squeeze. "I

" she tried again. "Earlier, when I got up and told you I was going to go to bed?"

"Yes?"

Well

" She felt Laura's thumb move over her wrist and before she knew it, her hands were the ones being held. "I was hoping that you'd

you know

like a kiss goodnight?"

"I thought about it," Laura admitted, her thumb moving in lazy circles over sensitive palms and doing the most distracting things to Crystal. "I wanted to but after you pulled away I thought that maybe I'd pushed it too much. I didn't want to scare you. I wasn't sure you liked it."

"I liked it," Crystal said softly. "It was

" She shook her head, unable to describe all that the tender kiss had stirred in her. There was fear certainly, but not the fear of being hurt as of the unknown. Gentle, not demanding or even requesting, just offering a tactile expression of the most amazing of feelings and while almost overwhelming in its intensity, Crystal felt the loss keenly when it ended. "I'm not as good with words as you are, but if

" She looked into Laura's eyes, seeing what the night shadows could not hide. "If you wanted to do it again

I'd let you." While not able to take the first step herself, she trusted Laura enough to allow the older woman to do so.

"I'd like to," Laura said softly. "Very much."

Crystal tried to think, to burn into her memory the sensations as Laura leaned forward and closed the remaining space between them but there was no thought once their lips touched, only feeling. It was not just one kiss but many little ones and she did as much searching out with her mouth as Laura. She did not resist when gentle hands pulled her closer, ignoring the hard *e.g.* of Laura's chair against her knee. Nothing mattered to Crystal but the whirlpool she was sinking willingly into. The world narrowed to just herself and Laura, arms wrapped around each other. Needing more, Crystal moved from her chair and pressed her body against Laura, the thin layer of silk allowing her to feel the heat of the skin beneath. Crystal felt desire rising within her, her body longing for more than just an endless series of kisses. When she dared to part her lips and let the tip of her tongue touch Laura's lower lip, she was delighted to hear a soft moan. Then she felt Laura respond, the kiss deepening into something far more intense, more erotic, and more loving than anything she had felt before. Laura's tongue gently explored her mouth, drawing soft moans from Crystal as she surrendered to the feelings swirling through her. Sinking her fingers into the dark hair, she did some exploring of her own, using the tip of her tongue to gently trace the edges of Laura's teeth, to feel sensations stronger than any she had known before. When the kiss finally ended, Crystal found herself mostly on Laura's lap and was grateful for the arms holding her tight as she was certain she would sink to the deck if those warm, gentle arms were to let go. She felt the rapid rise and fall of Laura's chest despite struggling to get her own breathing slowed down. When she spoke, it was with halting breaths. "Now that

was

a kiss."

Laura laughed and pulled her closer. "I'm glad you liked it."

Crystal smiled against the warm chest and inhaled deeply. "I did. I've never

been kissed like that before." The hoot owl cried out from his perch. "Boy, he's pretty loud tonight, isn't he?"

"Maybe he's looking for his mate," Laura offered. She tried to shift. "I guess these chairs weren't really made for two."

"Maybe," Crystal said, referring to the owl, though deep inside it sounded more like a cry of loneliness. Reluctantly she extricated herself from the tangle of arms and legs they had become and moved back to her own chair, though she made sure to keep it close enough that she was able to maintain some closeness, letting her bare feet brush against Laura's slippers. Reaching for her cigarettes, she lit one and took several drags before speaking again. "So now what?" she asked softly, half afraid of the possible answers.

"That depends on you," Laura answered. Crystal realized it was a calculated response, leaving everything, including when to take the next step, in her hands.

"What if I'm not sure?"

"Then I think the best thing is for you to wait until you are sure," Laura said, pressing her finger to Crystal's lips to silence her protest. "I told you there's no rush. I'm not going anywhere." Leaning forward, Laura replaced her finger with her lips. "Now put that thing out and get some sleep," she said when she pulled back and stood up. "I'll probably see if I can get some writing done. Always fighting those deadlines, you know."

Crystal put the cigarette out and rose as well, turning until they were face to face. "Why don't I believe you?" she asked. "You weren't writing earlier. I would have heard you typing."

"You can hear me in your room?"

"If both of us have the glass doors open, yeah." They were standing so close that it seemed only natural for Crystal to put her arms loosely around Laura's waist. "I listen to you sometimes." Closing her eyes, she leaned her head against the shoulder covered by silky material. "Your chair squeaks a little, you know," she whispered as if revealing some great secret. "I can tell when you're rereading what you've written or if you're just taking a break. I can tell when you're on a tear writing like crazy and when it seems like you're struggling just to get a sentence written. But tonight, you weren't working on your story at all."

"Know what was I doing?" Laura asked, mimicking Crystal's position with her arms, pulling her closer. "I was lying in bed listening to you moving around and

"She took a deep breath before continuing. "I was worried about you. You're usually not that restless."

"I had a lot on my mind," Crystal said. "I guess you did too."

"Not a lot," the writer corrected. "Just one thing." That was all she had to say. Crystal understood and wondered which of them was more surprised when she leaned forward and initiated the kiss. Certainly Laura had been startled by her brazen move but to the older woman's credit, she recovered quickly and soon it was Crystal who found herself overwhelmed by a more experienced and insistent mouth. She felt the hard e.g. of the table pressed against the back of her thighs but Crystal ignored it, concentrating more on what was going on with her front. Where previous life experiences had been hard and unyielding, Laura's body was soft, accommodating, molding against her own. A mouth that gave as well as took, hands that roamed but did not conquer, touching her neck, tilting her head back, making her feel desired and reveled at the same time.

"Oh." Gasping, she barely had time to register that Laura's mouth had left hers before she felt the electric sensation of those lips caressing her throat.

"

so much," was all she could understand mumbled against her skin. Her own fingers found themselves buried in the dark hair, holding Laura close. She felt Laura's hand make a slow path down her side, stopping at the gap where her sweatshirt had ridden up slightly. There the fingers stopped, rubbing the exposed skin gently but making no attempt to go further. When she reached for Laura's shoulders, the lips that were burning over her skin stopped and she felt the loss of the warm weight against her upper body. "Crystal

"

Crystal did not need experience with women to understand the timbre of Laura's voice. The meaning was clear. Anticipation, desire and even the jitters coursed through her. Nights of wondering what it would be like were about to be answered. Only now realizing she was sitting on the table, Crystal stood up and moved into Laura's waiting arms. Taking a deep breath, she reached down and entwined their fingers. "Yes," she whispered, searching out Laura's lips again. She began backing up, trusting that Laura would not let her bump into any of the furniture or walls. There was a pause as Laura reached out and Crystal heard the sound of the screen door sliding open, then it was a careful step backward over the threshold and into the immaculately kept bedroom.

There were no dirty clothes to trip over and within seconds Crystal felt the softness of the bed against the back of her legs. There she caught her breath as Laura stepped back and turned on the low wattage lamp next to the bed. After being out in the darkness of night for so long, Crystal had

to blink for several seconds before the light no longer seemed so bright.

Hey

"Crystal's vision was filled with the most tender of looks from Laura. "I want this to be right," the writer whispered. "You tell me if you need to stop, all right?"

Crystal nodded, then felt a shudder run through her when Laura's hands cupped her cheeks. She allowed herself to be pulled into the kiss, letting her own hands move over the blue silk top to feel the warmth permeating through from Laura's shoulders. For unknown minutes they stood there next to the bed, kissing and holding each other but not making any attempts to further things along. Suspecting that it was she who had to take the next step, Crystal lazily ended the kiss and took a step back, locking her eyes with Laura's. "I'm scared," she admitted quietly, reaching down and hooking her fingers under the e.g. of the sweatshirt. "You'd think it wouldn't matter to me," she said, giving a short laugh. "After all, look at what I was doing six months ago."

"I know," Laura said, stepping forward and running her hands up and down Crystal's shoulders reassuringly. "But that was then and this is now. This isn't some stage with dozens of people looking at you. It's just you and me making love. We'll take it slow, and we won't do anything you're uncomfortable with, all right?"

Taking a deep breath, Crystal nodded and nervously pulled her sweatshirt up, closing her eyes as the gray material passed over her head. Letting the shirt drop to the floor, she moved forward, feeling the silky softness of Laura's top against her breasts as their lips met. She gasped when Laura's hands slid across her bare back, the feather light touch causing a powerful reaction in her body. "That feels good," she murmured.

"Not as good as it does to me," Laura answered in an equally low tone, her lips nipping Crystal's ear. Twin points jabbed against the blue silk, giving proof to the writer's words.

Crystal reached between them, her fingers closing around the top button of Laura's pajama top. "So I see," she said, releasing the first button. Before she realized it, she had all the buttons undone, the blue silk hanging open and showing the thinnest glimpse of bared flesh. She reached up to push it off Laura's shoulders but the hands that had been wreaking havoc with her senses moved to intercept her. "I'll get it," Laura said, shrugging her shoulders, sliding the top off and catching it with her left hand. Crystal released her hold and stepped back, watching Laura fold not only the blue top but her sweatshirt as well. When the writer bent over to set them on the trunk, Crystal came up from behind and ran her fingers lightly in small circles up and down Laura's back.

"Are you nervous?" she asked, making the circles larger and using both hands now.

"Probably just as much as you are," Laura said, still making no attempt to move, except to press harder into Crystal's roaming fingers.

"I'm glad it's not just me," Crystal said, moving forward and wrapping her arms around the writer's waist. Closing her eyes, she pressed her lips to Laura's back, feeling the muscle covered bones against her breasts, silk covered hips against her belly. Wrapping her arms around Laura's waist, Crystal splayed her hands out, her thumbs coming dangerously close to the firm swells.

Laura inhaled sharply and straightened up. "No, it's not just you, trust me," she said, turning in Crystal's arms until they were face to face.

Crystal tightened her hold, enjoying the feel for the first time of soft breasts pressing against her own. As they kissed, the hands had been gently stroking Crystal's shoulders were now moving purposefully up and down her arms. "Do you trust me, Crystal?" the warm voice whispered in her ear.

"Yes," she answered. It took only a slight nudge for her to understand Laura's intent and recline against the bed, her lower legs dangling off the side. The comforter against her back might as well have been made of burlap when compared to the warm softness of Laura's body nestling her from the front.

"Hmm," Laura sighed between kisses. "I wish I could stay like this forever." Crystal gave a moan of agreement, her eyelids shuttering closed when she felt moist lips kissing a trail down her breastbone. Her body arched of its own volition, pressing her right breast against Laura's approaching mouth. "Easy," Laura said softly. "We have all the time in the world."

"Easy for you to say," she grumbled, threading her finger through Laura's dark hair. She was surprised when Laura propped herself up and stole a quick kiss.

"No it's not," the writer said. "I've wanted this for so long

"The roving lips found Crystal's right ear. "I'm going to show you just how much," she said before closing her mouth over the rosy nipple, already taut with anticipation.

The swirling tongue found its mark with pleasurable accuracy, drawing sounds Crystal thought herself incapable of making. Whether they were comprehensible or not, Laura seemed to understand them, moving from one breast to the other and back, lavishing more loving attention. Lifting her right leg, Crystal planted her heel on the e.g. of the bed and pressed upward, her need burning strong and demanding relief. Laura's hands and mouth moved down, the gentle fingers hooking around the elastic waistband of the sweatpants. "Yes," she sighed, lifting her hips in answer to the question in Laura's hesitation. Goosebumps formed on the newly revealed flesh, but whether it was from the feeling of Laura's fingers on her skin or the cool air on her overheated skin, Crystal could not be sure. All she knew was that it never, absolutely never felt as good as this. She watched tolerantly as Laura folded the sweatpants before setting them with the tops. "Come here," she whispered, needing to feel Laura's body against hers. Seeking those wonderful lips, Crystal used her strength to roll their bodies over so not only was she on top but they were diagonal on the bed. Their position gave Laura limited access to anything other than Crystal's back but the writer wasted no time in exploring what she could. "That feels good," Crystal said, rocking gently against the hands rubbing her buttocks.

"Good," Laura said, giving a gentle squeeze. "All I want is for you to feel good." She started to reach lower but was stopped.

"Wait." Crystal sat up, resting her hands on Laura's upper chest. "I just," she began, taking in the sight of the body she was straddling. Swallowing heavily, she slowly brought her hands down, the tips of her fingers moving over the tops of Laura's breasts, stopping just shy of the dark erect nipples. "You're beautiful," she whispered. "I don't

" Her voice cracked and she had to start again. "I don't know what you like."

"You're doing fine," Laura reassured her, taking one of Crystal's hands and kissing the palm. Their eyes locked, Crystal allowed her hand to be guided back to the breast, Laura's warm hand pressing hers against the soft flesh. Nervously Crystal closed her fingers, feeling the stiff peak being tenderly squeezed between them. Laura moaned and pressed her head back. "Yes, Crystal," she sighed. "That's nice." Crystal did the same with her other hand and received another sound of pleasure from Laura's lips. Her actions also caused the hips beneath her to rise, pressing her intimate center against Laura's soft belly. Crystal could feel her own wetness and was certain that last little rise made the writer aware of it as well. Laura's hands, which had been running restlessly up and down her back now wrapped around her, holding her as their positions were reversed, Crystal now lying on her back and looking up at the woman about to make love to her.

"Laura," she whispered, touching the thighs covered in blue silk. The heat against her lower abdomen confirmed Laura's rising desire. "Please take these off." Like a voyeur, Crystal found herself unable to tear her eyes away from the sight as Laura stood and pushed the blue silk off her hips. Unlike the hair on Laura's head, which tended to have little in the way of body, the dark triangle was made of small tight curls, the ones near the folds glistening with telltale moisture. The pajama bottoms joined the other clothes on the trunk then Crystal enjoyed the feel of Laura's warmth against her, her body tingling at the renewed contact. She felt the wetness pressing against her thigh as their lips met, knew her own was making its mark against Laura's skin as their bodies moved against each other.

Crystal's breath caught when Laura shifted to the side, lips closing around her nipple while a roaming hand moved over her hip, circling closer and closer to her own golden curls. Crystal's senses were on overload trying to handle all the different sensations at once. The soft, gentle mouth moving over her breasts, the warm body pressed against her own, the fingers begging her to surrender with the promise of the ultimate of rewards. Taking a leap of faith in both herself and in Laura, Crystal parted her thighs further, granting the writer full access. And then it was there, that magical moment when one lone digit moved between her slick folds and rasped across her bundle of nerves. "Ungh, oh Laura!" she cried, jerking her hips to repeat the motion. At one point Crystal had wondered if she would even be able to achieve orgasm with another woman, now she worried that should would all too soon. It had been so long since she had allowed another person to touch her and never before had it been so gentle, so tender and caressing. Laura seemed to know just how to touch her and for how long, never staying in one place too long before moving on, the slippery fingers quickly learning all of Crystal's secrets. The gasps were now steady, mixed with throaty cries that only vaguely resembled Laura's name as the tsunami grew within her. Grabbing Laura's shoulder tightly, Crystal held on as the wave grew larger and larger, her thighs trembling helplessly. She cried out when the wave finally crashed through, washing away all sense as she clung desperately to the anchor in her storm. Laura's soft voice filled her ear, whispering nonsense words meant to comfort as the writer's thigh replaced her fingers against Crystal's center. Smaller tremors rippled through her as she sought the safety and comfort of Laura's arms.

"Are you okay?" Laura asked in a low voice after a moment, giving Crystal time to get her breathing back to something close to normal.

Crystal nodded, kissing the skin so close to her lips. "I can't believe

" Shaking her head, she gave a nervous laugh. "I'm usually not loud like that."

"I'll take that as a compliment," Laura said, tilting Crystal's head up long enough to kiss the embarrassment away. "I loved hearing you calling out my name." Her hand moved down Crystal's side. "I'd love to hear it again," she said, lightly gripping the outer thigh.

Crystal smiled and stilled the roaming hand. "I don't know if I could take that again. Besides," she said, gently nudging Laura onto her back. "Don't you want me to

well, you know

take care of you?" She bent down and kissed the soft hollow of Laura's throat. "I want to," she whispered, kissing her way down. Closing her eyes, she felt as much as heard the sharp intake of breath as she kissed her way along the rising swell. There was some nervousness but Crystal ignored it, encouraged by the feel of Laura's hands on the back of her head. Listening to the hums of pleasure coming from Laura's lips, she concentrated her tongue along the pebbly flesh, tasting another woman's breast for the first time. Crystal bit a little too hard once in her enthusiasm but quickly learned the limits and soon was enjoying the sound of her name being repeated over and over in the most husky trill from Laura's mouth. She needed to touch everywhere, to bring Laura to that pinnacle that she herself had been at only minutes earlier, to learn the beautiful body beneath hers.

And learn Crystal did. From the ticklish spot below the left rib to the fine dusting of hairs below the navel that formed goosebumps when she ran her tongue along them, she learned it all. Laura's secrets were revealed to her in unfolding layers as she drew the writer higher and higher. She learned the right amount of pressure to use, the rhythm needed to meet her lover's body's demands. She felt awed by the emotional power of feeling Laura's intimate muscles clenching around her fingers, of feeling the tremors rippling through her lover. They made love again, sharing soft words and tender touches before falling asleep in each other's arms. There were no nightmares for Crystal, the warm body next to her protected her from the demons of sleep as the knights of old protected the fair maidens. In Laura's arms, there was no danger, only the safety and comfort that came from being loved.

Part 15

Sitting cross-legged on the bed, Laura watched in silence as Crystal slept. The sheet hung down near the blonde woman's hips, showing the writer an unhindered view of delicate lines and soft curves, curves that she had explored in detail only hours earlier. Unable to resist, she stretched out next to Crystal and placed a series of soft kisses along the bared back. "Good morning," she whispered, feeling her lover waking. She was surprised to feel Crystal's body tense up. Suspecting her proximity was the cause, Laura shifted back to her side of the bed.

"Morning." Crystal rolled over, rubbing her eyes against the late afternoon sun. "What time is it?"

"Close to three." Laura maintained her distance, unsure if physical contact would be welcomed. "I um

I could make something to eat," she offered, giving Crystal an opening if she wanted it.

"If you want," Crystal said, looking from the rumpled white sheets to Laura and back again. "Not even a morning kiss?" she asked shyly, a touch of insecurity threading her voice.

Laura moved quickly, not about to deny the woman who had captured her heart anything. She poured her feelings into the kiss, trying her hardest to wash away any doubts or fears Crystal might have had. Cupping the young woman's cheeks in her hands, she gave once final peck before pulling back. "Let's try this again. Good morning."

"Good morning to you too," Crystal said, taking advantage of Laura's position to claim a cuddling spot. "Mmm, this is nice. Maybe I'll go back to sleep."

"I wouldn't mind," Laura said. "I like holding you." She paused. "I'm sorry if I spooked you before."

Crystal nodded, giving an embarrassed smile. "I'm sorry. I guess I'm just not used to waking up with someone touching me," she said, snuggling closer and burying her face in Laura's neck. "I mean, I like it when you touch me. It just took a few seconds to realize that it was you touching me."

Laura rubbed her hand up and down the exposed back. "I understand. It'll just take some time." She kissed the top of Crystal's head. "And we've got plenty of time."

Crystal's head popped up. "Oh no we don't," she said, eyes wide. "It's Saturday, right?"

"Right."

"So we have to be at Patty's by six!" she exclaimed, trying to kick the sheets off. "We have to get ready."

Pulling Crystal back, Laura kissed her earlobe. "In a minute," she whispered, her right hand making small circles on the young woman's back. "I just want to hold you for a little while longer, all right?" She felt Crystal nod. It took only a few seconds to get settled into a comfortable position on the bed, Laura's back propped up with pillows while a blonde head rested against the writer's chest. "That's better," Laura said.

"Oh." Crystal's head came up, her eyes wide. "Did I do that?"

Laura looked down, seeing the oval bruises on her arm where Crystal's fingers had gripped just a little too tightly during a moment of passion last night. "I guess so," she said dismissively. "I bruise easy. Always have. Don't worry about it."

But Crystal was upset by the bruises, the sorrow evident on her face. "I didn't mean to do that," she said, kissing each discolored spot in apology. "I'm sorry."

"There's nothing to be sorry for," Laura said. "They'll go away." Seeing that her words were not working, the writer tried another approach. "Crystal, you didn't hurt me, I swear. I didn't even notice they were there until you pointed them out to me."

"I won't do it again," Crystal promised, her blue eyes shining as she stared at the bruises, shame and guilt evident on her face.

"It was an accident," Laura said gently but firmly, tilting the young woman's face toward hers. "I know you would never mean to hurt me."

"Never," Crystal vowed adamantly.

"Just as I would never deliberately hurt you," the writer continued, letting her hand cup Crystal's cheek. "You mean too much to me." Leaning forward, she guided their mouths together, letting her kiss speak for her. Feeling Crystal's lips part, Laura delved in, ignoring the taste of stale cigarettes. She felt her own body responding to the feeling of Crystal's naked flesh pressing against her. Laura wanted nothing more than to lose herself in the softness of her lover's breasts, to hear Crystal call out her name, to simply love her. When she felt a leg pressing between her own, she knew they would not be getting out of the bed any time soon. Letting her desire come to the forefront, Laura broke off the breath stealing kiss and moved down, tasting the softness of Crystal's neck. "I want you," she whispered, pressing their hips together.

"Yes," Crystal gasped.

Encouraged by urgent hands pushing her lower, Laura kissed her way down to Crystal's left breast, capturing the hardening nipple between her lips and flicking her tongue back and forth. It was not long before she felt the slim hips rising beneath her, silently begging for more. Using her legs to part Crystal's thighs, Laura moved to the right breast to lavish it with attention before covering both with her hands, her fingers rhythmically squeezing the hardened rosy tips.

Keeping her hands where they were, Laura shifted the rest of her body lower, kissing the flat stomach and damp curls before settling herself between Crystal's legs. Closing her eyes, Laura kissed the damp folds, smiling to herself at the tremor her action caused. "You like that?" she asked knowingly, kissing the sensitive flesh again.

"Oh yes," Crystal cried, her legs parting wider.

"I knew you would," Laura murmured, parting the folds with her tongue and tasting the sweetness hidden within. Unable to resist, she searched out the erect clitoris and gave it her full attention, enjoying the sounds of pleasure coming from Crystal's mouth. It was not long before she had to abandon Crystal's breasts, needing her hands to hold the rapidly wriggling hips. The cries became muffled as strong thighs tightened around Laura's head, pinning her in place. Feeling the tremors against her lips, she knew Crystal was close. Increasing the pressure and speed of her tongue, Laura's efforts were soon rewarded as she felt Crystal's body stiffen, followed by the gentle release. She gentled her oral touch, riding out the climax until the young woman jerked away. Laura pulled back and kissed Crystal's inner thigh. "I love you," she whispered in a voice too low to carry.

"Oh God," Crystal huffed. Laura propped herself up on one elbow, still nestled between her lover's outstretched thighs. Assuming a cocky smile, she looked down at Crystal.

"That good, hmm?" Getting on her knees, Laura used her right arm to support herself while letting her left hand wander aimlessly over Crystal's thigh. "I'm glad you liked it." She smiled as she followed Crystal's gaze down to where her fingers were dancing dangerously close to the intimate region. She looked back to Crystal's face, seeing no fear or hesitation, only affection and desire. She entered first with one finger, then two, sliding into the slick sheath with utter tenderness, not wanting to do anything that would startle or frighten her lover. She responded to Crystal's urgent tugging and lowered herself until she was half on the bed, half on the young woman's body. Laura's left leg was hooked over Crystal's right, allowing the writer full access to the treasure she was exploring. "You feel so good," she whispered, kissing Crystal deeply. "I love touching you."

"Crystal tried to answer but Laura's actions apparently made that an impossible task.

"Shh, just relax and enjoy it," Laura said, pressing in just a little deeper. "Yes, that's it

so nice." She felt the pressure of the muscles around her fingers ebb and cautiously added a third, watching Crystal's face the entire time for any sign of discomfort. Instead she was answered with hips rising to meet her fingers, forcing them in faster than she had intended. Crystal's eyes were closed, her head thrown back against the pillow, incoherent sounds coming from her lips. Laura closed her lips over Crystal's right nipple and began thrusting her fingers in and out. The cries she longed to hear filled her ears, urging Laura on. All too soon she felt the precious muscles clamping down, trapping her deep inside. Though it took some effort, Laura was able to curl her fingers upward and find the smooth spot she was searching for. Crystal cried out as she orgasmed, her fingers gripping like talons to Laura's right arm, coincidentally enough in nearly the identical location as the bruises left the night before. Laura happily held her afterwards, eventually receiving pleasure of her own under Crystal's touch before the clock demanded that their day in bed be brought to an end.

Crystal watched the road signs nervously. "There!" she pointed. "Take the next right." Laura did so and soon the Jeep was traveling up a pothole filled road lined with utility poles and cracked concrete sidewalks. Dented trash cans lay near the curb and twice Laura had to slam down on the brakes to keep from striking a unleashed dog. "Okay," Crystal said, rereading her handwritten directions. "Up there where the stop sign is take a left, then you go two blocks and turn right." She folded the directions up and put them in her shirt pocket. "The park is supposed to be on the right."

To Crystal's surprise, the trailer park was not as run down as she had expected. The lots were large compared to the narrow ones of the trailer park she had grown up in. The roads were smooth and edged by trees and grass, the homes set back from the roadways. The homes themselves all seemed fairly new, peaked roofs and bay windows showing everywhere. Neat signs indicated the cross streets, making it easy for Crystal to find Pine Lane and from there, the blue and white double-wide with a front yard filled with children's toys and a pair of bicycles laying on their side. "There it is!" she said excitedly, already reaching for the door handle. Laura turned into the white gravel driveway, stopping just behind an older Toyota. Crystal was barely out of the car when the front door opened and the woman who was unmistakably her sister stepped out. "Patty!"

"Crystal!" They collided together, arms embracing tightly.

"I can't believe it," Crystal said, clinging to the reality she thought she never would have. "Oh God, I've missed you so much."

Patty pulled back, wiping her eyes. "I just about dropped out of my chair when Mom told me she saw you at the store. I thought

well, it doesn't matter what I thought. You're here." Patty noticed Laura standing by the car. "And this must be your roommate Laura." Crystal watched as they shook hands.

"Nice to meet you," Laura said, standing just behind Crystal.

Standing at arm's length, Crystal observed the difference time had made in her sister. Youthful skin had given way to fine wrinkles near the eyes and hair that had once been sun blonde was now closer to ash. Patty also sported a body that had seen two pregnancies and not enough exercise. Still there was a vibrance there that could not be hidden by the extra pounds or lines. It was still the same sister Crystal had spent hours playing Monopoly with, sharing secrets and fears, and missed terribly.

"Let's go inside," Patty said, gesturing at the modest porch.

There was no doubt two children lived there, Crystal thought as she stepped around a toy robot and over a doll on her way to the couch where Patty joined her while Laura took a seat in the nearby recliner, immediately straightening out a stack of magazines and papers littered the end table. "So where is everyone?" Crystal asked.

"Mom took Jessica and Thomas out to Happy Mary's for dinner. They've got a playroom there and I wanted some time alone with you without everyone underfoot."

Crystal nodded, thinking it was a good idea, especially when she looked over at Laura, reminding her of the need to tell her sister the truth about their relationship. "Patty? There's something I have to tell you." It was a subject they had never talked about as children and despite her bravado at home to Laura, deep down inside Crystal held a fear that her sister would not approve. "I didn't tell you everything last night on the phone."

"No kidding," Patty said, reaching for the cigarettes and lighter on the coffee table. "We've got eleven years to catch up on. I've got a lot of stuff to tell you too." She lit a cigarette, taking a puff before continuing. "So tell me."

Nervously, Crystal looked over at Laura, seeing her looking back encouragingly. "Laura and I

we're more than roommates," she finished in a rush, her eyes never leaving the writer.

Patty's hand stopped halfway to the ashtray and she looked to Laura, then to Crystal. "Are you happy?" she asked.

There was no hesitation. "Yes," Crystal said. "I mean, it's all new but yeah, I'm happy."

"Then that's all that matters," Patty said, knocking the ashes into the plastic ashtray. "Can't say it isn't something I haven't tried once myself," she said with a shrug. "Boy did that blow Mom's mind."

"You mean she knew?" Crystal asked in amazement. "Did she have a fit?"

"Oh yeah," her sister said. "But the thing is I own this place and she can't afford to live anywhere as nice as this on her monthly checks not to mention the extra money she gets from me by babysitting the kids. It wasn't anything serious. I was just curious more than anything after all the shit I've been through with men. Right now I've got too much to worry about with the kids to be looking for Mr. Right somewhere. Oh Crystal, wait until you meet them. Jessie's first grade pictures look almost exactly like yours." She set the cigarette in the ashtray and stood up. "You've got to see it. I'll get the photo albums. I'll be right back."

Once her sister left the room, Crystal found Laura kneeling beside her. "That went well," she said in a low voice, not wanting it to carry down the hall.

"Yes it did," Laura agreed. "How are you doing?"

"Good," she said, relaxing now that her biggest fear had been vanquished. "It's so strange to see her after all this time but she's still the same Patty I grew up with, just a little older and I guess I can still tell her anything."

Laura smiled and kissed her cheek. "I'm glad you can." Both heads turned to the sound of a car doors opening and closing. "Sounds like they're back early."

"I can't find the one with Jessie's baby pictures but I found the rest," Patty said, returning with several large binders in her hands. Laura moved back to the recliner just before the front door opened, letting two bundles of energy into the once quiet room.

"Mommy, Mommy. Happy Mary's burned down!" Jessica said excitedly, dropping her pink jacket on the floor just inside the door.

"Yeah, and there was big fire trucks there 'n everything," six year old Thomas said, mimicking his older sister's actions with his own jacket. "They were loud."

"Hang your coats up where they belong," Patty said. "I have someone I want you two to meet."

Crystal stiffened at the sight of her mother slowly entering the house. Since they had both been standing still at the supermarket, she had not noticed the pronounced limp in the older woman's walk, or the arthritic fingers that struggled to hold the two brightly colored coats the children handed her. Images of a drunken woman sitting at the table flashed through her mind, bringing with them the old anger and pain. When their eyes met, there was first a look of pleasure, then of sadness, in Margaret Sheridan's face.

"Jess, Thomas, this is your Aunt Crystal," Patty said. "And this is her friend Laura."

"I'm a Crystal too," Jessica said proudly, pushing her younger brother out of the way in their sibling battle to be closest to their newly found relative.

"You are?" Crystal asked with surprise.

"Yup. My name is Jessica Crystal Sheridan. Mommy says crystals are special. I've got a whole collection of them in my room, wanna see?" the blonde girl asked, reaching for her aunt's hand.

"Later, Jessica," Patty said. "Aunt Crystal just got here. You can show her all your stuff later." She looked over at her mother. "So what happened?"

"I don't know but we saw the smoke from two blocks away," Margaret said, casting a quick look at Crystal before turning away. "I better get some dinner started for these two. Are you girls hungry?"

"No," Crystal said quickly. "Laura and I ate earlier," she lied.

"Thank you anyway," Laura said, sending a subtle questioning look at Crystal. She ignored, concentrating on the coffee table until she heard the swinging doors bumping against each other to indicate that her mother was no longer in the room.

"Aunt Crystal, Aunt Crystal," Thomas said urgently, shoving past his sister. "There was fire trucks there and they were real loud. I covered my ears like this but it still was loud." Unlike his sister, who was graced with the Sheridan blonde hair and light complexion, Thomas apparently took after his father, whom Crystal guessed to be of Hispanic origin. The boy's short hair was a dark brown, matching his eyes, his skin tone several shades darker than her own. Without hesitation he climbed onto her lap, forcing Crystal to put her arms around him to keep him from falling off. "Gramma wouldn't let us get close but I got watch the firemen put their hoses on the fire hydrant."

"You did, huh?"

Thomas shook his head up and down. "Yeah. And there was lots of people running around and Jessica pushed me once and I almost fell down."

"Jessica," Patty said in a gentle but disapproving voice. "What have I told you about pushing your brother?" She set the photo albums down on the coffee table and knelt down in front of her daughter. "You know better. Do you want me to take your bike away for a week?"

"No Mommy, but he wouldn't get out of the way," Jessica protested.

"That's still no reason to shove him. He could have hit the sidewalk and gotten hurt." Patty shook her head and looked at her sister. "I don't know about these two sometimes. We were never like that."

"Are you kidding?" Crystal asked. "Don't you remember when you pushed me down that muddy hill?"

"You pushed me first," Patty protested. "I didn't know you'd fall down the hill."

Thomas giggled, squirming on Crystal's lap. "Mommy pushed Aunt Crystal down the hill," he said in his childish voice.

"And don't you go getting any ideas, young man," Patty said in the unmistakable mother tone. "Now both of you change into your play clothes and you can ride your bikes until dinner's ready." She pulled Thomas off Crystal's lap and pointed him in the direction of the bedrooms. "Scoot. And put on your old sneakers too. I want those kept clean for school."

"Okay Mom," he said. "Jessica, race you."

"No running," Patty said but it was too late as both children went tearing down the hall, their laughter and footsteps echoing through the home. "The twin tornadoes will be coming back out in just a minute," she said as she resumed her former seat on the couch. "I don't think either of them knows the meaning of walk."

"They're great," Crystal said, turning toward her sister. "They seem really happy."

"They are," her older sister said. "Sometimes they're a handful but Mom really helps when they get to be too much."

Crystal reached into her pocket and pulled out her cigarettes. "I still can't believe you live with her," she said, lighting one. "No way in hell I could."

"She's changed," Patty said. "She's much better now that she's not drinking." Crystal felt her sister's arm go around her shoulders. "Give her a chance, you'll see. She really misses you," she added in a lower voice.

Crystal took a long drag on her cigarette, looking over to Laura. "Damn this is hard."

"If it's too much for you," Laura began but Crystal shook her head.

"No, I can do this," she said, looking over to her sister. "I can't just accept her as a loving mother, but I'll be civil."

"She really has changed," Patty said, looking toward the hall at the sound of a door opening. "The children really love her," she added.

"Yeah," she said, understanding the unspoken message, don't be hostile in front of the kids. "I'm gonna take this outside." She held up the cigarette. "I don't want to smoke around them."

"Aunt Crystal," Jessica said as she ran down the hall. "Wanna watch me do a pop-a-wheelie with my bike?"

"Put your helmet on," Patty said. "Mrs. Catcher told me she saw you riding around without it."

"Sure," Crystal said. "I was just going to step outside anyway."

Minutes later Crystal and Patty were sitting at the round picnic table in the front yard. Laura was kneeling on the roadway, watching Jessica and Thomas riding their bikes back and forth. The sun was setting, only the upper third still visible over the tops of the neighboring mobile homes.

"So how long have you two been together?" Patty asked.

"Not long," Crystal said. "In fact, um

well, last night was our first time."

"What? You're kidding." Patty playfully nudged Crystal with her shoulder. "Lucky you. But you've been living together for a while, right?"

"About four months," she said, waving as Jessica rode by. "Laura's a writer. She writes lesbian mysteries. She's also a great cook," she added.

"Well, I'm glad you're happy," Patty said. "All these years I wondered where you were, how you were doing. I didn't even know if you were still alive." She shook her head. "I even thought about hiring a private detective but I never could afford it."

"I worried the same about you," Crystal said. "Funny thing is I never left the county. I got down to the city and guess I just got lost in there. I didn't tell you this on the phone but

I worked the strip clubs for a long time."

Patty lit a cigarette and stared out at the roadway where Laura and the children were. "When I first got off the bus, I thought it would be easy to find a place to live and work. Pretty stupid for a seventeen year old. I was out of money in three days."

Crystal nodded, taking a long drag on her own cigarette. She did not have to ask how her older sister had survived. There was only one way a young girl could make quick money on the streets. Still, she felt saddened at the confirmation of what she had long suspected. "I'm glad you weren't out there long," she said.

"Long enough to get pregnant with Jessica," Patty said. "Her father was just another john who didn't have a condom with him. It wasn't like I could get the pill or anything either so it was bound to happen."

"I guess I was lucky," Crystal mumbled around her cigarette. "I never got pregnant." Exhaling slowly, she watched the white line of smoke trail upward. "I was such a mess I wouldn't have been any good as a mother anyway." She nudged her chin in the direction of the bicycling children. "You seem to have done good with those two."

"Thanks," Patty said. "It's important to me to be a good mother for them."

"Giving them what we never had," Crystal said, shooting a bitter look at the kitchen window.

Patty dropped her cigarette to the ground and crushed it under her foot. "You're right about that," she said. "It took a while after he died for her to get into treatment and learn how to be a parent, even if it was too late for us. She loves those children and would do anything for them."

Crystal felt the anger well within her and gripped her cigarette tightly, crushing the filter. "She used to sit at that table and do nothing while he beat the shit out of us or don't you remember that?"

"I remember," Patty said. "Believe me, I remember. But she's changed. She goes to her meetings, sees her counselor every other week and hasn't had a drink in years. It's been really hard on her not knowing what happened to you."

"I don't feel sorry for her," Crystal said. "She put us through hell and let him do even worse. You don't know what he was like after you left." She drew a hard long drag on what was left of her cigarette before tossing it to the ground. "You forgive her if you want. I'd rather have nothing to do with her." Closing her eyes, Crystal took a deep breath, willing her body to calm down, her fingers to uncurl from the fists they had become. She felt Patty's hand squeeze her shoulder.

"If you need to hate her, then do it," her older sister said. "But we've lost so many years. Isn't it time to let go of the past and move on? I don't want to lose you again, Crystal."

"You're not going to lose me," she said, lifting her head to look at Patty. "I'll work it out." Shaking her head, Crystal gave a small smile and reached for her cigarettes. "No wonder I'm in therapy, hmm?"

Patty laughed and squeezed her shoulder again. "I think everyone needs therapy."

Crystal gave a snort and lit another cigarette. "Poor Jenny. That's my therapist. It's gonna be a hell of a session when I see her Tuesday." She shook her head. "I still can't believe I'm sitting here talking to you."

"Same here," Patty said. "You're taller than I thought you'd be. You were always so much shorter than me."

"Only because you were older, but even though I was shorter I could still keep up with you, couldn't I?" Crystal asked.

"Yes you could," her sister admitted. "Those two are no different," she said, looking in the direction of the children. "Thomas is always trying to beat Jessica in whatever they do."

"Just like us," Crystal said, forcing the serious expression off her face when she saw the trio heading their way.

"Did you see my pop-a-wheelie, Aunt Crystal?"

"Yes Jessica, I did," she said, grateful for the distraction to end the conversation. "So are you any good with Monopoly?"

The girl shook her head. "I've got Twiddles the Caterpillar game for the computer. I'm good at that."

"Oh, I don't think Laura has that on her computer," she said, looking at her lover.

"No, can't say that I've ever seen it," Laura said.

"Mommy, can I show Aunt Crystal and Laura my game?" Jessica asked.

"Is your room safe to enter?" Patty countered.

"I'm sure it can't be any worse than your sister's," Laura said.

"Hey." Crystal gave her a playful shove. The smile left her face when she caught movement through the kitchen window. "Come on, Jess. Show us your game," she said, reaching out for the child's hand. She did not have to look at either of them to know they saw what she had seen. I can do this, she thought to herself as she followed Jessica up the steps. To be with her only sister and the children, she could handle being in the same room as her mother, she decided. After all, I'm an adult now. What can she do to me? Still as they moved through the living room, Crystal pointedly kept her eyes averted from the kitchen.

After the children finished their dinner, they sat on the floor in the living room while Patty and Crystal took up the couch and Laura claimed the recliner. When Margaret came out of the kitchen, Laura stood up to offer the older woman the seat but Crystal's mother held her hand up and slowly made her way through the living room. "I'm tired. I'm going to bed early," Margaret said.

Crystal said nothing, her eyes looking everywhere but at her mother as the children got up and gave their grandmother hugs goodnight.

"I'll see you in the morning," Patty said, holding the photo album on her lap. She gave Crystal a gentle nudge with her elbow but it was ignored. Only when she heard a bedroom door close did Crystal look up. "You know she did that because of you."

Shrugging her shoulders, Crystal reached for the photo album. "I know," she said. "Come on, let's see the pictures."

The rest of the evening progressed smoothly, the years of separation melting away as photos and memories were shared. Thomas, who had little interest in looking at pictures, kept Laura occupied by showing off his prowess with his modest video game collection. Jessica alternated back and

forth from the two activities, joining in to help her mother tell a story or to show Laura how to play a particular game. By selectively ignoring any references made by her sister or niece, it became easy for Crystal to relax and pretend that her mother did not even live there. When the time finally came, she found she was reluctant to leave, wanting to spend just a few more hours with her beloved sister. It was with shining eyes and fierce hugs that they parted, promising to call each other and get together again soon. Laura even received hugs from the friendly Jessica and Thomas, who wanted her to come back and play more games with them. A quick jockeying of the cars to move Margaret's car out of the way and the visit was over.

"Do you want to talk?" Laura asked as she guided the Jeep out of the mobile home park and onto the street, going slow to minimize the bump of the potholes.

"No," Crystal said, reaching for her cigarettes. "Thanks for coming with me. I'm glad you were there even if I did spend most of my time with Patty and left you to keep the kids occupied."

"I didn't mind," Laura said. "After all, you went so you could spend time with her. I was glad to help with the kids."

Crystal watched the tendrils of smoke illuminated by the passing street lights. "You know, I don't understand why she acts like nothing ever happened," she said.

"You mean Patty?" Laura clarified.

"Yeah," she said. "I know she wants me to make peace with her but I won't. I don't have to forgive her for what happened." Crystal's eye caught a bright yellow billboard extolling the smooth flavor of a popular whiskey. "That looks good right now," she muttered.

"What?"

"That billboard back there." She sighed and took another drag. "Never mind." She stiffened at the sudden touch of Laura's hand on her thigh and had to reach out quickly to stop any retreat. "No, it's okay," she said, putting the hand back where it was. "I guess I just got a lot of stuff on my mind."

"Care to share?" her lover offered.

Where to start? Crystal could not get her thoughts clear enough to understand them much less explain to another person. How angry she was to see her mother being so nice to Patty's children? How it bothered her to see Patty showing concern toward the woman that allowed them to be beaten and terrorized? How two lousy months made the difference between life with her sister and life on the streets? How somewhere deep inside a young girl still cries out for a mother that will never be there? The reasons swirled but the result was the same, intense anger roiled through her and refused to be tamped down. "I can't explain," she said finally, squeezing Laura's fingers with her own. "I just want to get home."

"We should be near the highway soon," Laura said, withdrawing her hand as she neared the entrance ramp to the highway. "Do you feel up to a late movie on TV?"

Crystal stared out into the darkness of the night. "Yeah, sounds good," she said without any enthusiasm.

"Are you sure you don't want to talk about it?"

Crystal stared out the window for several moments before speaking. "I just don't get it," she said. "How the hell can she just forget what happened?" The emotions continued to churn within her, bubbling closer and closer to the surface. Crossing her arms over her chest, she balled her hands into tight fists. "How can she stand to be around that woman? Let her near the kids?" She jerked in her seat, slamming her foot down hard on the floorboard. "Do you know what she said to me? She told me it was time to let go of the past and move on. Can you believe that? Forgive that

that bitch?" She shook her head firmly. "No way. Not after all the shit I was put through. If Patty wants to forgive her, fine. I'm not."

"You don't have to," Laura said. "If it's too much for you to see her, make arrangements with Patty to come over to our home instead." Laura's hand returned to Crystal's thigh. "Do whatever you need to do to be happy."

Feeling the anger ebb, Crystal laced her fingers with Laura's and brought them to her lips. "Thanks for going with me tonight," she said, kissing the writer's knuckles. She smiled when she felt their joined hands being pulled over to Laura's lips. Looking around, Crystal recognized the stretch of highway they were on. "If you take the next exit and turn right at the light, there's a park about a quarter mile or so down the road. Feel like taking a moonlit walk?"

"Are you sure that's safe?" Laura asked even as she turned on the directional signal and moved into the right hand lane.

"The walking path is fairly well lit and the cops patrol the place pretty frequently," Crystal said. "We'll be fine. Come on, it's a beautiful night."

Fallen leaves crackled beneath their feet as they walked side by side along the windy cobblestone path. There were relatively few people out despite the mild temperatures, allowing Crystal the privacy she was hoping for. Laura gave only a token protest before slipping her arm around Crystal's back, agreeing that the dried out leaves would alert them if anyone approached. The walkway curled around the duck pond where there were fewer lights, taking the couple into near darkness and fueling Crystal's newfound romantic streak. "Come here," she said, tugging Laura off the path.

"This isn't safe," Laura warned before Crystal's mouth covered hers.

"Safe enough," she answered between kisses. "Even if someone did walk by, they wouldn't see us back here." Pressing Laura between her and the tree trunk, Crystal enjoyed the feel of arms holding her gently while the sounds of the residents of the duck pond gave life to the night. "I like this," she admitted, squeezing her arms around Laura's waist. She buried her head into the writer's neck, inhaling the scent of pine from the nearby tree

along with Laura's own natural scent. "Somehow even being together in the car wasn't enough." She sighed when Laura's grip tightened, pulling her even closer. "I guess I just needed to be held, that's all."

"Well then it's a good thing I love holding you, isn't it?" Laura whispered in her ear. "In fact, the offer is good for the rest of the night if you're interested."

"Are you going to fold my clothes again?" she teased lightly.

"That depends," Laura said. "On whether you take them off or not."

Crystal stopped her nuzzling of Laura's neck and straightened up, though she maintained her hold around her lover's body. "What if I wanted to sleep with you but I didn't feel up to doing anything more?" she asked.

"Then I would curl up around you and hold you until morning if that's what you wanted," Laura said, reaching up and cupping Crystal's cheeks.

Crystal smiled and brushed her lips over Laura's. "Why are you so good to me?" she asked, enjoying the warmth of the writer's fingers on her face.

"Because," Laura said, her fingers now tracing Crystal's jaw line. "I love you."

Closing her eyes, Crystal let the words wash over her, wanting to believe them with every fiber of her being. "I

I never

"Her voice catching in her throat, she had to swallow and start again. "I never believed anyone would ever love me, not if they really knew the truth about me." Feeling Laura's hands moving down to her hips, she brought her own up to wrap around the writer's neck. "And you know."

"Yes, I know," Laura said softly. "I know that you can't get the newspaper back in order after you've looked through it. I know you squeeze the toothpaste in the middle and you're allergic to putting the toilet paper on the roll. I know your clutter drives me nuts and I know that I do love you."

"Despite all that, huh?" Crystal croaked, fighting the sting in her eyes.

"Maybe because of it," the writer whispered. "They say opposites attract."

"Can't get much more opposite than us."

"No, not much," Laura agreed.

"I love you too," Crystal said in a rush, afraid the words would somehow get stuck if she went any slower. "It has to be love. I never felt like this before." Bringing back her left hand, Crystal rested her forefinger on Laura's lower lip. "I've never liked kissing anyone before but

"Unable to resist, she leaned forward and flicked her tongue over the soft mouth. "God, you're a good kisser."

"Mm, so are you," Laura murmured.

Crystal felt the bark scraping against her knuckles and knew it had to be uncomfortable for Laura's back but every time she tried to pull back she found herself held tighter. The turmoil of the evening slipped away, replaced by the surety that no harm would come to her within these loving arms. "What were we talking about?" she asked dazedly when their lips finally parted.

"You were telling me you loved me," Laura said, her hands keeping Crystal firmly secured against her. "And I was telling you that I love you. Nothing else matters, not tonight."

And after one last kiss in the darkness, the couple returned to the path and leisurely made their way back to the parking lot. While her reunion with her family had created a whirlwind of emotions, walking arm in arm with Laura on a moonlit night gave Crystal the anchor she needed to weather the storm.

"So what's going on?" Jenny asked as she closed the door. "It's not like you to ask for a short notice appointment."

"It was a hell of a weekend, Doc," Crystal said as she slumped onto the bean bag. "I saw Patty."

"You sister? How did that happen?"

Crystal briefly went over the details, carefully omitting any mention of her intimate relationship with Laura. She talked about her newfound niece and nephew, how she could still make out the Patty she knew from over a decade before in her sister's adult face, and a dozen other details that stood out vividly in her mind. When she finished, she looked over to see Jenny busily scribbling down notes. "Trying to keep the names straight, Doc?"

"Oh, I know who's who," Jenny replied. "There were just a couple of things I wanted to go back and touch on."

"Such as?" Crystal drawled, crossing her arms defiantly and knowing full well what her therapist was going to pounce on.

"How did it feel to see your mother again?"

"How do you think it felt?" Crystal said, the muscles in her jaw tightening. "I couldn't believe I was just standing there in the store and there she was like some warped nightmare or something, acting all sad and missing me and stuff."

"You don't think she missed you?"

Shrugging her shoulders, Crystal looked off at nothingness. "Doubt it. Why should she? She didn't pay attention to me when I was there." She began wiggling her foot back and forth. "You should have seen the way she was acting, all nice-nice, making dinner for the kids and all."

"Does it bother you that your mother is doing things for her grandchildren that she didn't do for her own children?" Jenny asked.

"It's all an act," Crystal said angrily, the tempo of her foot increasing. "Just like when she looked at me before going into her room."

"How did she look at you?"

"Like she was all sorry and hurt that I wouldn't talk to her," she said. "Let Patty forgive her, I'm not." Feeling too much energy to stay put, Crystal stood up and walked over to the window. "I don't know how she does it. I can't stand to be in the same room with the woman much less live with her." Her fingers gripped the wooden frame of the window. "After all the things our mother did to us, let happen to us. How the hell can Patty do that?"

"Did you ask her?" Jenny asked.

"Yeah, yeah, of course I asked her. She said our mother has changed, that she's not the useless drunk she was. I guess I'm supposed to feel sorry

for her now that she's all crippled up with arthritis or whatever the hell is wrong with her." Turning her head, Crystal focused on the long punching bag near the far wall. "So many nights

so many times I wished for her to come in and protect me, to stand up to him for her kids, to do something, anything to show me she loved me. Why wouldn't she?" Her anger needing an outlet, she stormed across the room and swung a hard left at the bag. "Why? What the hell was so wrong with me that she couldn't do that simple little thing?" The punching bag swung under another emotion-filled blow. "And she thinks I'm going to forgive her?" Thud. "Just because she wants me to?" Thud. "Because Patty wants me to?" Thud. "No." Thud. "I don't have to." Thud. "I won't." Thud. "I won't." Thud. "They can't make me." Thud. "I'm an adult." Thud. "If Patty wants to live with her and pretend everything is perfect, fine. I don't care." Thud. "She doesn't know what it was like after she left." Her knuckles sore from the repeated poundings on the bag, Crystal flopped down on the padded mat and drew her knees up to her chest, hugging them tightly as she watched Jenny move closer, the therapist now sitting only a few feet away on the mat. "She doesn't know," she repeated. The fight was slowly draining from Crystal's body and with it the harsh tone to her words. "She wasn't there to protect me from him anymore. That left only our mother and she didn't lift a finger to help me so why should I do anything to help her? Let her live the rest of her life knowing her daughter hates her, I don't care."

"The opposite of love isn't hate, it's indifference," Jenny said. "She's your mother, Crystal. She's the one who was supposed to love and protect you and what you're feeling is the pain of not having that. We've talked about this before."

"Yeah, many times, Doc. I know," Crystal said. "But it's one thing to not see her, to not know where she is or what's happened to her and it's another to know she's living with Patty and making the family we never had." Bowing her head, Crystal took a deep breath. "It's like all it took was me leaving to make everything better for them or something. The bastard has a heart attack, Patty comes back home, and then my mother decides it's time to stop being a drunk." Shaking her head, she squeezed her eyes tight and took a deep breath. "When I needed her to be my mother, she couldn't. Now that she wants to be, I don't need her

or want her."

"And what is your anger at your sister about?" Jenny asked, causing Crystal to jerk her head up.

"Mad? At Patty? No way, Doc. Weren't you listening? I hate my mother, not my sister." Releasing her knees, Crystal folded her arms over her chest, using the wall to support her back.

"I didn't say hate," Jenny said. "I said mad. It's obvious you're angry at Patty."

"And why would I be mad at the sister I've been trying to find for over a decade?" Crystal said, standing up and putting some distance between her and the therapist. "You know how many times I thought she must be dead? All this time she's just been a local call away, living with our mother." Standing behind the recliner, Crystal gripped the soft leather cushion. "All this time she's been living the life we should have had. She's got the good job, two beautiful healthy kids and a nice place to live. I'm the one that struggles to get through the day without getting drunk off my ass, the one that used to take her clothes off to earn money." She snorted and gestured at Jenny. "Hell, I'm the one that needs to see a therapist because I'm so fucked up. And me? I go and pick the one therapist that can't talk to me about one of the things I need to talk about the most." She shook her head. "Could I make my life any more complicated?"

"Crystal, you knew going into this that we couldn't talk about Laura," Jenny said, rising from the mat and crossing over to the couch.

"But I didn't know how I was going to feel about her," Crystal said. "I didn't know then that we'd

She caught the look of first surprise, then disbelief in Jenny's eyes as the therapist figured it out for herself. "I didn't know that I'd end up loving her," she said quietly, wincing inside at the pained look on the other woman's face.

When Jenny spoke, it was in a tone carefully devoid of any inflection or tone. "So you and Laura are lovers?"

"Yeah," Crystal said, finding she could not maintain eye contact with Laura's ex-lover.

There was a long pause before Jenny spoke. "Our time is almost up," she said despite there being almost fifteen minutes left.

"Doc," Crystal began.

"Make sure you keep up your meetings and writing in your journal," Jenny said, rising to her feet. "I'll see you on Friday."

"Wait." Crystal reached out and grabbed Jenny's shoulder. "You're upset," she judged correctly.

"If you want to explore a relationship with someone, it's none of my business," Jenny said. "Please Crystal, I have some paperwork to catch up on before my next patient arrives."

"I thought you said bullshit wasn't allowed in this office, Doc," Crystal said, pulling her hand free. "You're right that I need to figure out why I'm mad at Patty. I didn't realize I was until you pointed it out. Maybe that's what I need you most for, to help me see the obvious when I can't." Wrapping her fingers around the door handle, Crystal paused and looked back at Jenny. "So let me tell you what I see right now, Doc. I see someone who still has feelings for Laura. You can hold onto those ethical guidelines all you want but this is something we're going to have to talk about." She opened the door. "See you Friday, right?" She waited for Jenny's nod before leaving the office, emotions swirling as they so often did after an intense session.

Not wanting to go right home, Crystal turned onto the highway and headed south. With the directions etched into her mind, she followed the signs

until she ended up on the pothole filled road that led to the mobile home park where Patty lived. To her disappointment, the only car in the driveway was the one she recognized as belonging to her mother. She thought about turning around and leaving but then the screen door flew open and Jessica came running out. Knowing she was spotted, Crystal put the car in park and shut off the engine, steeling herself for the sight of the woman she so despised.

"Aunt Crystal, Aunt Crystal," the nine year old yelled as she bounded down the steps and ran over to the car.

"Hi Sweetie," she said, now wishing she had stopped along the way and picked up some little toys for her niece and nephew. After all, she was their only aunt and there were many birthdays and holidays to make up for. "How was school?"

"Mrs. Trudeau yelled at me."

"Oh yeah?" Crystal picked her niece up and carried her over to the picnic table. "Why?"

"Because I punched Melissa Goldman in the arm during lunch."

"And why did you do that?"

"She hit me first," the child said defensively.

"Did you tell the teacher that?"

Jessica nodded. "Uh huh. She yelled at both of us and we had to stay in during recess." The child's head turned at the sound of the screen door opening. "Gramma, Aunt Crystal is here." The smile that had been on Crystal's face quickly disappeared when her mother appeared in the doorway.

"Jessica, go change into your play clothes if you're going to be outside," Margaret Sheridan said.

"Do I have to?" the girl whined. "I won't get them dirty."

"You know what your mother said about wearing school clothes to play in," the gray haired woman reminded. Jessica made a disappointed face but climbed down and scooted into the house.

Crystal stood as well and walked over to her car, reaching through the open window for the cigarettes sitting on the dash. "I have nothing to say to you," she said, feeling the older woman's eyes upon her. Angrily lighting her cigarette, she shoved the lighter back into her pocket and leaned against the hood of her car, her back to the older woman.

Crystal

"

"I don't want to hear it. You had your chance years ago." She brought the cigarette to her lips, surprised at how her hand trembled. Calm down, she thought to herself, knowing Jessica would be back out any minute.

"I've missed you," Margaret said sadly.

"Yeah?" Crystal snorted. "Funny, I haven't missed you one bit." Tasting the venom in her tongue, she took the opportunity to lash out. "What I miss is something you never were and never will be." She heard the snuffle, then the screen door opening and closing. "Good," she muttered, taking pleasure in the knowledge that her words could hurt the other woman. Now alone, she walked over to the picnic table and resumed her seat.

Jessica came out a few minutes later, now dressed in faded jeans and sneakers that would never again be white. In her hand was a paper, the "A" in red marker clearly visible. "Aunt Crystal, wanna see what I got on my test?"

"I see, very good," she said, carefully schooling the residual anger out of her voice. "What time does your mommy come home?"

"Mommy comes home at six," Jessica said as climbed up on the bench. "Are you gonna stay for dinner?"

"I don't think so," Crystal said. "I have to go home soon. Laura will wonder where I am."

"You could call her," Jessica suggested. "Gramma will let you use the phone."

Not a chance, she thought to herself. "Maybe another time," she said. "Where's Thomas?"

"He's at swimming class. Can I come to your house some time?" Jessica gave her aunt her best pleading look but all Crystal saw were shadows of her sister a generation before. The young girl's hair was the same shade of blonde and her button nose was unmistakably a gift from Patty's genes.

"Sure," Crystal said, knowing with certainty that she was going to be one of those aunts who spoils their nieces and nephews. "Maybe we can even find a movie to go to."

"Oh!" Jessica said excitedly. "I wanna see Dragons and Wizards."

"Isn't that the one with all the blood and stuff?" Crystal asked, wrinkling her nose at the memory of the previews on television. "Besides, I think that movie is rated R."

"I've seen R rated movies before," Jessica said.

"How about we ask your mother?" Crystal smiled as the look on her niece's face told her exactly what Patty's reaction to such a suggestion would be. "Uh huh, I thought so. You were trying to pull a fast one on your Aunt Crystal, weren't you?" Jessica giggled and squirmed as Crystal reached over and began tickling her. "I knew it, you're just like your mother when she was a kid."

The pair were still chatting away when Patty's car pulled in behind Crystal's hatchback. The passenger door opened and three feet of energy came bounding out. "Aunt Crystal!"

"Hi Thomas," she said, turning on the bench to catch the boy as he jump at her lap. "Did you have fun swimming?"

"Yeah," he said with a smile. "Mr. Sherman even let me jump off the diving board once."

Patty approached them carrying a bright blue roll bag. "Thomas, give Gramma your swimming trunks and towel so she can get them washed for Wednesday," she said.

"Okay Mommy."

Crystal stood up and accepted her sister's hug. "Hi."

"Good to see you again," Patty said. "Come on in and stay for dinner. Did you bring Laura?"

"Laura's home," Crystal said. "I was just out driving and thought I'd stop by for a few minutes. I can't stay."

"Well it's still good to see you," her sister said, pulling back but leaving one arm around Crystal's shoulders. "At least come inside for a few minutes."

"I can't." Crystal took a step toward her car. "You know why."

Patty glanced at the house, then at her daughter. "Jess, go inside and help Gramma with dinner, please."

"Okay Mommy. Can I come back out when I'm done?"

"Is your homework done?" Patty asked.

"Most of it."

"Then you know what you'll be doing after dinner then, don't you?"

Crystal had to smile at the pout on her niece's face. "I'll come back soon to visit," she promised, bending down to hug the child who had come running over.

"Bye Aunt Crystal."

"Bye sweetie."

The sisters remained quiet until the screen door closed, each lighting their own cigarette. Patty spoke first. "I wish you would try to get along with her."

"Not a chance," Crystal said. "You want to pretend nothing happened and she was mother of the year, go right ahead."

"Look, I know you blame her for some of what happened to us but Crys, it was years ago."

"Oh, and that makes it all right?" Crystal walked over to her car and leaned against it, forcing Patty to follow her or have to speak loud enough for the words to carry through the open kitchen window. "She was all that stood between him and us and she did nothing, not one damn thing to help us."

"All right but he was the one, not her. You want to hate someone, hate him." Patty said angrily. "He's the one I hate."

"I hate him too but you can't just pretend she's innocent in all of it," Crystal said, her voice rising to match Patty's. "She's just as guilty and I can't figure out why the hell you can't see that." Pulling the keys out of her pocket, Crystal walked around the front of the car to the driver's side. "I'd like to see you and the kids," she said. "But I'm not going to put up with her."

"This is her home too," Patty said. "I can't just ask her to disappear whenever you want to stop over."

Jerking the door open, Crystal shrugged. "Fine. Then come over to my place because nothing is going to get me to make peace with her." She started the car and began backing up the second Patty moved away.

Speed was not a concern for Crystal as she whipped through the side streets on her way back to the highway. Once on the wide open road, she moved into the left lane and pushed the old car well over the posted limit. Only the rushing wind kept her thoughts company and it did nothing to help steer her away from the darkness that beckoned. At the intersection at the end of the exit ramp, Crystal came to a complete stop, the time having come for her to make a decision. To the right were the bars that offered oblivion, the escape from the anger and pain swirling around inside her. To the left, the scenic townhouse complex and Laura. Making her decision, Crystal turned the steering wheel and stepped on the gas.

Laura was waiting impatiently in the living room when she heard Crystal's car pull up. "It's about time," she said as she headed for the door, throwing it open just as Crystal was getting out of the car. "Where were you? I called around noon and Michael said you took the afternoon off."

"I went to see Jenny then over to Patty's," Crystal said, meeting Laura halfway up the walk. "And I'm not sure I should have done either."

"What happened?"

Crystal sighed and leaned against her. "Long story, both of them."

"All right, let's go inside and you can tell me all about it," Laura said, putting her arm around Crystal's waist. "I'm sorry if I sounded agitated. It's not like you to leave work in the middle of the day."

"I couldn't concentrate at work," Crystal said as they entered the townhouse. "I thought if I talked it out with Jenny that I could make sense of it but that just added to the problem."

"Wait a minute, I'm confused. How did talking with Jenny make the problem you have with Patty worse?"

"Not that," Crystal said, tossing her keys on the side table. "Though in Doc's usual way she gave me a lot to think about." She shook her head. "I don't know how to explain it."

"How about if we go over to the couch and I hold you until you figure out a way?" Laura suggested, using her hands on Crystal's shoulders to guide her lover in the direction she wanted.

"Why is it everything in my life always ends up being so screwed up?" Crystal huffed as she flopped onto the couch. "It's like I have some sort of warped Midas touch or something."

Believing Crystal would explain in her own way, Laura sat down and began gently rubbing her back, patiently waiting out the long moments before the young woman spoke again.

"I went over to see Patty and we got into it over the old woman," Crystal sighed. "Again. I don't know why she even bothers trying. It's not going to change the way I feel. I told her from now on she should come over here with the kids instead of me going there."

"Did she agree with that?" Laura asked.

Crystal shrugged her shoulders. "I dunno. I was so pissed by then that I just jumped in the car and took off." She shook her head. "I guess Doc was right when she said that I was mad at Patty because she defends the old woman." She reached for her shirt pocket where the half-empty pack of cigarettes were. "I need a smoke," she said. "Can we go outside?"

"Sure," Laura said, standing up and reaching for Crystal's hand. Together they walked through the kitchen to the deck. They sat down on the chairs, Laura saying nothing while Crystal lit her cigarette and took several drags.

"I told Jenny about us," Crystal said, finally breaking the silence. She looked down at her hands. "She's not happy about it."

"Why do you say that?" Laura asked.

"The way she reacted when I told her we're lovers." Crystal took a long drag. "Maybe you should talk to her."

Shifting her chair closer, Laura put her arm around Crystal and pressed her lips to the blonde forehead. "Was she mad about it?"

"Not mad," Crystal said. "I think she was hurt."

"Oh." Laura said, rubbing her lover's back and trying to figure out how to handle this latest problem. While her breakup with Jenny had been extremely painful for both of them, she thought that was all in the past. "I'll talk to her if you want me to," she said, tracing the outline of Crystal's ear with her finger. "But I want you to know something." Tipping Crystal's face up to hers, Laura bent her head and brushed their lips together. "What Jenny and I had is in the past. We're close friends and hopefully will always be that way but we could never be lovers again. You're the one I want, the one I love." She saw the shadow of doubt still lingering in the soft blue eyes. "What is it?"

"What if Jenny wants you back?" Crystal asked in a small voice, letting her insecurities show. "You gotta admit, she's a better"

"No," Laura said quickly, pressing her fingers to Crystal's lips. "Don't do that. I don't want Jenny back. I want you. If you believe nothing else, believe that. No matter what Jenny says or does, it's not going to change how I feel about you."

Minutes after Crystal left for work, Laura jumped into the Jeep and drove across town. As she had hoped, the orange Thing was still in its parking space when she pulled into Jenny's apartment complex. It was a meeting that Laura did not want to have but for Crystal's sake, one she knew she must. Hoping for the best, she walked to Jenny's door and knocked. Seconds later the door opened to reveal Jenny still in the sweatpants and t-shirt she slept in.

"Morning," Jenny said, stepping back to let Laura inside. "What are you doing here?"

"We need to talk," Laura said.

"About?" Jenny said without enthusiasm as she gestured at the couch.

"You know what about," Laura said. "Crystal and I. I understand you weren't exactly happy about the news when she told you."

"How I feel about it is irrelevant," Jenny said, crossing her arms and leaning against the low counter that separated the living room and kitchen.

"Not when it affects Crystal," Laura said, leaning forward to rest her forearms on her knees. "She thinks you still have some feelings for me."

Jenny raked her fingers through her short brown hair and turned away. "You don't want to go there, Laura," she warned.

"Why?" Laura asked, though she suspected she knew what it was that had Jenny so riled up.

"Oh don't play that with me," Jenny snapped, raking her fingers through her hair. "How could you?"

Three years of living and loving the woman standing before her had taught Laura well and she knew that at this particular moment, she and Jenny were about to have quite an argument. "You make it sound like I defiled some virginal maiden," she said, crossing her arms over her chest and leaning back. "It was consensual."

"And you didn't do anything to encourage her just like that bitch in Colorado, right?" Jenny said, storming across the living room to the reproduction fireplace where a picture of her and Laura rested on the mantle. "Just another notch in your belt, right?"

"Crystal means more to me than that and you know it," Laura said defensively. "I love her."

"You told me you loved me once too," Jenny said, still staring at the picture and refusing to look at her ex-lover. "How long before you're sleeping around with some horny fan?"

"I won't," Laura said, rising to her feet.

"Like a promise of fidelity from you means anything," Jenny scoffed. "Or is that only promises you made to me?"

"What's this about, Jen? The fact that Crystal and I are lovers or that you and I aren't?" Laura asked. "I tried to get you back for almost four years and you shot me down each time. The best I could ever hope for was the occasional sleepover."

"How could I ever trust you again?" Jenny asked. "Do you think it was easy for me to walk out on three years of my life?"

"It seemed easy enough at first, I was standing," Laura said, trying hard to keep her voice from rising with the increased tension. She stood behind Jenny and put her hands on the therapist's shoulders. "I know it's my fault but it hurt like hell when you left," she admitted.

"Yeah well it hurt like hell when I came home to find that message on the answering machine too," Jenny said, shaking off the gentle hands and walking over to the couch.

"I know," Laura said quietly. Following Jenny's lead, she took a seat in the nearby chair. "Jen, this isn't the first time I've been with someone since we broke up. Why now?"

"You weren't serious about those other women," Jenny said. "You'd go out on a few dates, tell me all their shortcomings and why you couldn't possibly maintain any kind of a relationship with them, then move on to the next one."

"And I'm not moving on this time," Laura finished for her.

"I remember when you used to call me up practically screaming about your roommate from hell," Jenny said. "I thought you were going to have a stroke over the shower curtain."

"I remember," she said, leaning forward so her elbows were resting on her knees. "I even threatened Peter with bodily harm for ever sending her my way."

"So why?" Jenny looked down at the carpet. "Why her over all the others?"

"I've asked myself the same question," Laura admitted. "And I've tried to chalk it up to a dozen things from loneliness to some sort of misplaced caretaker complex." She chose her next words carefully, knowing Jenny would be hurt by them and wanting to minimize that as much as possible. "But the simple truth is that I love her. I didn't plan on it happening but it did and I can't change the way I feel."

"You didn't plan on sleeping with that girl in Colorado but you did," Jenny pointed out angrily, her eyes glistening. "Does Crystal know about your wandering eye or did you keep that little bit of information to yourself?"

Laura bristled at the accusing tone. "I told her," she said evenly. "And it's not the same thing. I didn't have feelings for Lisa. I love Crystal."

Jenny gave a small snort and looked away. "There you go again, Laura. Don't you understand that there's more to a relationship than love?"

"I know that," Laura shot back defensively. "But I think it's a good foundation, don't you?"

Jenny turned to her. "What about trust?"

"You'll never forgive me for that, will you?" Laura said, leaning back in the chair. "Jen, if I could go back in time and change what happened, I would."

"And if you had gotten home first and found that message, you would have erased it." Jenny raked her fingers through her short brown hair. "Don't you understand? After that happened, the trust was gone between us and without trust, there could be no relationship. I would always be wondering if you were telling me the truth or trying to cover up another affair. I couldn't live like that."

"Jen, I never meant to hurt you."

"Yeah but you did," Jenny said quietly.

Laura nodded and moved over to the couch, putting her arm around Jenny's shoulders. "I did," she admitted. "And there's nothing I can do to change that. I'm lucky you chose to remain friends with me. I'm sure many ex's wouldn't." She felt Jenny lean against her and tightened her grip. "You're very important to me, don't ever doubt that."

"That goes both ways," Jenny said. "I don't want to lose you from my life."

"And you're not going to," Laura said. "Being with Crystal isn't going to change that. You're still my best friend." Jenny's watch beeped, alerting them of the time. "I guess I'd better let you get ready for work."

"I didn't realize it was getting so late," Jenny said, looking at her watch. "My first appointment comes in at nine."

"Are we okay?" Laura asked as they stood up.

Jenny nodded. "Yeah, we're okay," she said. "I just have some of my own stuff to work out, that's all."

"Come over tomorrow for dinner?" Laura offered. "I'll call the boys and we can make a little dinner party out of it."

"Sounds good," Jenny said. "Now go on and get out of here. I have to hit the shower."

Laura pulled her into a quick hug. "I'll see you then," she said.

"Be good to her," Jenny whispered before stepping back.

"I will," Laura promised, knowing she was referring to Crystal. "I'll see you tomorrow."

Crystal arrived home from work to find Laura in the kitchen making dinner. "Hmm, smells good," she said as she kicked off her work boots and set her keys on the side table. "What are we having?"

"One of my mother's favorite recipes," Laura said, closing the oven door. "Creamy chicken and rice casserole."

"I hope you made a lot," Crystal said as she entered the kitchen. "My nail gun jammed first thing this morning and it took almost a half hour to clear it. I ended up working through lunch to catch up." She moved closer and smiled when she saw Laura's arms open for a hug. "It's been a long day."

"Well then you go sit down and relax," Laura said. "It won't be ready for another fifteen minutes or so."

"Do I have to?" Crystal asked, enjoying the feel of Laura's body against hers. "I'm comfortable right here." Resting her head on Laura's shoulder, she inhaled the faint scent of perfume. "Yeah, this is nice." She felt the arms around her tighten.

"It does make it hard for me to check on dinner," Laura joked.

"Uh huh," Crystal said, letting her hands slip down to Laura's hips. "You said we had fifteen minutes."

"And that's not enough time for what you're thinking," Laura said, though her own hands were beginning to wander restlessly along Crystal's back.

"What makes you think I'm thinking about anything?" she teased, taking advantage of her position to kiss Laura's neck. After years of believing she had no sex drive, Crystal was surprised by the strength of her desire. Moving her hands between them, she reached for the top button of Laura's shirt.

"The fact that you're trying to undo my shirt?" Laura said, though she made no attempt to stop Crystal's progress.

"It's hot in here," Crystal said as the button came free and exposed bare flesh. She heard Laura's sharp intake of air and smiled to herself, knowing her wandering hands were the cause. "I love you," she whispered, releasing another button and kissing the exposed vee of skin. Tracing the lace *e.g.* of Laura's bra with her lips, she slipped her tongue out to taste the soft swell of skin.

"I love you too," Laura said, her voice huskier than usual. Her grip tightened, pulling Crystal's hips against hers. "And you're the reason it's hot in here."

"Do you want me to stop?" Crystal asked, tugging the shirt free from Laura's jeans. She was answered by Laura's mouth coming down upon hers, the kiss adding fuel to the fire burning inside.

"No," Laura murmured between kisses. "Don't stop."

What

what about dinner?" she asked, her hands sliding up Laura's back to toy with the bra fastening.

"Keep that up and we won't be eating dinner until ten o'clock," Laura said, her own hands sliding under Crystal's shirt.

Closing her eyes as she received another one of those wonderful kisses from Laura, Crystal used her fingers to release the two hooks that held the bra together. Now with nothing to impede her progress, she flattened her hands and moved them around to the front, gently cupping Laura's breasts, her thumbs gently moving back and forth over the hardening nipples. She answered her lover's moan with one of her own when she felt her bra being unhooked. Reluctantly she broke off the kiss. "The couch," she suggested.

"The couch," Laura agreed, gently nudging Crystal toward the living room.

Crystal was grateful for Laura's steadying arms around her when the back of her legs bumped against the couch. Raising her arms, she allowed Laura to lift off her shirt and bra, smiling tolerantly when the writer folded the clothes and set them on the nearby chair. "You know," she said as her hands pushed the shirt over Laura's shoulders, "You worry too damn much about keeping everything neat."

"I know," Laura said as she folded her own shirt and bra, placing them neatly on top of the others before taking Crystal in her arms again. "It's one of my little quirks."

Crystal slipped her hands beneath the waistband of Laura's jeans, pulling her closer. "I suppose since you're so insistent on folding our clothes, we should just get them all off and out of the way right now."

"I like that idea," Laura said, her hands moving to the button of Crystal's jeans.

"Me too," Crystal said, feeling the button of her jeans being undone while Laura's lips sought out her own. She moaned softly when she felt her jeans being lowered along with her underwear over her hips. Laura's hands squeezed and fondled her rear, sapping all strength from her legs. "I

can't stand up any longer," she managed between the breath stealing kisses. They stayed together as Laura lowered her to the couch, the writer's warm body covering her own. Her legs pinned by the jeans still halfway up her thighs, Crystal began squirming to try and push them down.

"You're gonna knock me off the couch," Laura warned.

"I can't help it," she said, "I can't stand feeling trapped."

"Sorry," Laura said, rolling off and reaching for the waistband of the jeans. "Let me."

Crystal felt vulnerable as the last of her clothing was removed and she was left lying on the couch, naked to the daylight. Laura turned back from folding the clothes and knelt next to the couch. Looking up at her, Crystal knew now why her need to touch and be touched had been so strong. It was more than mere desire, it was the want, no, the need to connected in an intimate way with the person who held her heart. "I love you," she whispered, blinking away the sting of emotion in her eyes. Reaching up, she cupped Laura's cheek and guided her closer until their lips were only inches apart. No further urging was needed as Laura took control and closed the remaining distance.

The fear of being defenseless and exposed vanished under the loving kiss. Crystal felt the gentle touch of fingers caressing her abdomen, moving in ever growing circles while Laura's kisses continued to leave her breathless. Following the line of Laura's spine, she ran her fingers down the bare back until she reached the denim covered hips.

"Mmm," Laura hummed as she moved from Crystal's mouth to her jaw. "You're so beautiful

" Crystal could only arch into the gentle series of kisses down her throat, her body tingling with the realization of where those lips were headed. She moaned and squeezed the jean covered rear when Laura's roaming fingers found her triangle of curls. "So soft

" the writer continued, touching Crystal's nipple with the tip of her tongue.

Crystal could only moan and squeeze Laura's rear harder while her other hand held her lover's mouth to her breast. "Oh God

feels so good," she sighed.

"Mm hmm," Laura agreed, moving to the other breast. In the process, her own breast came within reach of Crystal's mouth and the young woman happily parted her lips to accept the gift being offered to her. Eyes closed, Crystal suckled heartily, her tongue flicking the hardened nipple between her teeth in a matching rhythm to the feelings on her own breast from Laura's mouth. Feeling Laura's hand on her thigh, Crystal parted her legs, letting her right foot rest on the floor. Raising her hips to urge Laura on, she was surprised to feel the breast she had been loving being pulled out of her mouth. Her protest died on her lips when she felt Laura's hand on her right knee, spreading her legs wider. "Oh Laura, yes," she said when Laura moved between her thighs and she realized what her lover intended. Soft kisses on her inner thighs teased her briefly before Laura's lips focused on her center. She jerked at the first touch of Laura's tongue on her outer folds, knowing she was about to be taken higher than any drug could ever hope to. It seemed that Laura was touching her everywhere; knowledgeable hands moving over her thighs, hips, and breasts, lips and tongue moving at a maddening pace over her most intimate area. Laura's tongue felt cool at first compared to her overheated center. Crystal's head lolled from side to side and she hooked her leg behind Laura's head as the writer's fingers began to tease and torment her nipples, squeezing in a matching rhythm to the strokes of the tongue brushing over her clitoris.

For endless minutes Laura took her spiraling upward until Crystal was certain she could go no higher. Laura's hand left her breast and moved down, around her hip and back over her thigh. Two fingers slipped smoothly inside, stealing Crystal's breath away as she found herself being taken higher still. When at last her world shattered away in a wave of pleasure, Crystal cried out Laura's name and clung helplessly as aftershocks

throbbed through her.

Shh

it's okay

"I've got you," Laura murmured into her ear. There were other words but Crystal found it hard to concentrate on much more than the warmth and comfort of Laura's body against hers. It was a haven she had no interest in leaving. The first time Laura tried to pull back, she gripped tighter, silently conveying her need. Her hand moved over Laura's back, once again finding the waistband of the jeans.

"I can't believe you still have those on," she said, slowly moving out of Laura's embrace and into a sitting position.

"I was a little busy," Laura said, moving in for a quick kiss. "Oh, my knees are killing me."

"Maybe I should kiss them and make them better?" Crystal offered, putting her hands on Laura's elbows and standing up, bringing the writer with her. "Of course I can't do it through these," she said, tugging on the waistband. "They'll just have to come off." Slipping her hand between the denim and cotton, she pushed the jeans over Laura's hips.

"Oh they do, do they?" Laura asked, her hands moving restlessly over Crystal's back and shoulders. "What if I wasn't finished with you yet?"

Crystal squeezed the panty covered bottom and rested her forehead on Laura's shoulder. "Damn woman," she huffed. "You're gonna kill me."

"I can't help it," Laura said, wrapping her arms around Crystal's back and squeezing their chests together. "I love touching you," she said, tipping Crystal's head down to kiss her brow.

Taking advantage of her position, Crystal began kissing Laura's throat, then down the writer's chest. "I love touching you too," she said as she lowered herself to her knees. "And right now I plan on touching you until you can't take it anymore." She pushed the jeans down to Laura's ankles, then offered her shoulders for her lover to lean on as first one leg, then the other came free. "Love the sensible white cottons but they've got to go too," she said, kissing the tuft of hair through the panties before pulling them down to join the jeans on the floor. A gentle push and Laura lying on the couch.

"The clothes," Laura said, reaching for the pile near Crystal's knees.

"Leave them," Crystal said, nudging Laura's knees apart.

But

"

"But nothing. In a minute you're not going to give a damn about where the clothes are," Crystal said. Bound and determined to win this little battle, she began running her fingertips up the inside of Laura's thighs. "For once, don't worry about it. Just lie back and feel." Then Crystal set out to give Laura plenty to feel, using her fingers, lips, everything at her disposal to send her lover to pinnacle once and then again, the crumpled clothes forgotten.

"Hey Doc," Crystal said when she opened the door. "Come on in. Laura's in the kitchen." She stepped back to let Jenny in. "Could it get any colder out there?"

"I hope this doesn't mean we're in for a brutal winter," Jenny said, shrugging off her jacket and hanging it on the coat rack next to the door. "You're going to have to trade in that denim jacket of yours for something warmer."

"You know how much a new jacket costs?" Crystal said, moving closer. "Do me a favor, okay?" she whispered. "Don't say anything about it to Laura."

"And just how long do you think she's going to let you get out the door in that thin thing?" Jenny asked in an equally low tone.

"Hopefully at least two more weeks. I'm not going to have any extra money until then."

"Hey what are you two talking about in there?" Laura called from the kitchen.

"Don't worry, I'm not telling her all your secrets," Jenny said. "Besides, I'm sure she knows all your bad habits by now."

"Just about," Laura said, moving into the doorway between the kitchen and living room. "Who knows, she might just break me of one or two. Miracles are known to happen."

"You mean someday I'll stop in and find a dust bunny under the couch?" Jenny asked.

"Well let's not push it," Laura said, wiping her hands on her apron. "But I've been convinced it's not a crime to let the clothes go unfolded after I've taken them off."

Jenny looked from Laura to Crystal. "You're kidding."

"Nope," Crystal interjected proudly.

"She caught me at a weak moment," Laura added in her own defense.

"Must have been some moment," Jenny said, patting Crystal on the shoulder. "Now try getting her to go to bed and leave a dish in the sink."

"Never happen," Laura said confidently.

"Ah ah ah," Jenny wagged her forefinger. "You forget, don't you?"

Laura gave her a confused look for a few seconds before the memory surfaced. "Oh."

"As I recall you got up in the middle of the night and washed them but I still count it as a victory," Jenny said, her posture relaxed and comfortable, not at all the body swirling with emotions that Crystal had seen at the end of her last session with the therapist. She had asked but Laura said little about the conversation with Jenny, only that she thought it went well. If Jenny's turnabout was any indication, their meeting was a total success as far as Crystal could see. Still there were questions that she needed answered before she would be totally convinced things were completely all right between the three of them.

"Hey Doc, I'm going to have a smoke before the guys get here. Come out and keep me company?" Crystal said, moving toward the sliding glass door without waiting for an answer. As she had expected, Jenny followed her out to the deck, sliding the door closed behind her.

"Yes?" Jenny asked expectantly.

Crystal pulled her cigarettes from her pocket and lit one. "So," she said, moving so the smoke blew away from where Jenny was standing. "We still on for our regular sessions?"

"Of course," Jenny said.

"Good." Crystal turned away and concentrated on the blue smoke trailing from the end of the cigarette. "I was worried, you know."

"About?" Jenny prodded.

"I was worried you wouldn't want to help me anymore because I'm involved with Laura," Crystal said, shaking her head. "Hell, for a while there I was even worried that you'd try and get her back."

"I would never do that," Jenny said, leaning against the rail and staring out at the leafless trees mixed with pines. "Laura and I just had some

unresolved issues, that's all."

"Uh huh," Crystal said. "And they're completely resolved now, right?"

"For the most part," Jenny said.

"You're the one who's always telling me that change doesn't happen overnight," Crystal said, taking another drag off her cigarette.

Jenny turned and gave her a knowing smile. "You know I hate it when my own words are used against me." She paused. "But it's true. Laura and I have a significant history together and it's hard for me to see her with someone else." She moved closer to Crystal. "But I also want her to be happy and she's made it clear that to her, that means being with you."

"Do you think we have a chance?" Crystal asked, nervously flicking her ashes into the wind.

"It doesn't matter what I think," Jenny said.

"It does to me," Crystal said firmly, walking over to the table and extinguishing the cigarette in the ashtray.

"Do I think you two have a chance to make this relationship work? Absolutely," Jenny said. "Do I think it's going to be easy? No. It's going to take a lot of sacrifices and compromises to make it work but if you love each other enough, it'll be worth it. Now can we go inside? It's freezing out here."

"Yeah," Crystal said. She took a step toward the door, then stopped. "Hey Doc?"

"Yes?"

"You know

I thought I was so messed up that no one would ever want to be with me much less that I would fall in love." Crystal looked down at the deck, pausing to find the right words. "But

I see things differently than I did four months ago. I've

I've

"

"Grown?" Jenny offered.

Crystal shrugged. "I guess so. What I'm trying to say is this wouldn't have happened if it weren't for you."

Jenny moved closer. "It was all you, my friend," she said, poking Crystal with her forefinger. "I'm not the reason for your change, I'm just the one who helped you to see that change was possible. Remember, you're the one that came to me looking for help. You took that first step. Now

" She put her hands on Crystal's shoulders. "Let's go before I freeze to death out here."

"Thanks," Crystal said. "For everything."

"You're welcome," Jenny said, pulling her into a loose hug. "For what it's worth, I hope the two of you are very happy together."

Crystal tightened her hold. "It's worth a lot," she said quietly.

"All right, enough of this," Jenny said as they separated. "Let's get inside."

Part 16

"Damn," Crystal swore as Laura steered the Jeep into Patty's driveway. "I can't believe I agreed to this."

"You could have canceled," Laura said.

"And say what? Sorry I can't make it to your son's birthday party? How is Thomas going to understand that?" Crystal said, tossing her sunglasses on the dash. "No, I can't do that to him. I have to go." She shook her head and reached for the door handle. "I'll just have to deal with it."

"I'll be right there with you," Laura reminded her. "You don't have to stay long."

"Ten minutes in the same room with my mother is too long," Crystal said as she opened the door and stepped out. She took a deep breath, knowing an open display of hostility toward her mother would upset the children. "All right, let's get this over with."

"Don't forget his present," Laura said just as the screen door swung open and the now seven year old came running out, his older sister right behind him.

"Aunt Crystal, Aunt Crystal, did you bring me a present for my birthday?" he asked.

"Mommy says you're not supposed to ask for presents," Jessica said in her best reprimanding tone when they both reached Crystal. "Aunt Crystal, I got an A on my test."

"Oh very good," Crystal said. "And yes, Thomas, we brought you a present."

"See?" he said to Jessica. "I told you I'd get a present."

Jessica crossed her arms and pouted. "I didn't get a present for my birthday."

At that moment Crystal was grateful for Laura's suggestion when they were in the toy store. "Jess," she said, drawing the girl's attention. "I think if you look in the back seat you'll find a belated birthday present."

Jessica's eyes widened in direct proportion to her smile. "A present

for me?"

"Yup," Crystal said, looking over the girl's head to share a smile with Laura. "One for you and one for your brother."

Laura curtailed Thomas as he tried to get the back door open. "Hang on, slugger. I'll get it," she said, gently moving him aside and opening the door. "Yours is the one in the long flat box. I'll get Jessica's."

"Hey, her box is bigger than mine," he said in a childish whine.

Laura knelt down next to him. "But yours has more pieces," she said. "Trust me, you'll like it. Now, no peeking in the bag until we get inside, okay?"

"Okay," he said, tugging his present out of the car and immediately trying to lift the flap of the paper bag where it was stapled shut.

"All right," Laura said, lifting the package out of his hands. "I'll tell you what. You go tell your mother we're here and Aunt Crystal and I will bring the presents inside."

The colorful decorations caught Crystal's eye when she entered the living room. Blue and white streamers were draped in a crisscross pattern across the ceiling while brightly colored balloons were bunched in the corners. The coffee table in front of the couch was littered with torn wrapping paper. Patty, who had been sitting in the recliner reading the instructions for Thomas' newest video game, rose from her chair when Crystal entered, meeting her halfway for a hug. "I'm glad you made it," the elder sister said, taking the present from Crystal's hands and putting it on the coffee table.

"We can't stay long," Crystal lied, looking around for the woman she wanted to avoid. "Where is she?"

"In the kitchen frosting his cake," Patty said. "Don't worry, she's not going to say anything to you."

"I wasn't," Crystal said with feigned casualness.

"I want open my present from Aunt Crystal," Thomas said, reaching for the present.

Patty paused for only a second before giving in. "All right, but you'll have to wait until after your cake and ice cream before you can open your other presents."

Thomas nodded and tugged open the bag holding his present. "Okay." The black plastic was no match for the seven year old, opening to reveal a race car track set. "Oh boy, thanks Aunt Crystal."

"It's from me and Laura," Crystal said, leaning over to receive the offered hug.

Thomas let go of her neck and turned to Laura. "Thanks Aunt Laura," he said. Crystal exchanged a smile with her lover as Laura bent down to accept the child's hug.

"I want to open my present now too," Jessica said, tugging open the staples and pulling pushing the plastic off the large box. "It's a Singing Suzy make-up center and jewelry box," she said, immediately opening the box. "Thank you."

"Can I play with mine now too, Mom?" Thomas asked.

"You have to put the track together first," Patty said. "And I think something like that belongs in your bedroom, not out here where everyone can trip over it. Jessica, I think you can put yours in your room as well."

Jessica continued to try and open the box. "I wanna show Grandma first. Hey Grandma!" she called in a louder voice.

"What have I told you about yelling?" Patty said just as her mother stepped out of the kitchen.

"Grandma, look what Aunt Crystal got me," the girl said excitedly, holding up the box. Thomas yelped and grabbed his race set.

"Me too," he said.

Without meaning to, Crystal's eyes met her mother's and for a moment, she found herself unable to turn away from the sadness in the older woman's face. In that fraction of time, Crystal remembered a Christmas morning so many years ago when her mother had happily handed her a present. She could not remember what the gift was or where her sister or father were, but she recalled hugging her mother, being held in those arms and for that brief moment in time, feeling special. The wisp of memory faded, returning her to the present and, to her surprise, a feeling other than anger at the woman who gave her birth.

Jessica succeeded in getting her grandmother's attention, causing the women to break their eye contact. Crystal looked over to Laura, wondering if her lover could see the confusion in her face. She wanted to leave, to get away from the mix of emotions swirling within her but before the urge to flee could set in, Jessica was before her, asking Crystal to help her put her rings and necklaces into her new jewelry box. Grateful for the escape, she followed her niece down the narrow hallway to Jessica's bedroom.

"Looks like we're going to have to untangle some of these before we can put them away," Crystal said as she looked at the pile of necklaces on Jessica's dresser. "Do you need help getting that?" she asked, her back to her niece.

"No, I got it," Jessica said, setting the box on the bed and pulling out the pink plastic pieces. "Did you have a Singing Suzy make-up center when you were a girl?"

Crystal continued to focus her attention on the twisted up pile of necklaces. "No. I had a plastic tree that held my pierced earrings but I don't remember any jewelry boxes or make up things."

"Oh." The blonde haired girl continued to take the various parts of her new gift out of the box. "Aunt Crystal?"

"Hmm?"

"Why don't you like Grandma?"

Crystal's fingers stopped as the words registered. "Why do you ask that?" she asked cautiously.

"I heard Mommy and Grandma talking," Jessica said. "Grandma was crying and said you hate her."

Crystal set the necklaces down and turned around. "What did your mother say?"

The present forgotten for the moment, Jessica looked at her aunt intently. "Mommy said she didn't think you hated Grandma but that she would talk to you again and Grandma said not to because she understood why you hated her." The young girl tilted her head, the mannerism reminiscent of her mother. "What did Grandma do that you hate her, Aunt Crystal?"

Um

"Crystal scrambled to find the right words to dodge the question. "I don't think you should be eavesdropping on adult's conversations."

"She said she's sorry," Jessica said. "When she was crying. She told Mommy she was very sorry."

Crystal turned away and picked up the necklaces again. "You certainly made quite a mess out of these," she said, trying not to think about what her niece was saying.

"Once, my friend Katie and I were fighting 'cause she pushed me too hard and I fell down and cut my knee and Mommy said that because Katie was sorry that I should forgive her and I did and now we're friends again. Are you gonna forgive Grandma?"

Crystal turned and looked at her. "I don't know," she said. "What happened between your grandma and I is different." Moving over to the bed, she sat down and picked up the sticker sheet that came with the make-up center. "Things between adults aren't as simple as they are between kids. Now, let's get this put together so we can get out there and get some cake and ice cream, okay?" She quickly found two pieces and connected them, hoping to distract Jessica. Looking only at the picture on the box, the young girl found the adjoining part and handed it to Crystal. "Good. See? We'll have this finished in no time."

Despite her success in getting Jessica to drop the subject, Crystal found herself unable to stop thinking about it. Sitting in the living room later, she glanced at her mother often enough that Laura noticed and gave her a questioning look. Crystal shook her head as if to say nothing was going on and stared down at her plate. For the next several minutes she concentrated on looking everywhere but at the couch where her sister and mother were sitting. She poked at the ice cream on her plate until it was nothing more than a lumpy, melted mess before setting the plate on the coffee table.

"Here, I'll get that," Patty said, rising to her feet and taking the plate. "Thomas, if you're done with yours, give me your plate, wash your hands, and then you can open the rest of your presents."

"They're clean," he protested.

"No, they're not," Patty said in that unmistakable mother tone. "Go on. Jess, yours could use some soap and water too."

"I'll help clean up," Laura said as the kids took off down the hall.

Crystal thought about helping but it was clear Laura had it under control as the clutter disappeared from the coffee table and floor. She had a sense of being watched and turned her head to catch Margaret looking at her. The older woman turned away quickly but not before Crystal caught the look of sadness on her mother's face.

By the time darkness had fallen, Crystal had become progressively quiet, giving one or two word answers. She and her mother continued to sneak glances at each other, caught more often than not by Patty or Laura if not by one another. The tension was building within her and Crystal found herself struggling to control it. Questions that could only be answered by one person repeated themselves over and over in her mind, refusing to be quieted. They grew louder and louder until Crystal knew it was time to give them voice. Taking a deep breath, she steeled herself for what was to come and stood up, her eyes staring directly at her mother. "I want to talk to you."

The room fell deadly silent save the electronic sounds coming from Thomas' video game. Even ten year old Jessica understood to some degree the magnitude of the moment and watched the adults intently. Patty was the first to break the silence, getting to her feet and standing protectively between her mother and sister. "Crystal, can I speak to you in the kitchen for a minute?"

Laura rose as well and stood next to Crystal. "Are you sure?" she asked in a low voice.

Crystal wanted to say no, to say she reconsidered, but it was too late. Reluctantly, she nodded. Sword or olive branch, it had been extended and now there was no taking it back. "I'm sure," she said.

"Patty," Margaret said, holding out her hand. "Help me up."

"Perhaps the kitchen would be a good place to talk," Laura suggested, casting a glance in the direction of the children.

"I don't think this is a good time for this, regardless of which room it's in," Patty protested as she used both hands to help steady her mother.

Clenching her jaw to keep from snapping at her sister, Crystal pushed past her and stormed into the kitchen, smacking the heel of her hand into the swinging door. Her annoyance at Patty's overprotectiveness of their mother was quickly replaced by the nervous realization of what was about to happen.

The louvered door that separated the kitchen from the living room swung open to reveal Margaret with Patty right behind her. Standing behind Patty, a concerned Laura looked in. "I want to talk to her alone," she said when Patty followed their mother into the kitchen.

"I'm staying," Patty said firmly, guiding Margaret into the nearest chair.

"No," Crystal said. "It's between us." She moved to the far side of the table, wanting to put as much distance between her and her mother as she could.

"It's okay," Margaret said to her eldest daughter. "Go be with the children."

Crystal shrugged casually at the warning look given by her sister, rebellious defiance welling within her. Patty looked as though she was going to

protest again, but finally turned and entered the living room.

Unable to make out the words, Crystal heard Laura's voice, then Patty's through the closed door. Feeling the floor shake, it took a second for her to figure out the kids were running down the hall. She made a mental note to ask her lover about it later, then turned her attention to the woman across the table from her. Taking a deep breath, she raised her eyes to meet her mother's, seeing the same sad look she had witnessed earlier. The venomous words that had longed to come forth for so many years caught in her throat, refusing to come out at the moment when they could have done the most damage. "Damn you, Doc," she muttered, turning away and walking over to the window. Part of her wanted so much to lash out, to verbally rip her mother into shreds. After all, it felt good to list off every one of her mother's failings in her therapy sessions with Jenny. What was holding her back now? "Do you know how many times I wished I had never been born?" she asked, still staring out the window. "That I never had to go through the hell that was my life?" Turning around, she leveled an accusing glare at her mother. "Did it ever occur to you all those nights you sat there sucking down that whiskey that maybe your kids needed you, even just a little?"

"Crystal, I know I failed you and your sister

"

"Oh, you got that right," she said, cutting her mother off. "You know what happened to me after I ran away?"

Margaret's head dropped, her eyes glistening. "Your sister told me," she said quietly.

"Did she tell you how I had to have sex with men to get enough money to eat?" Part of her took a perverse sense of pride in her mother's visible flinch but at the same time another part felt hollow, a painful emptiness that all the hateful words in the world would not cure. Kicking the chair leg with her foot, she pushed it out enough to slump onto the vinyl cushion. "I did what I had to do," she said softly. "I couldn't go back to that hell." Folding her arms in front of her, Crystal stared down at the table. "I used to dream that someday you'd take us away from him, that you'd stop drinking and be a mother like everyone else had. One that paid attention to them, that made sure they had clean clothes for school, that made dinner for them instead of making them get it themselves." Ignoring the tightening in her chest, Crystal pushed on, gazing down at nothing. "Why?" Swallowing hard, she lifted her head to look at her mother. "Why couldn't you be like the other mothers? Why couldn't you have cared about us as much as you cared about that damn whiskey?"

Margaret pulled a tissue from inside her sleeve and dabbed her eyes. "I'm sorry," she said, her voice cracking. "I'm sorry I married your father, that I didn't take you two girls away from him when you were babies. I'm sorry I couldn't see how much my drinking was destroying everything until it was too late." She wiped her eyes again and sniffed. "I'm sorry I wasn't the mother you should have had."

Crystal wanted to doubt the sincerity of the woman sitting across from her, to pass the trembling lips and tears as just a desperate attempt to gain her sympathy, but there was no denying the heartfelt regret and pain in her mother's voice. "So am I," she said, pulling out a cigarette and lighting it. "So am I," she repeated softly. Her ears picked up the sound of Laura and Patty still talking in the living room, rather heatedly if the sudden rise in volume was any indication. She tried to listen but only caught a word or two at a time before the voices quieted down. Staring at her cigarette, Crystal let seconds drag into minutes, the silence broken only by the faint ticking of the kitchen clock and the thumping of the children's feet as they came running back down the hall. She was tired. Tired of all the anger, all the tears and pain. Nothing would change the nightmare that was her childhood. It was time, if not to forgive the past, to move on with the present. Taking a shaky breath, she lifted her head and looked into her mother's shining eyes. "I can't forgive you for what happened," she said. "But I don't hate you." Standing up, she shrugged and extinguished the cigarette. "I guess I just wanted you to know that," she said, pushing the chair in. "Laura and I gotta get going now," she said, walking toward the door.

"Crystal?"

She stopped in front of the door and looked back at her mother. "What?"

Margaret pushed herself up, leaning her hands on the table for support. "Thank you," she said, letting a tear roll down her cheek.

Crystal shifted uncomfortably. "Yeah well

" She put her hand on the door. "I did it for me." She pushed the door open and left the kitchen before Margaret could say anything further.

Jessica jumped up from her seat on the floor as Crystal entered the room. "Did you and Grandma fight?"

"No Jess, we didn't fight," Crystal said, noticing her nephew sitting in front of the television, fully engrossed in a video racing game. "We talked and right now it's getting late so Laura and I have to go home." She heard the squeak as the swinging door opened behind her. Moving aside, she watched as Patty came over to help their mother to the couch. "I'll call you tomorrow," she said as her sister passed. Patty nodded but said nothing. "Fine, whatever." Bending down, she gave Jessica a quick hug. "You be good, okay?"

"Okay, Aunt Crystal. When are you coming back?"

"Soon," she said. "Or you can come over to our place."

Jessica's eyes lit up. "Oh, when?"

Put on the spot, she looked up at Laura. "Uh

I don't know."

"How about next weekend?" Laura suggested. "It'll give me time to straighten everything out."

Crystal knew what her lover meant was to get all breakables up out of reach of curious children. "Yeah, next weekend is good if your mother says

it's okay," she said to her niece.

Patty nodded. "As long as you behave and have that room picked up," she said.

"Can I come too?" Thomas asked, turning his attention away from the video game for a second.

"Yes, you can come too," Crystal said.

"I'll walk you to the car," Patty said. "Thomas, your games are scattered all over the place. Pick them up and put them away please."

"Okay Mom."

"I'll help," Jessica added, kneeling down and picking up two of the games. Crystal turned away from the children and headed for the door, Laura and Patty right behind her.

"What?" Crystal asked as soon as they were outside.

"What did you say to her?" Patty asked.

"Um, I'll go get the Jeep warmed up," Laura offered, though it was not cold enough to warrant such an action.

"We just talked," Crystal said to Patty as Laura walked away. "Nothing you have to worry about."

"Well I do worry," Patty said. "You're my sister and she's my mother. You spent half the night giving her looks and you haven't said a kind word to her since you returned. How am I not supposed to worry?"

Crystal pulled her cigarettes out of her pocket and offered one to her sister. "You can't expect everything to be all nice-nice between us," she said, taking a cigarette for herself and lighting it. "And I'm never going to be as nice to her as you are so don't expect it."

"But?"

Inhaling deeply, Crystal took a long drag on her cigarette before answering. "But as long as she doesn't try to act like mother of the year or go on about how she cares for me, I think we can be civil to each other."

"And who knows what might happen from there," Patty said, adding her own smoke to the cloud forming above them.

"Don't push it," Crystal warned gently. "I'm sure Doc and I will have a hell of a session about this. So what did you and Laura talk about anyway?"

"What else," Patty said. "You, but I'll let her tell you about it."

"Tell me."

"You tell me what you said to Mom," Patty countered, much to Crystal's annoyance. "See? So you ask your girlfriend and I'll ask Mom and then we'll both know."

"You're a real pain in the ass, you know that?" Crystal said, nudging her sister with her elbow. "You always were."

"So were you," Patty said. "Jessica is a lot like you too. You're going to have fun with her next weekend. She gets into everything."

Crystal tossed her cigarette on the ground and crushed it beneath her sneaker. "I'm sure I can handle her for a few hours."

"Hours? Oh no. You're taking them for the weekend."

"Uh uh, not for the weekend." Crystal shook her head. "No way."

"How about overnight?"

"Not a chance."

"So I suppose summer vacation is out of the question too, huh?" Patty teased. "Ah, no problem. Listen, I'd better let you go so you two can get home. Tell Laura I said good night, will ya?"

"Sure, see ya later." Crystal turned to leave only to find herself stopped by Patty pulling her into a hug.

"Not going to leave without giving your big sister a hug, were you?"

"You're not exactly my bigger than me anymore," Crystal said.

"Certainly not in the chest," Patty said, pulling back. "Go on, I'll talk to you tomorrow."

"So what did you two talk about?" Crystal asked as she shut the car door.

"Nothing important," Laura said, putting the Jeep in gear and backing out of the driveway. "How about you and your mother?"

"I think we've got an understanding," Crystal said. "But don't expect me to go out looking for Christmas presents for her or anything."

"You okay?"

Crystal stared out the window for a few seconds before answering. "Yeah, I think so." She gave a small smile when Laura squeezed her knee reassuringly. "I'll be fine, really. It's just

I dunno, draining I guess." She threaded her fingers with Laura's. "I love you."

"I love you too," Laura said, squeezing their joined hands. "Do you want to stop at the park before we go home? It's a little cool but we could take a short walk on the path if you like."

"No, I just want to go home," Crystal said, pressing her forehead against the cool glass. "Go home and curl up under a nice, thick blanket with you."

"Sounds good, you know I love cuddling with you," Laura said, slowing down to turn onto the highway ramp.

"Yeah, and then you can tell me what you and Patty were talking about."

"You really want to know?" Laura said. "All right. I told her I thought she was being unfair to you and that she should let the two of you work things out between yourselves."

Crystal rolled the window down an inch or so and pulled out a cigarette. "And what did she say? I heard your voices raise a couple of times."

"First she sent the kids in to get in their pajamas. I'm glad she did that because I didn't want to argue with her in front of them."

"Yeah, sounds like a good idea," Crystal said. "So?"

"So first she tried to tell me that it was a family thing and I should stay out of it and I told her that when it comes to you, it is my business because I love you," Laura said. "I pointed out to Patty that where she's had ten years or so to work out her feelings about your mother that you're only now starting to deal with them and she should be more understanding."

"Oh yeah?" Crystal took a long drag on her cigarette. "Sounds like you told her, my hero." She leaned over and pressed her lips to Laura's shoulder. "I'm glad you were there with me."

"Always," Laura promised.

"Brr, did you turn the heat down before we left?" Crystal asked as they entered the townhouse. "It is almost November, you know."

"You make it sound as though we live in Northern Canada," Laura said as Crystal turned the thermostat up a few degrees. "It can't be below fifty out there."

"It's still cold," Crystal grumbled good-naturedly as she took off her jacket and, with Laura's, put them in the closet. Their sneakers were next, this time put neatly on the mat next to the door.

"Well, I can suggest something to keep us warm," Laura said, slipping her arms around Crystal's waist.

"Oh yeah? Like what?" Crystal asked, leaning back against her lover's warm body.

"I was thinking about us, naked," Laura lowered her voice to a husky trill. "A steamy bath with lots of bubbles. We haven't taken a bath or shower together yet. It might be fun." Nuzzling Crystal's ear, she inhaled the scent of shampoo and smoke. "It'll relax you."

Crystal gave a playful snort. "I don't think relaxing is what you have in mind."

"You're right," Laura whispered, her roaming hands moving slowly up Crystal's ribcage. Reaching the top button, she slowly opened it. "You, me..". Another button opened, revealing a hint of lace. "Hot soapy water that makes everything nice and slippery." A few quick tugs and Crystal's shirt was free, the remaining buttons opening with ease. "Relaxing is not what I have in mind at all." Her fingers reached for the back hooks of the bra while her lips search out Crystal's.

That was all the encouragement needed to get Crystal to follow her up the stairs and into the bathroom. After flipping the lever to plug the tub, Laura turned on the hot and cold taps, adjusting the flow until she had it at just the right temperature. "Do you want bubbles?" she asked.

"Sure, if you do," Crystal said, standing in the middle of the bathroom, still fully clothed.

Laura shut the water off and stood up. "Hey," she said, gently wrapping her arms around Crystal's waist. "Need some help?" She was answered with Crystal's lips seeking out hers. Taking it as a yes, she deepened the kiss, her hands pushing the shirt off Crystal's shoulders. Before she could try to fold it, however, it was taken from her hands and tossed against the door, the bra with it.

"Not a chance," Crystal murmured against her lips, her hands moving between their bodies and slipping under the thick sweatshirt.

Laura shuddered as playful fingers walked up her torso and danced over her bra covered breasts. "Keep that up and we'll never make it into the tub," she said, stepping back to shrug off her top and bra. She smiled indulgently when Crystal took them from her to add to the growing pile by the door. "I can't believe I let you do that," she said, pulling Crystal close.

"Next thing you know you'll be leaving dishes in the sink overnight," Crystal said.

"Never," Laura vowed, groaning softly at the warm feeling of her lover's body against hers. "It's getting hot in here," she said in a husky whisper.

"I know," Crystal said, their eyes locking as her hands slipped behind Laura's neck. "The mirror's all fogged up."

"Oh, is that how you can tell?" Laura asked, her playful smile matching her lover's. Hooking her fingers inside the waistband of Crystal's jeans, she smoothly undid the button and lowered the zipper. "Think it's because of the hot water?"

"No," Crystal said.

Laura pushed the jeans over Crystal's hips. "Think it's because you turned up the heat when we came in?"

"No."

"Hmm," Laura gave a thoughtful look as she gently guided Crystal to lean against the wall. "Well," she said as she knelt down and worked the jeans off first one leg, then the other. "It must be because we're half naked and about to make love."

Crystal smiled and nodded. "Yeah, that must be it."

Unable to resist the smooth thighs inches away from her face, Laura leaned forward and kissed the creamy skin. "You're so beautiful," she said, her hands rubbing up and down Crystal's legs.

"Now who's keeping us from getting in the tub?" Crystal asked, her chest rising and falling noticeably.

Pleased with the effect her touch was having, Laura gave a self satisfied smile and finished her task, standing only after she had Crystal completely naked. Pressing their bodies together, Laura gave her a long and passionate kiss. "Would you start the water again and add the bubble bath?"

"Sure," Crystal said unknowingly, immediately turning her back to Laura and bending over to reach the faucet controls.

"Nice view," Laura said, pushing her remaining clothes off. "You know, if you stay just like that

"

Crystal gripped the *e.g.* of the tub and groaned at the suggestion. "I can't believe how easy it is for you to make me feel like this."

"You have the same effect on me," Laura said, moving directly behind Crystal and running her hands lightly over the bent woman's back. "Sometimes you look at me and I'm ready, if you know what I mean." She heard and felt Crystal laugh with understanding. "Seriously, though," she said, gently pulling Crystal up and turning her so they were face to face. "It's more than just something physical." She paused to brush their lips together while her fingers caressed Crystal's upper back.. "When you look at me, I can feel your love deep inside."

Crystal smiled shyly. "Are you going to start sweet talking me again?"

"If you want me to," Laura said as she pulled back the curtain. "Or we can get in the tub and I can show you."

"Doesn't seem like a lot of water," Crystal said as they helped each other in.

"Don't worry about it," Laura said as she sat down and moved as far back as she could. "There's two of us in here. Trust me, there's plenty of water." Their bodies bumped together cozily as they made room for arms and legs. Wrapping her arms around Crystal's torso, she pulled her lover close and kissed her shoulder. "Love you."

"Mm, I love you too," Crystal said, her hands moving up and down Laura's thighs. "I've never done this before. Taking a bath with someone, I mean. Well, except Patty when we were little but that doesn't count."

"No it doesn't," Laura agreed, moving her thumbs in a lazy arc over the soapy underside of Crystal's breasts. "I forgot to tell you there are certain advantages to being the one in the back."

"So I see," Crystal said, reclining so the back of her head was resting against Laura's shoulder. "Then again, being in front has its advantages too."

Scooping up piles of bubbles in her hands, Laura playfully covered Crystal's breasts. "Nice," she whispered, feeling the hardened nipples pressing into her palms. "I can see us gong through lots of bubble bath."

"That feels nice," Crystal murmured. Her eyes were closed and a soft smile played across her lips. "Obviously this isn't your first time in a tub."

Laura smiled. "It's not like I've had an endless stream of women coming in an out," she said. "But let's just say I know what I'm doing."

"I have no complaints," Crystal said.

"Uh huh," Laura said dubiously, brushing her thumbs back and forth over the erect nipples. "That's not what you said last night. If I remember correctly, you called me a bitch."

"You were teasing me," Crystal pointed out. "If you waited much longer, I would have reached down and done it myself."

Laura laughed, remembering how she had been in a playful mood and tested her lover's patience, among other things. "But you have to admit it was worth the wait. I have no interest in rushing things tonight either," she warned. Crystal groaned and arched into her touch, causing the water to lap against their bodies. "Nice and slow," Laura said in a seductive tone, moving her hands down Crystal's body until they dipped beneath the water, then bringing them up again to recapture the heaving breasts. "Nice and slow," she repeated in a husky whisper before lightly running her tongue over the outer shell of Crystal's ear.

"You're gonna drive me crazy," Crystal said as Laura's busy fingers tweaked and squeezed her nipples.

"See how helpful soap is?" Laura asked, her fingers slipping off before her pinches could be painful. "Maybe I should just stay up here for a while." Spreading out her fingers, she cupped Crystal's breasts and squeezed. "Making sure they're clean," she said by way of explanation.

"I was wrong," Crystal said, looking up at Laura. "You're not a bitch. You're a royal bitch."

"A royal bitch who loves you," Laura said, moving her hands beneath the water again, this time reaching the crease of her lover's legs and lightly swirling through the patch of blonde curls. "I could spend all day touching you," she confessed, enjoying the way Crystal's hips rose in response to her wandering hands. Seeing the thick bubbles clinging to the full breasts, Laura felt the urge to revisit them but when she started to bring her hands up she found her wrists held in a tight grip.

"That's it," Crystal growled, twisting around until they were facing each other. Before Laura could react she found herself pinned against the back of the tub. "You think you're the only one that can tease?" she was asked while an insistent thigh pressed between her legs. "Remember, I was a stripper," Crystal continued, tracing the outer *e.g.* of Laura's right aureole with a wet fingertip. "When it comes to teasing, I'm an expert."

"You feel so good," Laura sighed, happily surrendering to whatever her lover had in mind.

"I think I like this tub idea," Crystal said, sliding down to rub her cheek against Laura's breast.

"I'm glad," Laura said, wrapping her arms around Crystal and holding her close.

"It's awkward as hell," Crystal said as she tried to squirm her hand between their bodies. "We need a bigger tub for this."

"Not really," Laura said, shifting to give her lover more room. "We just need to learn new positions."

"Before or after I drown?" Crystal asked, sliding down and brushing her lips over Laura's soft belly, her fingers idly playing over the writer's breasts.

"Maybe a bath wasn't such a good *i.e.* after all," Laura said, reaching down and pulling Crystal up for a kiss.

"Why?" Crystal asked with feigned innocence, her fingers gently squeezing Laura's nipples. "Is there something you wanted?"

"Yes, something you do so very well," Laura said.

"I thought you said all we needed to do was learn new positions?" Crystal countered, her left hand moving between their bodies and slipping beneath the water.

"I don't think there's a position to do what I want you to do that would be comfortable for either of us in here," Laura said, lifting her knee to give her lover more access. She gasped when Crystal's fingers found their mark.

"Think we're clean enough?" Crystal asked, her fingers gently stroking back and forth over Laura's most sensitive spot.

"Oh yes," Laura hissed, her head falling back against the wall and her eyes closing as her hips moved of their own volition.

"Want to get out?" Crystal asked, moving her teasing fingers down until they were just outside the entrance to Laura's womanhood.

I want

oo!" Laura began, her hips surging forward as gentle fingers filled her up. "Oh god, don't stop, Love, please don't stop." The fire raged higher, spiraling upward until Laura felt the throbbing pulses begin. At that moment of absolute vulnerability, she blindly reached forward and pulled Crystal's mouth to hers. Crystal held on, pressing deep and hard, doing her best to prolong her lover's pleasure. There was no outer world, no family or friends. All that existed was the sharing of hearts and souls, declarations of love and devotion spoken with their bodies instead of their voices. When she finally tried to speak, it came out as a squeak and Laura had to swallow and try again. "I can't move," she said. "Not ever."

Crystal smiled with self-satisfaction and ran her finger along Laura's collarbone. "Kinda like what you do to me, eh?"

"That's different," Laura huffed, her breathing still not back to normal. "You can usually function afterwards. I can't move a muscle."

"Then we'll just have to stay here," Crystal said, her smile now a grin.

Laura looked at her and frowned. "You are entirely too pleased with yourself," she said, pulling Crystal in for a kiss. "I love you."

"I love you too," Crystal said, snuggling down so her head rested in the crook of Laura's neck.

Endless minutes passed as they held each other in the cooling water until Laura shuddered and goosebumps appeared on her forearms. "The water's getting cold," she said quietly.

"Is it always going to be like this?" Crystal murmured, not lifting her head from its soft pillow.

"You mean am I always going to respond to you like this?" Laura asked.

Crystal shook her head. "I mean

" She paused, unsure how to put her thoughts into words. "Will you always feel about me the way you do now?"

Ignoring the cold for a moment, Laura reached down and cupped Crystal's chin. "I can't imagine not feeling this way about you," she said softly. "You mean everything to me and the thought of you not being here hurts too much to think about. I love you, Crystal. I know it sounds selfish but I want all you can give and then some. I want to be the only one you touch in love and the only one that touches you. I want you to be the first thing I see when I wake up in the morning and the last before I go to sleep. I want to hold you when you cry and laugh with you when you're happy. I want to be your white knight when you need protection and your helpless damsel when you need to be the one doing the protecting. I don't want just a relationship with you," she said, moving her fingers to trace Crystal's lips. "I want a life with you." At first alarmed when she saw tears welling up in her lover's eyes, Laura quickly realized they were tears of happiness and hugged Crystal even closer. "I love you," she said, kissing the top of the blonde head. "I'm not going anywhere."

"I love you too," Crystal said, sniffing as she brought herself back under control. She gently smacked Laura's arm.

"Hey, what was that for?" Laura asked with mock indignation.

"You know what your sweet talking does to me," Crystal said, causing Laura to chuckle.

"Serves you right for making me as limp as a washcloth," Laura said. She felt Crystal's lips on her neck, the soft tongue slipping out to taste her. She groaned, knowing she could no more resist her lover's touch than she could resist breathing. "There's a nice warm bed right in the next room," she tried.

"Uh huh," Crystal mumbled, moving down to capture Laura's left breast with her mouth while her fingers kept the other breast company.

"Crystal," Laura sighed, her legs automatically parting despite her wish to move the action to another venue.

"You really wanna waste time with the towels?" Crystal asked around a mouthful of flesh.

"No," Laura agreed, caring little at the moment about how wet the sheets would get.

"So what's stopping you?" Crystal teased, her teeth lightly scraping the tender peak.

"Now who's being the bitch?" Laura asked, her fingers lightly stroking her lover's back. "You're going to be the death of me."

"Not before we get out of here and under the covers," Crystal said as she stood up, the bubbles sliding down her wet body. "It's cold in here."

Laura laughed and reached out for Crystal's hand, knowing sleep would not come for quite a while.

Part 17

"Damn," Crystal swore as Laura steered the Jeep into Patty's driveway. "I can't believe I agreed to this."

"You could have canceled," Laura said.

"And say what? Sorry I can't make it to your son's birthday party? How is Thomas going to understand that?" Crystal said, tossing her sunglasses on the dash. "No, I can't do that to him. I have to go." She shook her head and reached for the door handle. "I'll just have to deal with it."

"I'll be right there with you," Laura reminded her. "You don't have to stay long."

"Ten minutes in the same room with my mother is too long," Crystal said as she opened the door and stepped out. She took a deep breath, knowing an open display of hostility toward her mother would upset the children. "All right, let's get this over with."

"Don't forget his present," Laura said just as the screen door swung open and the now seven year old came running out, his older sister right behind him.

"Aunt Crystal, Aunt Crystal, did you bring me a present for my birthday?" he asked.

"Mommy says you're not supposed to ask for presents," Jessica said in her best reprimanding tone when they both reached Crystal. "Aunt Crystal, I got an A on my test."

"Oh very good," Crystal said. "And yes, Thomas, we brought you a present."

"See?" he said to Jessica. "I told you I'd get a present."

Jessica crossed her arms and pouted. "I didn't get a present for my birthday."

At that moment Crystal was grateful for Laura's suggestion when they were in the toy store. "Jess," she said, drawing the girl's attention. "I think if you look in the back seat you'll find a belated birthday present."

Jessica's eyes widened in direct proportion to her smile. "A present

for me?"

"Yup," Crystal said, looking over the girl's head to share a smile with Laura. "One for you and one for your brother."

Laura curtailed Thomas as he tried to get the back door open. "Hang on, slugger. I'll get it," she said, gently moving him aside and opening the door. "Yours is the one in the long flat box. I'll get Jessica's."

"Hey, her box is bigger than mine," he said in a childish whine.

Laura knelt down next to him. "But yours has more pieces," she said. "Trust me, you'll like it. Now, no peeking in the bag until we get inside, okay?"

"Okay," he said, tugging his present out of the car and immediately trying to lift the flap of the paper bag where it was stapled shut.

"All right," Laura said, lifting the package out of his hands. "I'll tell you what. You go tell your mother we're here and Aunt Crystal and I will bring the presents inside."

The colorful decorations caught Crystal's eye when she entered the living room. Blue and white streamers were draped in a crisscross pattern across the ceiling while brightly colored balloons were bunched in the corners. The coffee table in front of the couch was littered with torn wrapping paper. Patty, who had been sitting in the recliner reading the instructions for Thomas' newest video game, rose from her chair when Crystal entered, meeting her halfway for a hug. "I'm glad you made it," the elder sister said, taking the present from Crystal's hands and putting it on the coffee table.

"We can't stay long," Crystal lied, looking around for the woman she wanted to avoid. "Where is she?"

"In the kitchen frosting his cake," Patty said. "Don't worry, she's not going to say anything to you."

"I wasn't," Crystal said with feigned casualness.

"I want open my present from Aunt Crystal," Thomas said, reaching for the present.

Patty paused for only a second before giving in. "All right, but you'll have to wait until after your cake and ice cream before you can open your other presents."

Thomas nodded and tugged open the bag holding his present. "Okay." The black plastic was no match for the seven year old, opening to reveal a race car track set. "Oh boy, thanks Aunt Crystal."

"It's from me and Laura," Crystal said, leaning over to receive the offered hug.

Thomas let go of her neck and turned to Laura. "Thanks Aunt Laura," he said. Crystal exchanged a smile with her lover as Laura bent down to accept the child's hug.

"I want to open my present now too," Jessica said, tugging open the staples and pulling pushing the plastic off the large box. "It's a Singing Suzy make-up center and jewelry box," she said, immediately opening the box. "Thank you."

"Can I play with mine now too, Mom?" Thomas asked.

"You have to put the track together first," Patty said. "And I think something like that belongs in your bedroom, not out here where everyone can trip over it. Jessica, I think you can put yours in your room as well."

Jessica continued to try and open the box. "I wanna show Grandma first. Hey Grandma!" she called in a louder voice.

"What have I told you about yelling?" Patty said just as her mother stepped out of the kitchen.

"Grandma, look what Aunt Crystal got me," the girl said excitedly, holding up the box. Thomas yelped and grabbed his race set.

"Me too," he said.

Without meaning to, Crystal's eyes met her mother's and for a moment, she found herself unable to turn away from the sadness in the older woman's face. In that fraction of time, Crystal remembered a Christmas morning so many years ago when her mother had happily handed her a present. She could not remember what the gift was or where her sister or father were, but she recalled hugging her mother, being held in those arms and for that brief moment in time, feeling special. The wisp of memory faded, returning her to the present and, to her surprise, a feeling other than anger at the woman who gave her birth.

Jessica succeeded in getting her grandmother's attention, causing the women to break their eye contact. Crystal looked over to Laura, wondering if her lover could see the confusion in her face. She wanted to leave, to get away from the mix of emotions swirling within her but before the urge to flee could set in, Jessica was before her, asking Crystal to help her put her rings and necklaces into her new jewelry box. Grateful for the escape, she followed her niece down the narrow hallway to Jessica's bedroom.

"Looks like we're going to have to untangle some of these before we can put them away," Crystal said as she looked at the pile of necklaces on Jessica's dresser. "Do you need help getting that?" she asked, her back to her niece.

"No, I got it," Jessica said, setting the box on the bed and pulling out the pink plastic pieces. "Did you have a Singing Suzy make-up center when you were a girl?"

Crystal continued to focus her attention on the twisted up pile of necklaces. "No. I had a plastic tree that held my pierced earrings but I don't remember any jewelry boxes or make up things."

"Oh." The blonde haired girl continued to take the various parts of her new gift out of the box. "Aunt Crystal?"

"Hmm?"

"Why don't you like Grandma?"

Crystal's fingers stopped as the words registered. "Why do you ask that?" she asked cautiously.

"I heard Mommy and Grandma talking," Jessica said. "Grandma was crying and said you hate her."

Crystal set the necklaces down and turned around. "What did your mother say?"

The present forgotten for the moment, Jessica looked at her aunt intently. "Mommy said she didn't think you hated Grandma but that she would talk to you again and Grandma said not to because she understood why you hated her." The young girl tilted her head, the mannerism reminiscent of her mother. "What did Grandma do that you hate her, Aunt Crystal?"

Um

"Crystal scrambled to find the right words to dodge the question. "I don't think you should be eavesdropping on adult's conversations."

"She said she's sorry," Jessica said. "When she was crying. She told Mommy she was very sorry."

Crystal turned away and picked up the necklaces again. "You certainly made quite a mess out of these," she said, trying not to think about what her niece was saying.

"Once, my friend Katie and I were fighting 'cause she pushed me too hard and I fell down and cut my knee and Mommy said that because Katie was sorry that I should forgive her and I did and now we're friends again. Are you gonna forgive Grandma?"

Crystal turned and looked at her. "I don't know," she said. "What happened between your grandma and I is different." Moving over to the bed, she sat down and picked up the sticker sheet that came with the make-up center. "Things between adults aren't as simple as they are between kids. Now, let's get this put together so we can get out there and get some cake and ice cream, okay?" She quickly found two pieces and connected them, hoping to distract Jessica. Looking only at the picture on the box, the young girl found the adjoining part and handed it to Crystal. "Good. See? We'll have this finished in no time."

Despite her success in getting Jessica to drop the subject, Crystal found herself unable to stop thinking about it. Sitting in the living room later, she glanced at her mother often enough that Laura noticed and gave her a questioning look. Crystal shook her head as if to say nothing was going on and stared down at her plate. For the next several minutes she concentrated on looking everywhere but at the couch where her sister and mother were sitting. She poked at the ice cream on her plate until it was nothing more than a lumpy, melted mess before setting the plate on the coffee table.

"Here, I'll get that," Patty said, rising to her feet and taking the plate. "Thomas, if you're done with yours, give me your plate, wash your hands, and then you can open the rest of your presents."

"They're clean," he protested.

"No, they're not," Patty said in that unmistakable mother tone. "Go on. Jess, yours could use some soap and water too."

"I'll help clean up," Laura said as the kids took off down the hall.

Crystal thought about helping but it was clear Laura had it under control as the clutter disappeared from the coffee table and floor. She had a sense of being watched and turned her head to catch Margaret looking at her. The older woman turned away quickly but not before Crystal caught the look of sadness on her mother's face.

By the time darkness had fallen, Crystal had become progressively quiet, giving one or two word answers. She and her mother continued to sneak glances at each other, caught more often than not by Patty or Laura if not by one another. The tension was building within her and Crystal found herself struggling to control it. Questions that could only be answered by one person repeated themselves over and over in her mind, refusing to be quieted. They grew louder and louder until Crystal knew it was time to give them voice. Taking a deep breath, she steeled herself for what was to come and stood up, her eyes staring directly at her mother. "I want to talk to you."

The room fell deadly silent save the electronic sounds coming from Thomas' video game. Even ten year old Jessica understood to some degree the magnitude of the moment and watched the adults intently. Patty was the first to break the silence, getting to her feet and standing protectively between her mother and sister. "Crystal, can I speak to you in the kitchen for a minute?"

Laura rose as well and stood next to Crystal. "Are you sure?" she asked in a low voice.

Crystal wanted to say no, to say she reconsidered, but it was too late. Reluctantly, she nodded. Sword or olive branch, it had been extended and now there was no taking it back. "I'm sure," she said.

"Patty," Margaret said, holding out her hand. "Help me up."

"Perhaps the kitchen would be a good place to talk," Laura suggested, casting a glance in the direction of the children.

"I don't think this is a good time for this, regardless of which room it's in," Patty protested as she used both hands to help steady her mother.

Clenching her jaw to keep from snapping at her sister, Crystal pushed past her and stormed into the kitchen, smacking the heel of her hand into the swinging door. Her annoyance at Patty's overprotectiveness of their mother was quickly replaced by the nervous realization of what was about to happen.

The louvered door that separated the kitchen from the living room swung open to reveal Margaret with Patty right behind her. Standing behind Patty, a concerned Laura looked in. "I want to talk to her alone," she said when Patty followed their mother into the kitchen.

"I'm staying," Patty said firmly, guiding Margaret into the nearest chair.

"No," Crystal said. "It's between us." She moved to the far side of the table, wanting to put as much distance between her and her mother as she could.

"It's okay," Margaret said to her eldest daughter. "Go be with the children."

Crystal shrugged casually at the warning look given by her sister, rebellious defiance welling within her. Patty looked as though she was going to

protest again, but finally turned and entered the living room.

Unable to make out the words, Crystal heard Laura's voice, then Patty's through the closed door. Feeling the floor shake, it took a second for her to figure out the kids were running down the hall. She made a mental note to ask her lover about it later, then turned her attention to the woman across the table from her. Taking a deep breath, she raised her eyes to meet her mother's, seeing the same sad look she had witnessed earlier. The venomous words that had longed to come forth for so many years caught in her throat, refusing to come out at the moment when they could have done the most damage. "Damn you, Doc," she muttered, turning away and walking over to the window. Part of her wanted so much to lash out, to verbally rip her mother into shreds. After all, it felt good to list off every one of her mother's failings in her therapy sessions with Jenny. What was holding her back now? "Do you know how many times I wished I had never been born?" she asked, still staring out the window. "That I never had to go through the hell that was my life?" Turning around, she leveled an accusing glare at her mother. "Did it ever occur to you all those nights you sat there sucking down that whiskey that maybe your kids needed you, even just a little?"

"Crystal, I know I failed you and your sister

"

"Oh, you got that right," she said, cutting her mother off. "You know what happened to me after I ran away?"

Margaret's head dropped, her eyes glistening. "Your sister told me," she said quietly.

"Did she tell you how I had to have sex with men to get enough money to eat?" Part of her took a perverse sense of pride in her mother's visible flinch but at the same time another part felt hollow, a painful emptiness that all the hateful words in the world would not cure. Kicking the chair leg with her foot, she pushed it out enough to slump onto the vinyl cushion. "I did what I had to do," she said softly. "I couldn't go back to that hell." Folding her arms in front of her, Crystal stared down at the table. "I used to dream that someday you'd take us away from him, that you'd stop drinking and be a mother like everyone else had. One that paid attention to them, that made sure they had clean clothes for school, that made dinner for them instead of making them get it themselves." Ignoring the tightening in her chest, Crystal pushed on, gazing down at nothing. "Why?" Swallowing hard, she lifted her head to look at her mother. "Why couldn't you be like the other mothers? Why couldn't you have cared about us as much as you cared about that damn whiskey?"

Margaret pulled a tissue from inside her sleeve and dabbed her eyes. "I'm sorry," she said, her voice cracking. "I'm sorry I married your father, that I didn't take you two girls away from him when you were babies. I'm sorry I couldn't see how much my drinking was destroying everything until it was too late." She wiped her eyes again and sniffed. "I'm sorry I wasn't the mother you should have had."

Crystal wanted to doubt the sincerity of the woman sitting across from her, to pass the trembling lips and tears as just a desperate attempt to gain her sympathy, but there was no denying the heartfelt regret and pain in her mother's voice. "So am I," she said, pulling out a cigarette and lighting it. "So am I," she repeated softly. Her ears picked up the sound of Laura and Patty still talking in the living room, rather heatedly if the sudden rise in volume was any indication. She tried to listen but only caught a word or two at a time before the voices quieted down. Staring at her cigarette, Crystal let seconds drag into minutes, the silence broken only by the faint ticking of the kitchen clock and the thumping of the children's feet as they came running back down the hall. She was tired. Tired of all the anger, all the tears and pain. Nothing would change the nightmare that was her childhood. It was time, if not to forgive the past, to move on with the present. Taking a shaky breath, she lifted her head and looked into her mother's shining eyes. "I can't forgive you for what happened," she said. "But I don't hate you." Standing up, she shrugged and extinguished the cigarette. "I guess I just wanted you to know that," she said, pushing the chair in. "Laura and I gotta get going now," she said, walking toward the door.

"Crystal?"

She stopped in front of the door and looked back at her mother. "What?"

Margaret pushed herself up, leaning her hands on the table for support. "Thank you," she said, letting a tear roll down her cheek.

Crystal shifted uncomfortably. "Yeah well

" She put her hand on the door. "I did it for me." She pushed the door open and left the kitchen before Margaret could say anything further.

Jessica jumped up from her seat on the floor as Crystal entered the room. "Did you and Grandma fight?"

"No Jess, we didn't fight," Crystal said, noticing her nephew sitting in front of the television, fully engrossed in a video racing game. "We talked and right now it's getting late so Laura and I have to go home." She heard the squeak as the swinging door opened behind her. Moving aside, she watched as Patty came over to help their mother to the couch. "I'll call you tomorrow," she said as her sister passed. Patty nodded but said nothing. "Fine, whatever." Bending down, she gave Jessica a quick hug. "You be good, okay?"

"Okay, Aunt Crystal. When are you coming back?"

"Soon," she said. "Or you can come over to our place."

Jessica's eyes lit up. "Oh, when?"

Put on the spot, she looked up at Laura. "Uh

I don't know."

"How about next weekend?" Laura suggested. "It'll give me time to straighten everything out."

Crystal knew what her lover meant was to get all breakables up out of reach of curious children. "Yeah, next weekend is good if your mother says

it's okay," she said to her niece.

Patty nodded. "As long as you behave and have that room picked up," she said.

"Can I come too?" Thomas asked, turning his attention away from the video game for a second.

"Yes, you can come too," Crystal said.

"I'll walk you to the car," Patty said. "Thomas, your games are scattered all over the place. Pick them up and put them away please."

"Okay Mom."

"I'll help," Jessica added, kneeling down and picking up two of the games. Crystal turned away from the children and headed for the door, Laura and Patty right behind her.

"What?" Crystal asked as soon as they were outside.

"What did you say to her?" Patty asked.

"Um, I'll go get the Jeep warmed up," Laura offered, though it was not cold enough to warrant such an action.

"We just talked," Crystal said to Patty as Laura walked away. "Nothing you have to worry about."

"Well I do worry," Patty said. "You're my sister and she's my mother. You spent half the night giving her looks and you haven't said a kind word to her since you returned. How am I not supposed to worry?"

Crystal pulled her cigarettes out of her pocket and offered one to her sister. "You can't expect everything to be all nice-nice between us," she said, taking a cigarette for herself and lighting it. "And I'm never going to be as nice to her as you are so don't expect it."

"But?"

Inhaling deeply, Crystal took a long drag on her cigarette before answering. "But as long as she doesn't try to act like mother of the year or go on about how she cares for me, I think we can be civil to each other."

"And who knows what might happen from there," Patty said, adding her own smoke to the cloud forming above them.

"Don't push it," Crystal warned gently. "I'm sure Doc and I will have a hell of a session about this. So what did you and Laura talk about anyway?"

"What else," Patty said. "You, but I'll let her tell you about it."

"Tell me."

"You tell me what you said to Mom," Patty countered, much to Crystal's annoyance. "See? So you ask your girlfriend and I'll ask Mom and then we'll both know."

"You're a real pain in the ass, you know that?" Crystal said, nudging her sister with her elbow. "You always were."

"So were you," Patty said. "Jessica is a lot like you too. You're going to have fun with her next weekend. She gets into everything."

Crystal tossed her cigarette on the ground and crushed it beneath her sneaker. "I'm sure I can handle her for a few hours."

"Hours? Oh no. You're taking them for the weekend."

"Uh uh, not for the weekend." Crystal shook her head. "No way."

"How about overnight?"

"Not a chance."

"So I suppose summer vacation is out of the question too, huh?" Patty teased. "Ah, no problem. Listen, I'd better let you go so you two can get home. Tell Laura I said good night, will ya?"

"Sure, see ya later." Crystal turned to leave only to find herself stopped by Patty pulling her into a hug.

"Not going to leave without giving your big sister a hug, were you?"

"You're not exactly my bigger than me anymore," Crystal said.

"Certainly not in the chest," Patty said, pulling back. "Go on, I'll talk to you tomorrow."

"So what did you two talk about?" Crystal asked as she shut the car door.

"Nothing important," Laura said, putting the Jeep in gear and backing out of the driveway. "How about you and your mother?"

"I think we've got an understanding," Crystal said. "But don't expect me to go out looking for Christmas presents for her or anything."

"You okay?"

Crystal stared out the window for a few seconds before answering. "Yeah, I think so." She gave a small smile when Laura squeezed her knee reassuringly. "I'll be fine, really. It's just

I dunno, draining I guess." She threaded her fingers with Laura's. "I love you."

"I love you too," Laura said, squeezing their joined hands. "Do you want to stop at the park before we go home? It's a little cool but we could take a short walk on the path if you like."

"No, I just want to go home," Crystal said, pressing her forehead against the cool glass. "Go home and curl up under a nice, thick blanket with you."

"Sounds good, you know I love cuddling with you," Laura said, slowing down to turn onto the highway ramp.

"Yeah, and then you can tell me what you and Patty were talking about."

"You really want to know?" Laura said. "All right. I told her I thought she was being unfair to you and that she should let the two of you work things out between yourselves."

Crystal rolled the window down an inch or so and pulled out a cigarette. "And what did she say? I heard your voices raise a couple of times."

"First she sent the kids in to get in their pajamas. I'm glad she did that because I didn't want to argue with her in front of them."

"Yeah, sounds like a good idea," Crystal said. "So?"

"So first she tried to tell me that it was a family thing and I should stay out of it and I told her that when it comes to you, it is my business because I love you," Laura said. "I pointed out to Patty that where she's had ten years or so to work out her feelings about your mother that you're only now starting to deal with them and she should be more understanding."

"Oh yeah?" Crystal took a long drag on her cigarette. "Sounds like you told her, my hero." She leaned over and pressed her lips to Laura's shoulder. "I'm glad you were there with me."

"Always," Laura promised.

"Brr, did you turn the heat down before we left?" Crystal asked as they entered the townhouse. "It is almost November, you know."

"You make it sound as though we live in Northern Canada," Laura said as Crystal turned the thermostat up a few degrees. "It can't be below fifty out there."

"It's still cold," Crystal grumbled good-naturedly as she took off her jacket and, with Laura's, put them in the closet. Their sneakers were next, this time put neatly on the mat next to the door.

"Well, I can suggest something to keep us warm," Laura said, slipping her arms around Crystal's waist.

"Oh yeah? Like what?" Crystal asked, leaning back against her lover's warm body.

"I was thinking about us, naked," Laura lowered her voice to a husky trill. "A steamy bath with lots of bubbles. We haven't taken a bath or shower together yet. It might be fun." Nuzzling Crystal's ear, she inhaled the scent of shampoo and smoke. "It'll relax you."

Crystal gave a playful snort. "I don't think relaxing is what you have in mind."

"You're right," Laura whispered, her roaming hands moving slowly up Crystal's ribcage. Reaching the top button, she slowly opened it. "You, me..". Another button opened, revealing a hint of lace. "Hot soapy water that makes everything nice and slippery." A few quick tugs and Crystal's shirt was free, the remaining buttons opening with ease. "Relaxing is not what I have in mind at all." Her fingers reached for the back hooks of the bra while her lips search out Crystal's.

That was all the encouragement needed to get Crystal to follow her up the stairs and into the bathroom. After flipping the lever to plug the tub, Laura turned on the hot and cold taps, adjusting the flow until she had it at just the right temperature. "Do you want bubbles?" she asked.

"Sure, if you do," Crystal said, standing in the middle of the bathroom, still fully clothed.

Laura shut the water off and stood up. "Hey," she said, gently wrapping her arms around Crystal's waist. "Need some help?" She was answered with Crystal's lips seeking out hers. Taking it as a yes, she deepened the kiss, her hands pushing the shirt off Crystal's shoulders. Before she could try to fold it, however, it was taken from her hands and tossed against the door, the bra with it.

"Not a chance," Crystal murmured against her lips, her hands moving between their bodies and slipping under the thick sweatshirt.

Laura shuddered as playful fingers walked up her torso and danced over her bra covered breasts. "Keep that up and we'll never make it into the tub," she said, stepping back to shrug off her top and bra. She smiled indulgently when Crystal took them from her to add to the growing pile by the door. "I can't believe I let you do that," she said, pulling Crystal close.

"Next thing you know you'll be leaving dishes in the sink overnight," Crystal said.

"Never," Laura vowed, groaning softly at the warm feeling of her lover's body against hers. "It's getting hot in here," she said in a husky whisper.

"I know," Crystal said, their eyes locking as her hands slipped behind Laura's neck. "The mirror's all fogged up."

"Oh, is that how you can tell?" Laura asked, her playful smile matching her lover's. Hooking her fingers inside the waistband of Crystal's jeans, she smoothly undid the button and lowered the zipper. "Think it's because of the hot water?"

"No," Crystal said.

Laura pushed the jeans over Crystal's hips. "Think it's because you turned up the heat when we came in?"

"No."

"Hmm," Laura gave a thoughtful look as she gently guided Crystal to lean against the wall. "Well," she said as she knelt down and worked the jeans off first one leg, then the other. "It must be because we're half naked and about to make love."

Crystal smiled and nodded. "Yeah, that must be it."

Unable to resist the smooth thighs inches away from her face, Laura leaned forward and kissed the creamy skin. "You're so beautiful," she said, her hands rubbing up and down Crystal's legs.

"Now who's keeping us from getting in the tub?" Crystal asked, her chest rising and falling noticeably.

Pleased with the effect her touch was having, Laura gave a self satisfied smile and finished her task, standing only after she had Crystal completely naked. Pressing their bodies together, Laura gave her a long and passionate kiss. "Would you start the water again and add the bubble bath?"

"Sure," Crystal said unknowingly, immediately turning her back to Laura and bending over to reach the faucet controls.

"Nice view," Laura said, pushing her remaining clothes off. "You know, if you stay just like that

"

Crystal gripped the *e.g.* of the tub and groaned at the suggestion. "I can't believe how easy it is for you to make me feel like this."

"You have the same effect on me," Laura said, moving directly behind Crystal and running her hands lightly over the bent woman's back. "Sometimes you look at me and I'm ready, if you know what I mean." She heard and felt Crystal laugh with understanding. "Seriously, though," she said, gently pulling Crystal up and turning her so they were face to face. "It's more than just something physical." She paused to brush their lips together while her fingers caressed Crystal's upper back.. "When you look at me, I can feel your love deep inside."

Crystal smiled shyly. "Are you going to start sweet talking me again?"

"If you want me to," Laura said as she pulled back the curtain. "Or we can get in the tub and I can show you."

"Doesn't seem like a lot of water," Crystal said as they helped each other in.

"Don't worry about it," Laura said as she sat down and moved as far back as she could. "There's two of us in here. Trust me, there's plenty of water." Their bodies bumped together cozily as they made room for arms and legs. Wrapping her arms around Crystal's torso, she pulled her lover close and kissed her shoulder. "Love you."

"Mm, I love you too," Crystal said, her hands moving up and down Laura's thighs. "I've never done this before. Taking a bath with someone, I mean. Well, except Patty when we were little but that doesn't count."

"No it doesn't," Laura agreed, moving her thumbs in a lazy arc over the soapy underside of Crystal's breasts. "I forgot to tell you there are certain advantages to being the one in the back."

"So I see," Crystal said, reclining so the back of her head was resting against Laura's shoulder. "Then again, being in front has its advantages too."

Scooping up piles of bubbles in her hands, Laura playfully covered Crystal's breasts. "Nice," she whispered, feeling the hardened nipples pressing into her palms. "I can see us gong through lots of bubble bath."

"That feels nice," Crystal murmured. Her eyes were closed and a soft smile played across her lips. "Obviously this isn't your first time in a tub."

Laura smiled. "It's not like I've had an endless stream of women coming in an out," she said. "But let's just say I know what I'm doing."

"I have no complaints," Crystal said.

"Uh huh," Laura said dubiously, brushing her thumbs back and forth over the erect nipples. "That's not what you said last night. If I remember correctly, you called me a bitch."

"You were teasing me," Crystal pointed out. "If you waited much longer, I would have reached down and done it myself."

Laura laughed, remembering how she had been in a playful mood and tested her lover's patience, among other things. "But you have to admit it was worth the wait. I have no interest in rushing things tonight either," she warned. Crystal groaned and arched into her touch, causing the water to lap against their bodies. "Nice and slow," Laura said in a seductive tone, moving her hands down Crystal's body until they dipped beneath the water, then bringing them up again to recapture the heaving breasts. "Nice and slow," she repeated in a husky whisper before lightly running her tongue over the outer shell of Crystal's ear.

"You're gonna drive me crazy," Crystal said as Laura's busy fingers tweaked and squeezed her nipples.

"See how helpful soap is?" Laura asked, her fingers slipping off before her pinches could be painful. "Maybe I should just stay up here for a while." Spreading out her fingers, she cupped Crystal's breasts and squeezed. "Making sure they're clean," she said by way of explanation.

"I was wrong," Crystal said, looking up at Laura. "You're not a bitch. You're a royal bitch."

"A royal bitch who loves you," Laura said, moving her hands beneath the water again, this time reaching the crease of her lover's legs and lightly swirling through the patch of blonde curls. "I could spend all day touching you," she confessed, enjoying the way Crystal's hips rose in response to her wandering hands. Seeing the thick bubbles clinging to the full breasts, Laura felt the urge to revisit them but when she started to bring her hands up she found her wrists held in a tight grip.

"That's it," Crystal growled, twisting around until they were facing each other. Before Laura could react she found herself pinned against the back of the tub. "You think you're the only one that can tease?" she was asked while an insistent thigh pressed between her legs. "Remember, I was a stripper," Crystal continued, tracing the outer *e.g.* of Laura's right aureole with a wet fingertip. "When it comes to teasing, I'm an expert."

"You feel so good," Laura sighed, happily surrendering to whatever her lover had in mind.

"I think I like this tub idea," Crystal said, sliding down to rub her cheek against Laura's breast.

"I'm glad," Laura said, wrapping her arms around Crystal and holding her close.

"It's awkward as hell," Crystal said as she tried to squirm her hand between their bodies. "We need a bigger tub for this."

"Not really," Laura said, shifting to give her lover more room. "We just need to learn new positions."

"Before or after I drown?" Crystal asked, sliding down and brushing her lips over Laura's soft belly, her fingers idly playing over the writer's breasts.

"Maybe a bath wasn't such a good *i.e.* after all," Laura said, reaching down and pulling Crystal up for a kiss.

"Why?" Crystal asked with feigned innocence, her fingers gently squeezing Laura's nipples. "Is there something you wanted?"

"Yes, something you do so very well," Laura said.

"I thought you said all we needed to do was learn new positions?" Crystal countered, her left hand moving between their bodies and slipping beneath the water.

"I don't think there's a position to do what I want you to do that would be comfortable for either of us in here," Laura said, lifting her knee to give her lover more access. She gasped when Crystal's fingers found their mark.

"Think we're clean enough?" Crystal asked, her fingers gently stroking back and forth over Laura's most sensitive spot.

"Oh yes," Laura hissed, her head falling back against the wall and her eyes closing as her hips moved of their own volition.

"Want to get out?" Crystal asked, moving her teasing fingers down until they were just outside the entrance to Laura's womanhood.

I want

ooh" Laura began, her hips surging forward as gentle fingers filled her up. "Oh god, don't stop, Love, please don't stop." The fire raged higher, spiraling upward until Laura felt the throbbing pulses begin. At that moment of absolute vulnerability, she blindly reached forward and pulled Crystal's mouth to hers. Crystal held on, pressing deep and hard, doing her best to prolong her lover's pleasure. There was no outer world, no family or friends. All that existed was the sharing of hearts and souls, declarations of love and devotion spoken with their bodies instead of their voices. When she finally tried to speak, it came out as a squeak and Laura had to swallow and try again. "I can't move," she said. "Not ever."

Crystal smiled with self-satisfaction and ran her finger along Laura's collarbone. "Kinda like what you do to me, eh?"

"That's different," Laura huffed, her breathing still not back to normal. "You can usually function afterwards. I can't move a muscle."

"Then we'll just have to stay here," Crystal said, her smile now a grin.

Laura looked at her and frowned. "You are entirely too pleased with yourself," she said, pulling Crystal in for a kiss. "I love you."

"I love you too," Crystal said, snuggling down so her head rested in the crook of Laura's neck.

Endless minutes passed as they held each other in the cooling water until Laura shuddered and goosebumps appeared on her forearms. "The water's getting cold," she said quietly.

"Is it always going to be like this?" Crystal murmured, not lifting her head from its soft pillow.

"You mean am I always going to respond to you like this?" Laura asked.

Crystal shook her head. "I mean

" She paused, unsure how to put her thoughts into words. "Will you always feel about me the way you do now?"

Ignoring the cold for a moment, Laura reached down and cupped Crystal's chin. "I can't imagine not feeling this way about you," she said softly. "You mean everything to me and the thought of you not being here hurts too much to think about. I love you, Crystal. I know it sounds selfish but I want all you can give and then some. I want to be the only one you touch in love and the only one that touches you. I want you to be the first thing I see when I wake up in the morning and the last before I go to sleep. I want to hold you when you cry and laugh with you when you're happy. I want to be your white knight when you need protection and your helpless damsel when you need to be the one doing the protecting. I don't want just a relationship with you," she said, moving her fingers to trace Crystal's lips. "I want a life with you." At first alarmed when she saw tears welling up in her lover's eyes, Laura quickly realized they were tears of happiness and hugged Crystal even closer. "I love you," she said, kissing the top the blonde head. "I'm not going anywhere."

"I love you too," Crystal said, sniffing as she brought herself back under control. She gently smacked Laura's arm.

"Hey, what was that for?" Laura asked with mock indignation.

"You know what your sweet talking does to me," Crystal said, causing Laura to chuckle.

"Serves you right for making me as limp as a washcloth," Laura said. She felt Crystal's lips on her neck, the soft tongue slipping out to taste her. She groaned, knowing she could no more resist her lover's touch than she could resist breathing. "There's a nice warm bed right in the next room," she tried.

"Uh huh," Crystal mumbled, moving down to capture Laura's left breast with her mouth while her fingers kept the other breast company.

"Crystal," Laura sighed, her legs automatically parting despite her wish to move the action to another venue.

"You really wanna waste time with the towels?" Crystal asked around a mouthful of flesh.

"No," Laura agreed, caring little at the moment about how wet the sheets would get.

"So what's stopping you?" Crystal teased, her teeth lightly scraping the tender peak.

"Now who's being the bitch?" Laura asked, her fingers lightly stroking her lover's back. "You're going to be the death of me."

"Not before we get out of here and under the covers," Crystal said as she stood up, the bubbles sliding down her wet body. "It's cold in here."

Laura laughed and reached out for Crystal's hand, knowing sleep would not come for quite a while.

"Are you sure this is the kind that doesn't lose its needles?" Laura asked as they muscled the large tree through the front door.

"How would I know?" Crystal said. "Hang on, I have to turn here."

"Are you sure that stand is big enough? I don't want it to tip over."

"It's not going to tip over and the stand is big enough," Crystal huffed as she backed into the corner they had designated for the Christmas tree.

"How much time do we have before we have to leave to get to the airport?"

"Aunt Helen's plane is due in at four thirty," Laura said. "You're almost to the wall."

"I know, hang on, I'm going to put it in the stand and hold it there while you keep coming and stand it up. Then I'll tighten down the screws and we should be all set," Crystal said as she slowly crouched down. "You think we can get this thing decorated in the next two hours?"

"I hope so, otherwise we're going to get Aunt Helen's unsolicited help," Laura said. "You all right down there?"

"Yeah, just keep coming forward slowly," Crystal said. "I still say the lights have to twinkle. Otherwise why bother having them?"

"Multi-colored twinkle lights," Laura said disapprovingly. "Why not put a lighted Santa and snowmen on the lawn?"

"I like lighted Santas," Crystal protested. "Okay, hold it still now. I'm gonna tighten it down."

"They're tacky and commercial," Laura said.

"It's festive, you Scrooge." Crystal said as she backed out from under the tree and stood up. "There, you can let go now." She stood up and hooked her arm around Laura's waist. "Our first Christmas tree."

"It looks bigger than it did at the tree farm," Laura said.

"Is that bigger good or bigger bad?" Crystal asked. "You said I could pick it out and I thought this was a good size."

"It is a good size," Laura said reassuringly. "I just don't know if we have enough decorations to cover it. Mother only gave me two boxes of ornaments and lights."

"I can't believe you never bothered to put up a tree before," Crystal said, resting her head on Laura's upper chest.

"When I was with Jenny, we were always spending the day at one relative's house or another. It just didn't make any sense to put up a tree when we weren't going to be here." Laura stepped back and opened one of the boxes sitting on the coffee table. "Of course we're not going to be here most of the day either." She scrutinized the tree. "How can you tell if it's the kind that loses its needles?"

"When a bunch of them show up on the carpet?" Crystal offered. "I dunno, call someone and ask."

"Peter would know," Laura said. "Wait until you see what he does for Christmas."

"Michael said you can see their house from space," Crystal said as she took the string of lights from Laura. "How many of these do we have?"

Laura looked through the box. "There's two more like this and one string of the bigger white bulbs. The other box is garland, tinsel and the rest of the ornaments."

"We need more lights," Crystal said matter-of-factly as she arranged the string over the lower boughs. "Maybe we can go shopping after we drop Helen off?" she asked hopefully. Laura gave her that indulgent smile that Crystal knew meant she'd won. "Great. I promise not to go overboard."

"Your definition of overboard and my definition of overboard are two different things, I'm sure," Laura said as she untangled a string of lights. "Shouldn't we plug these in first to see if they work?"

"Naw, that would make too much sense," Crystal said, bending down to put the plug into the outlet. Red, green, blue and orange lights shined brightly against the rich green branches. "This one works." She unplugged it and reached to take the one Laura was holding. "This one works too but they're not blinking."

"It's not the end of the world," Laura said as they continued to check the strings. "Besides, I think you have to leave them plugged in for a few minutes to warm up before they start flashing." She bent down and wrapped her arms around Crystal's shoulders. "And if they don't blink we can buy new ones that do."

"I'm being a baby about this, huh?"

"Just a little," Laura said with a smile. "But it's all right. I think it's cute." She kissed the tip of Crystal's nose, then stood up. "To be honest, I haven't been this excited about Christmas in years. The tree was a good idea."

Crystal stood as well, connecting the end of one string of lights to the beginning of another. "You realize this will be the first year since I was a kid that I won't be drunk on Christmas?"

"Or stoned," Laura added.

"You noticed that, did you?" She looked down at the light string in her hands, unaware of the smile that played on her lips. "You didn't say anything."

"You didn't say anything either," the dark haired woman said. "At first I wasn't sure if you had stopped or just run out. I don't think you've had any in at least two weeks."

"Twenty days," Crystal said. "And I didn't run out. I just

well

"She shrugged her shoulders. "I dunno."

"I'm certainly not complaining," Laura said.

"I was hoping you'd notice without me having to tell you," she admitted, smiling when she felt Laura's arms go around her.

"I did notice," Laura said. "When it comes to you, I always notice."

"Don't you start sweet talking me again," she warned lightly. "Or we'll never get this tree done." Patting Laura's hands, she said "Let me go so we can finish this and then we can go to bed." Once free of the loving embrace, she looped the light set around the tree. "There. It probably won't be as good as your mother's or Peter's but it'll be okay."

"It doesn't have to be as good as Mother's or Peter's," Laura said. "It's not a competition."

"I thought you said it wasn't a competition," Crystal said from her reclined position on the couch.

"It's not," Laura said as she moved the purple ornament

again.

"Then why were you up all night?"

"Because the tree isn't symmetrical," Laura said, stepping back. "See? There's still too much green over in this area."

"I know and too much red near the top," Crystal sighed, having listened to her lover point out every imperfection with their tree since she woke up and found her downstairs. "Who cares?"

Laura carefully removed a green ball and set it in the box. "Now you know the real reason Jenny and I never had a tree."

"You obsess too much, you know that?" Crystal grumbled as she sat up and stretched. "No one's going to notice."

"I'm almost done," Laura said. "I just need to move some of the tinsel over to this side and even out the ornaments. I don't think this is the good kind of tree, either. I found several needles on the floor."

"What do you expect with the way you've been moving everything around?" Crystal said. "I know that bottom string of lights aren't where I put them yesterday."

"They were too low," Laura explained as she hooked a hanger over the branch and attached the glass ornament. "Besides, it looks better now."

"Next year you're doing the tree by yourself," Crystal said as she rose and padded out to the kitchen. "Don't think I didn't hear you and your mother talking about the

"She made quote marks with her fingers "perfect tree. You want some coffee?"

"That sounds good, thanks," Laura said, putting the last piece of tinsel in its place and plugged in the lights. "There. Perfect," she said proudly as she stepped back to inspect her handiwork.

Crystal came out from the kitchen carrying two mugs of coffee. "It looks very nice," she said, though she saw nothing wrong with the way the tree looked last night. "Nice and ah

even."

"See how there's an equal amount of color all the way around?" Laura said proudly as she took the offered mug. "It's symmetrical and aesthetically pleasing to the eye."

"It's beautiful," Crystal said. "The best tree I ever saw."

"Are you being sarcastic?"

Taking Laura's coffee from her, Crystal set both mugs down on the coffee table and pulled her lover into a gentle embrace. "It's our first tree. How could it be anything less than the best?"

"You realize you're letting me get away with being overly compulsive," Laura pointed out.

"I know," Crystal admitted. "But it's a nice tree and obviously it made you happy to stay up all night working on it."

"It did," Laura said, brushing their lips together. "I'm glad you talked me into getting a tree this year."

"I'm glad I did too," Crystal said, enjoying the feel of their bodies pressed together. "We'll have to make it an annual tradition."

"I think we already have," Laura said. "I love you."

"I love you too," Crystal said, squeezing tightly. "Thanks for my gift."

Confused, Laura pulled back and looked at her. "But Christmas isn't for two days and I hid your present at Jenny's. How do you know what it is?"

Putting her arms around Laura's neck and bringing her close, Crystal said "I didn't mean that gift but thanks for telling me so I can stop looking around here."

"Then what do you mean?"

"This gift," she said, kissing Laura's chin. "You. Your love. Six months ago I was just existing and now

" She tightened her hold. "Now I feel for the first time like I'm living."

"All I did was support you," Laura said softly. "Any changes or successes you've had are because of you, not me." She smiled. "I was just going through the motions before you moved in and turned everything upside down. Into my quiet, organized little world comes this blonde hellion who, despite my best efforts, stole my heart. I'm just lucky enough to have you fall for me as hard as I fell for you."

Crystal sighed happily and rested her head on Laura's chest, the brightly decorated tree filling her vision. "I guess we're both lucky then. I love you."

"I love you too," Laura said. "Always." And together they stood under the twinkling lights of their first Christmas tree, knowing there were struggles to be faced, problems to be had but through it all, they would face it together.

Always.